

The background of the entire page is a vibrant, low-angle shot looking up at numerous open umbrellas of various colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, pink) against a clear blue sky. The umbrellas are scattered across the frame, creating a sense of height and openness.

# **OYA!**

**ORLANDO  
YOUTH  
ALLIANCE**

**2021**  
**ANNUAL**  
**NEWSLETTER**



## PRESIDENT & CEO'S MESSAGE

The bottom of our stationery reads "the children are our future." As we work with, dialogue with and mentor the youth in our support groups, we can see the hope, the spark, the creativity and the energy. The Orlando Youth Alliance knows that we are helping to develop the leaders of tomorrow.

This year was our 31st year of service to the LGBTQ youth in Central Florida. Our dedicated volunteers gave hundreds of hours to create those safe spaces for our youth. We thank them for their time and dedication. Our financial health is strong. We appreciate our donors who believe in our mission.

We did a lot of zoom support group meetings, but started again offering in-person groups in October. We had over 455 sign ins at our meetings. We awarded six members with a scholarship to attend college. On the anniversary of Pulse we arranged a private showing for our youth to experience the display at the Orange County History Museum. Some of our youths were only eight years old when the tragedy occurred. Over 30 youth joined us at the National Trans Visibility March and the Come Out with Pride Parade and festival. Twenty-five youth dined on Olive Garden, wore festive holiday sweaters, ate cookies and made gingerbread houses at the annual Holiday Party.

Even with the pandemic our volunteers engaged our youth and helped them know they weren't alone in this journey. On behalf of our Board, volunteers, and over 100 Central Florida youth with whom we have the privilege of working, thank you for your continued support as we pursue our mission to facilitate the development of LGBTQ+ youth and provide a safe space for them to find the support they need to thrive.

**Thank you for being a part of the success of the Orlando Youth Alliance in 2021!**

With thanks,



**Patrick Howell**  
President



**Michael Slaymaker**  
Chief Executive Officer

## MISSION

The mission of the Orlando Youth Alliance and its chapters is to provide a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in Central Florida.

## BASIC OVERVIEW OF OYA

The Orlando Youth Alliance has offered a weekly peer-to-peer support group for LGBTQ youth in Central Florida since 1990. Today, three weekly groups are offered: Orlando, Lakeland and Longwood. Monthly social, educational and recreational activities occur to further help our youth to develop a core group of friends and peer supporters. In addition to the support group and activities, OYA provides LGBT History & Culture classes, scholarships, mental health referrals and career exploration. Numerous professionals have spoken to our youth about their careers and the options that await them. Developing this nucleus of friends is the key to never feeling alone. Since LGBTQ youth are five times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual classmates, it is vital that we provide the services of OYA to our area youth.

**The impact of OYA:** Over the past 31 years we have helped 2,100 youth. Two of those youths now serve on the board of directors.

## CONTACT US

We look forward to hearing from you!

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[www.orlandoyouthalliance.org](http://www.orlandoyouthalliance.org)  
[www.seminoleyouthalliance.org](http://www.seminoleyouthalliance.org)  
[www.lakelandyouthalliance.org](http://www.lakelandyouthalliance.org)



## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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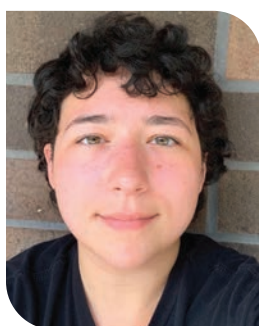
Scott Guira

**LGBTQ YOUTH ARE FIVE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO ATTEMPT SUICIDE COMPARED TO THEIR HETEROSEXUAL CLASSMATES.**



## SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

The Orlando Youth Alliance awarded six scholarships to area youth. Here are the mid-year reports from our scholarship recipients.



**MacKenzie Shramko**  
University of Florida

I'm doing really well! I graduated from the University of Florida this year and receiving this scholarship from OYA was a huge help in taking off some financial strain, not only in going to school, but in the time after graduating as well. I majored in Italian Studies (which falls under Foreign Languages and Literature). Having these funds to put towards my schooling meant I was able to save more of the money I made from my job at the time, so my financial stress was lessened even after graduation. All of this came during the highly stressful year that 2021 has been with ongoing stress and difficulty due to COVID-19, so I've greatly appreciated the help this scholarship provided. This scholarship was a major part of making my last year in school significantly less financially stressful, and I am so grateful for this scholarship and the opportunities I've had as a result of it.



