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interview

Carolyn Laub of GSA Network

Carolyn Laub: Organizing and Empowering GSAs

Interview by [Wik Wikholm](#)

Carolyn Laub is the Executive Director of GSA Network, a youth leadership organization that connects school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) to each other and community resources through peer support, leadership development, and training. The organization, which dates to 1998, became an independent non-profit in 2008. Carolyn sat down with me at her office in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood to discuss GSA Network's goals as well as the needs of middle and high school students.



Carolyn Laub.
Photograph courtesy
gsanetwork.org

Tell me about your new website. It seems like the online instruction book for young people who want to build a GSA as well as a guide to adults in how to support them.

Even though our network focuses on serving GSAs (gay-straight alliances) in California, we also have a national role. We're working to help organizations in other states do what we've done here. We have a new national directory on the website so that if you're a GSA in Wisconsin, you can find the organization there that can work with you. Teachers and students from all over the country go to our website first because it comes up at the top of the list in a lot of search engines. Even if there's a small struggling volunteer-run organization in another state that doesn't have a network with the capacity to do trainings, go out to schools, and support GSAs on the ground, someone can get 90% of the information they need from gsanetwork.org to build and operate their own GSA.

What specific needs did you see that drove you to start this work in 1998?

A couple of things were really important. The surgeon general's report came out that showed that LGBT youth experienced suicidal feelings and attempted suicide at a disproportionate rate and at the same time a few early GSAs were forming, primarily in some of the more progressive communities and in some, mostly wealthy, private schools. I learned about GSAs in the mid-1990s when many in the U.S. became aware of them because of the experience of students who tried to form a GSA in Salt Lake City. They had to go before the Salt Lake City school board. The school board was Mormon-dominated, and since it didn't want to approve gay-straight alliances, the board banned all extra-curricular clubs in order to be able to legally ban GSAs.

The events in Utah actually helped spark the growth of GSAs. At the time, I met a young woman in a psychosocial support group I was running here in the San Francisco Bay Area who inspired me by what she had done in solidarity with the students in Salt Lake City. When she learned that they couldn't have a GSA because their school board had banned all clubs, she said, well, that's not going to stop me from starting a gay-straight alliance club at my school. That's the kind of phenomenon that helped launch the explosion of GSAs all over the country. I was really inspired by the activist instincts that led this young woman to start a gay-straight alliance club in her school.

I was frustrated that the kind of psychological and social support I was contributing to could not help solve the root causes of the problems: the harassment, homophobia, and transphobia students were experiencing in school—the things that were causing them to feel suicidal or to abuse alcohol and drugs or feel more depressed. A gay-straight alliance club addresses the root causes of those psychological issues, so I just thought it was a brilliant idea young people had come up with. That's why I started the organization.

The other thing that happened is that this young woman—the one I worked with in the support group—had great instincts, but she hit a wall where she kind of didn't know what to do next. She came to the support group and, even though it was mostly focused on social, psychological, and peer support, she asked for help with the gay-straight alliance club she had formed at her school. She said she

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started the GSA and was being called names. The teachers were doing a thing about it. She went to the principal and asked if the GSA could present to the teachers at the next staff development day to get them to do something. The principal said yes—it was a pretty progressive school. She came to the support group and said "Help! I don't know what to do at the training for the teachers." I saw the light bulb go off for other students in the group. They wanted to create gay-straight alliances to get teachers to improve the school climate and stop the name calling and bullying that was happening at their schools, too.

What I realized in that moment was that they needed to have some kind of training and some mechanism to get networked to each other so they didn't have to reinvent the wheel at every GSA.

On your website, you appear to support the grass-roots efforts of students rather than dictating any single approach to building a GSA.

It's absolutely a bottom-up approach. When I started this, I was 23 and I saw these students who already have the power within themselves to create these clubs. They were already doing it. GSAs want to learn from each other, so it's more of a peer-to-peer and youth empowerment model. All the ideas in our resource materials come from things students have already done and tested. Things like how to address slurs, how to fight for greater protections for transgender and gender non-conforming youth—everything from getting your teachers to use the right pronouns when addressing you to getting gender-neutral bathrooms on your campus. One of the new issues that is especially exciting is student efforts to get LGBT issues included in their school curricula.



