



# United Way Community Matters

By Mary Lou Goeke

## Youth and Adult Allies Leadership Awards

Once a year I get the opportunity to invite my readers to a Santa Cruz County event that is designed to celebrate and recognize our local young people who are making our schools and community spaces safer for all of us. It is astonishing and inspiring to note that as it enters its twelfth year of production, the Santa Cruz County Queer Youth Leadership Awards has caught up in age with the youngest of its nominees.

Some people may find it hard to believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth can be sure of their sexual orientation at such a young age. However, no matter if a young person is certain or still figuring themselves out, it is important to have support structures like the Queer Youth Leadership Awards to help make that process easier.

The Queer Youth Leadership Awards is an annual Santa Cruz County event that recognizes and honors local LGBTQ youth and their individual and organizational allies with a fun night of celebration. Four youth are chosen to receive a \$250 gift from the community and \$500 to donate to any non-profit of their choice. These youth are dynamic people who are dedicated to making Santa Cruz County a better place. It is my pleasure to introduce you to four of those courageous and inspirational people.

Maddie Smith is an energetic and enthusiastic eighth grader at Aptos Junior High School who has made a name for herself on campus as an out and proud bisexual and as an outspoken advocate against all forms of bullying. Junior High is not an easy time for almost all students, especially the LGBTQ students, with phrases such as "That's so gay!" being used on a daily basis to put people down. Maddie, however, is setting the example for her peers. She rises above the bullying and respectfully encourages her peers to use language that is inclusive of everyone.

Not all of the nominees for the QYLA are activists in the traditional sense. The Queer Youth Leadership Award is designed to recognize those who are leaders not just as activists, but as athletes, artists and academics. These brave young people are making strides by simply being true to themselves while excelling in the activities they are most passionate about.

Xavier Plasencia is one of those leaders. A student at Watsonville High School, Xavier is a swimmer, an actor and an articulate speaker. After coming out to his water polo team, Xavier's sexual orientation became a non-issue. By being out and open in an area such as sports where LGBTQ youth are often the target of bullying and harassment, Xavier is setting a path for other youth to follow, telling them to never give up what they love in fear of being rejected. Out of the pool, Xavier uses his story of coming out as a tool for education. Speaking at this year's production of "What's in a Name?" a play put

on yearly by the Watsonville High School Drama class, Xavier inspired his peers and teachers with his strength and confidence.

The last two people who I am proud to introduce you to are not youth. They are being recognized, however, for their unyielding support of all youth regardless of sexual orientation. Recognizing that the entire community must be involved in order to fully support all LGBTQ youth, the Queer Youth Leadership Awards recognizes gay and straight, youth and adult, individuals and organizations.

Married couple Angie and Sylvia are vocal, strategic and passionate advocates for Angel, their gay son. After hearing that Angel, a sixth grader at Mission Hill Middle School, was facing homophobic harassment, they took a stand against all forms of bullying. They reached out to the Safe Schools Project and Triangle Speakers, engaging the administration in conversations with the organizations that improve the lives of LGBTQ youth. Because of their work, the administration is working to make their school safer.

These are just four of the twenty two nominees for this year, half of which came from South County. Reading the stories of the nominees for the 2009 Queer Youth Leadership Awards is humbling and inspirational and that is why the United Way of Santa Cruz County is a proud co-sponsor of the show. I encourage you to join me in support of this community event by attending the 12th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards on Saturday, May 16th at Scotts Valley High School. The event begins with a community resource fair at 5:00 a buffet dinner catered by Village Caterers at 5:30 and the awards ceremony beginning at 7 pm.

For more information about the QYLA, and to learn more about the 2009 nominees, I encourage you to visit their website at [www.QYLA.org](http://www.QYLA.org). I also encourage you to support the event in any way that you can. Ticket locations throughout the county are listed on the website and tickets, tables and donations can be purchased online. The Queer Youth Leadership Awards is produced by the Santa Cruz Task Force for LGBTQ Youth, an affiliate of the Diversity Center.

For more information, call (831) 427-4004 or visit their website at [www.QYLA.org](http://www.QYLA.org)

*For the past 16 years Mary Lou Goeke has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She has 32 years of experience providing social services to elders, children and families. The mission of United Way is to improve the lives of the people of Santa Cruz County by convening the community to seek solutions to their needs and by efficiently raising funds for the human care programs the United Way supports. Their website is [www.unitedwaysc.org](http://www.unitedwaysc.org).*