**Joel Figueroa**  
Seminole State College

Education has been a journey for me to say the least. I've had many challenges and obstacles that I've dealt with. From the very beginning of my academic journey, I've had to push. Push to show people that I have the drive and the intelligence despite my disability. Constantly pushing barriers and stereotypes of what a disabled individual looks like taking on their education. Now being in my sophomore year of college I've pushed all of those boundaries. Exceeding my own expectations for myself. So thank you to all of the donors who were selfless enough to donate. In order for me to continue my education path, and hopefully make myself a successful individual who achieves my goals.



**Andres del Castillo**  
Pennsylvania State University

My name is Andres del Castillo and I am a current freshman at the Pennsylvania State University majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology. Because of your help and donation to make the OYA scholarship a possibility, I as a queer student at Penn State feel financially supported in reaching my ambitious goals to become a geneticist who studies the genetic configurations behind queerness. This first semester has proved successful towards such goal as I have achieved straight As in all my classes, applied for summer research experiences, and have been personally offered a position at a prominent research lab studying RNA kinetics. Because of this scholarship that you chose to fund, queer Orlando youth like myself have the opportunity to explore beyond boundaries, to represent their community beyond barriers, and ultimately, achieve beyond limitations. Thank you for your generous help in making mine, as well as several others, dreams a reality.



## SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS (continued)



**Andrew Wiater**

Valencia College

I wish that I could go back and tell this little one, that he just graduated with his associates in arts degree. For those who don't know my road to education was never easy. I was told throughout my life, that an academic journey was not needed. That my disability would stop me from fully succeeding in my academic life. Never the less, I persisted and now have my two-year degree. My next step, is receiving my bachelor's degree in social work. To do what I feel is my life calling. To advocate for minority groups, underprivileged communities, and hopefully bring as much social change as I possibly can. The amount of pride I feel is unmatched. Not only because of what I've done, but more importantly what I know I am going to do in the future. Here's to finishing a chapter, and opening up another one. 🎓🎉 I'm officially accepted into the bachelors of social work program at UCF! I love you all, thank you if you have ever believed in me or supported me. I'm not crying, you are!



**Liam Clarke**

Valencia College

I would like to say a huge thank you to all of the OYA donors, their contribution aids so many LGBT youth including myself. With the OYA scholarship I was able to graduate from Valencia College with my Associates degree and I am now about to start my first semester at Maryville College in Tennessee. I am so grateful for the opportunities this scholarship has made available to me and I can't wait to see what happens next!



**Kevin Wonder**

University of South Florida

The first half of my sophomore year at USF has been phenomenal. Returning to in person classes has given me a taste for the true college experience and made the course work more enjoyable. I have become excellent friends with my roommates and people on my dorm floor; becoming a better part of the USF community has been a highlight of the semester. Having my friends and family to support me through school is great, but it is extra motivating to know I have community members that want to financially support my education and I am so grateful for that. Here's to a better 2022! Go Bulls!

The OYA Scholarship Program is grateful to **Bill Neighbors** and **Tim Warzecha**, the **Walt Disney Company Foundation**, **Bill Woods**, **Barry Miller**, **The 49 Fund at the Central Florida Foundation** for their gifts to help fund a major portion of the program. We thank **Maggie Martin Lloyd** for funding *The Rodney Hughley Memorial Scholarship*. OYA has been providing financial assistance for education to its members since 2009.

# CENTRAL FLORIDA COUNTIES

## LAKE/SEMINOLE/ORANGE/OSCEOLA/POLK

### POLK COUNTY UPDATE

In 2021 we tried to host Polk Pride but COVID was having another surge so we postponed until 2022. We remained busy reminding the community that Polk Pride is still here and pride continues even during a pandemic.