Photograph from the Dorsey High School GSA courtesy gsanetwork.org

The approach has supported the growth of GSA Network. We started with 40 clubs in 1998. Today, we're over 750 in California.

So you see the key issues facing secondary school students as slurs, recognition of the rights of people with non-conforming gender expression or identities, and inclusion of LGBT issues in curricula?

I would say the number one issue every school faces is slurs and name-calling. This issue seems to face every community. More and more transgender youth are coming out as well, and harassment against gender non-conforming youth is a critical issue. In California, discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression is illegal, so much of the work is to get schools to comply with existing law. The curriculum issue rounds out the top three issues most GSAs are working on.

What kinds of opposition are glbtq students and GSAs facing?

There is certainly still in-school opposition and bullying. We saw a huge spike in that here in California after the passage of Proposition 8 [which makes same-sex marriage illegal in California]. We surveyed our members and many reported a spike in name calling. It seemed like bullies felt the vote condoned their behavior.

There is definitely still organized opposition to GSAs as well. Most recently, Fred Phelps' church and family protested at schools with GSAs. There has also been opposition to GLSEN's Day of Silence, which is one of the days of action we promote here. In recent years, right-wing Christian-based groups have organized the "Day of Truth," which is directly opposed to the Day of Silence. When that first started a few years ago, it was very upsetting to LGBT students who were confronted with homophobic signs on the way to school or trucks circling the schools with all kinds of anti-LGBT signage.

In the wake of the debate over Proposition 8, Safe Schools work designed to prevent abuse of LGBT youth and the children of LGBT parents has also been threatened. The pro-8 faction said that same-sex marriage would be taught in schools if California continued to permit it, which has inflamed some communities and led to ongoing opposition to Safe Schools work.

Is there any particular opposition to GSAs in middle schools?

I can't point to anything that suggests that middle school GSAs face more or different opposition than those in high schools, but middle school GSAs tend to be quite different from those for high school students. Developmentally, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students have different skills, abilities, and needs than high school students do. Most clubs in the middle school context have much more involvement on the part of the advisors. In middle schools, the focus is more on students who have questions about sexual orientation, have an LGBT family member, or feel unsafe on campus because of name-calling. Middle school clubs tend to be more support oriented while the high school clubs tend to be more activist

oriented.

The death of Lawrence King [an Oxnard, California middle-school student murdered because of his gender expression and sexual orientation] led to a significant increase in the number of teachers and administrators who reached out to us for support because they wanted to do something about the bullying and harassment they saw on their campuses.

GSA Network has grown in size phenomenally. Do you intend to grow to become national in scope?

We are already a national organization in the sense that we convene the National Association of GSA Networks. Our role nationally is not to provide on-the-ground support for GSAs outside of California, but rather to support other state organizations who fill that role in their states. We provide the website and technical assistance to other organizations nationally. Including California and Washington, D.C., 26 states have non-profits that support their GSAs. For those states that lack a support organization, we have a staff person dedicated to training those interested in forming one. So far, we have helped establish networks in New Mexico and Texas.

What new projects do you see your organization undertaking in the near future?

One of the things that is an untapped potential in our movement is the alumni. The many youth who have gone through GSAs represent an enormous pool of young leaders. There is a lot of power and energy that could be harnessed from this generation to lead in supporting LGBT equality. We are looking at how we can support these young leaders and our board is examining ways we may do that in the future.

Learn More about GSA Network and GSAs

www.gsanetwork.org

Recommended Reading

Miceli, Melinda. *Standing Out, Standing Together*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

GLSEN. "GayStraight Alliances: Creating Safer Schools for LGBT Students and Their Allies." (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2007.

[Additional bibliographical resources are available in the Resources section of the [GSA Network](http://www.gsanetwork.org) website.]

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