

The Virtual Rainbow Summit Supports LGBTQ+ Young People Nationwide

By Dani Castillo-Dávalos, Paul Lachapelle, and Deborah Albin



In the 45 seconds you took to scan the table of contents of this publication and turn to this article, at least one LGBTQ+ young person attempted suicide. In fact, in the United States more than 1.8 million young people ages 13-24 who identify as LGBTQ+ seriously consider suicide each year. (The Trevor Project, 2021.) These statistics are just a small sample of the results of years of research that reveal the risk factors for suicide by this group: rejection of friends and family, lack of affirming support and spaces, discrimination, and physical harm.

In early 2020, a small group of concerned educators at Montana State University, in collaboration with the Western Rural Development Center, came together to see if they could mitigate those factors just a bit by offering LGBTQ+ young people the opportunity to network and learn – and have a whole lot of fun with their peers, allies, and knowledgeable and caring adults. But, like every other plan at the time, the arrival of Covid-19 blew it to dust. Or, more accurately, blew it up, because the originally envisioned one-day, face-to-face event for young people in Montana, became a three-day, virtual event with hundreds of participants and dozens of presenters from throughout the United States.

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Then in 2021, and still under a pandemic pall, the same formula was used, resulting in another three-day event that reached many more participants throughout the country and featured presenters of every age and expertise.

While the opportunities to learn and network were the reasons to attend the daily sessions, the crown jewel of the Virtual Rainbow Summit was the Youth Leadership in Action Awards. Born of the need to spend sponsorship funds in 2020 that were not used for food, travel, and the other logistics of an in-person event, the Awards became a way to impact communities far and wide.

The Youth Leadership in Action Awards application was open to all individuals or organizations that were either youth-led or serve youth and wanted to use the funds to increase LGBTQ+ inclusivity in their community, school, or family and friend groups. They were such a hit in 2020 that funds were raised in 2021 to continue these community-based leadership efforts. In two years, \$16,400.00 was awarded to 30 individuals and organizations for their grass-roots LGBTQ+ education and advocacy efforts.

Some notable proposals and outcomes from the 2020 and 2021 Awards are presented here in the recipients own words, and you can see all the awardees at www.virtualrainbowsummit.org/leadership-awards.

Washington State 4-H Teen Equity and Inclusion Task Force

“We would like to facilitate and support an inclusive 4-H youth organization. Using compassion and empathy, our teen task force strives to create an open and safe environment

to celebrate and embrace our diversity. We hope to work towards our goals through curating and presenting workshops to leaders in our state...provide training for our youth task force members...create materials and provide information to distribute around Washington state regarding best practices and how to support participation for diverse youth.”

Arizona 4-H Healthy Living Ambassadors – Youth Action Project

“Our Youth Action Teams has been working on ways to tackle student mental health issues in our community, specifically amongst LGBTQ+ students. We are aiming to hold workshops with 4-H volunteers, 4-H staff, teachers, parents, and anyone who would like to learn more about best practices for inclusivity when working with youth, specifically, those in the LGBTQ+ community.”

Sidney LGBTQ Youth (Montana)

“Sidney LGBTQ Youth is a student organization started by a few wonderful and brave high schoolers who recognized the need for a safe space for LGBTQ young people growing up in rural Montana. Over the past year, young adult leaders from the community have built up this program to not only be a safe space for LGBTQ youth to exist, but also aims to improve the mental and physical health of young LGBTQ people. In an area with a high youth suicide rate, limited mental health services, and few mental health resources for LGBTQ youth specifically, this is a much-needed service.”

Mercy Health Project (Michigan)

“The Muskegon County Homeless Continuum of Care Network (MCHCCN) has developed a task force to address the homeless youth crisis we

face in our community. This program requires an active Youth Action Board, comprised of youths aged eighteen to twenty-four who are at risk or have current or previous lived homeless experience. There is a growing concern with the LGBTQ+ community and youth homelessness. The network would like to increase the access to homeless services for the youth LGBTQ+ population and give them a voice as well as leadership opportunities.”

Box Elder School Two-Spirit Youth Club (Montana)

“We would like to increase awareness around issues faced by LGBTQIA+ in our schools, families, and community. We would like to invite local tribal schools to participate in events such as hikes, pow-wows, gatherings, and eventually begin working toward locating families in our community that would be open to housing our transgender and LGBTQ+ youth who need a safe place to stay either from family, abusive relationships, or homelessness.”

Monmouth City Has Pride (Oregon)

“Even for a small town, Monmouth has managed to accomplish so much by making its support of LGBTQ+ people known. A city-wide

leadership committee has since developed to help plan significant events such as the Monmouth Pride Picnic and the Aids Awareness event that happened October 2021. With the help of two city counselors and a supportive cast of businesses, the small college town of Monmouth will work towards becoming a haven for inclusion and belonging for generations of university students to come.”

Now, more than ever, it is important to offer resources, support, and fellowship to LGBTQ+ young people. As of this writing, there are 113 bills moving through 35 state legislatures that will halt or greatly reduce educators’ ability to talk about LGBTQ+ issues (Pen America, 2022.) and, already in 2022 in the United States, 18 LGBTQ+-themed books have been banned or are facing bans. (Masters, J., 2022.) With yet another social institution – joining government, religion, and athletics – failing to offer affirmation and representation, projects like the Virtual Rainbow Summit and its participants, presenters, and sponsors, must step forward to fill these ever-expanding voids.

So, our work goes on. In 2022, we will continue this work with a national focus involving the



PHOTO: 2021 awardee, Monmouth City has Pride, displays 200 pride flags and a large cross-street banner purchased for the city's first ever "Pride Month" and Pride event.

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4-H Program Leaders Working Group (PLWG) Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee and the 4-H Champions Group: LGBTQ+ Youth and Community. We plan to offer another multi-day, virtual event focusing on the various social intersections of LGBTQ+ individuals. With plans to address topics like the roles of visible and invisible disabilities, racial bias, ethnic background, age, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status, the Virtual Rainbow Summit will provide collaborative approaches to spread knowledge and awareness to all populations.

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Keep checking the official website – www.virtualrainbowsummit.org/ – for more information as planning progresses. We can't wait to see you in 2022! *

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PHOTO: A board member of 2020 awardee, Gender Equality Montana, dedicates eight rainbow crosswalks in downtown Bozeman.