On September 7, members cheered on the Polk County School Board as they read a Proclamation of Polk Pride Week. We had a float in the 2021 Lakeland Christmas Parade. We were recognized at the December 20 Lakeland City Commission meeting by the Junior League of Greater Lakeland and the City of Lakeland for having the best professional float. The love and support showed by the city and its residents the night of the parade made us even more proud to be members of this beautiful community. We're grateful to the city of Lakeland for the annual opportunity to be present in our community through participation in this event.

We are currently in the planning stages for Polk Pride in the Park to be held June 18, 2022...so mark your calendar!

June 15 Pride for Youth

June 16 Pride in Faith

June 18 Pride in the Park

Scott Guira, President Polk Pride



**LAKELAND  
YOUTH  
ALLIANCE**

[www.lakelandyouthalliance.org](http://www.lakelandyouthalliance.org)



[www.polkpridefl.org](http://www.polkpridefl.org)





# ACTIVITIES TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS & UNDERSTAND THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

## COME OUT WITH PRIDE & NATIONAL TRANS VISABILITY MARCH



Photo credit: J.D. Casto



## ORLANDO BALLET



## OYA PICNIC

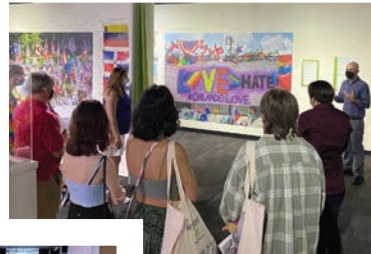
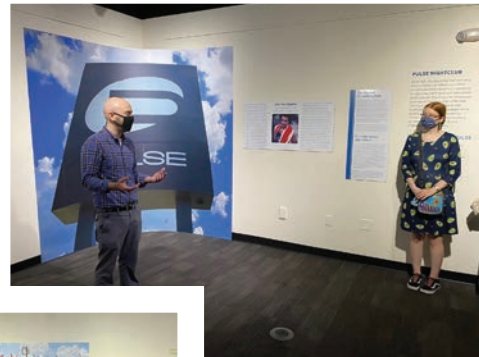


## BOOK CLUB & ZOOM MEETINGS





## PULSE EXHIBIT AT HISTORY CENTER



## HOLIDAY PARTY





# WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

## AMANDA ESPOSITO CERTIFIED SURGICAL TECHNOLOGIST

Coming from a high school with no Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) when I started at Valencia Community College, I was looking for a place that I would fit in and make new friends they were like me, queer. I first attended a GSA meeting where I met a member of OYA, who has since become a life-long friend of mine. They invited me to come to a meeting the following Tuesday night and I quickly found what I was looking for, a second home. Over the course of 5 years OYA provided me with the education, visibility, and acceptance that I needed. I can't thank OYA and their leaders enough for providing me and other LGBTQ+ youth with a safe



and supportive environment. I was fortunate enough to facilitate for OYA virtually during the past year and it allowed me to see the group through a new lens; the support they provide has continued to evolve and the kids are still in great hands. OYA remains a part of my life with the friendships and learnings that have endured. I have been fortunate to remain involved in FL queer

visibility now by volunteering with St. Pete pride, but Orlando will always be home.



## MARCUS MILLS LIC. REAL ESTATE BROKER | SKYMARC PROPERTIES, LLC

The Orlando Youth Alliance was the lifeline that helped me to survive my teenage years. My home life was one of violence and hostility towards queerness, so being out at home wasn't an option. Luckily, I was able to go to school on the other side of town, which freed me to not only seek out community in other queer youth, but helped jumpstart my activism at a young age. (The more I could do outside of the house, under the guise of "academics", the less I needed to be home!). I found a group of people who I could say were MY people. We fought for Gay-Straight alliances in our high schools. We put together quiet mutual aid. We went from being OYA members to OYA youth leaders. We made lifelong friends. We celebrated our victories together. We mourned those we lost,

together. And we were lucky enough to have queer adults around us who genuinely loved and protected us, and made sure we protected each other. (Thank you, John, Greg, Jim, Lisa, Barry, Michael). Fast forward 20 years since I first stepped foot in an OYA meeting, I'm almost 35, I live in the beautiful city of Miami Beach, I have my own modest little real estate brokerage, and I am still fired up with a passion to fight for our community. It's amazing to look back and think about how much the world has changed (how much WE'VE CHANGED the world) since 2002!



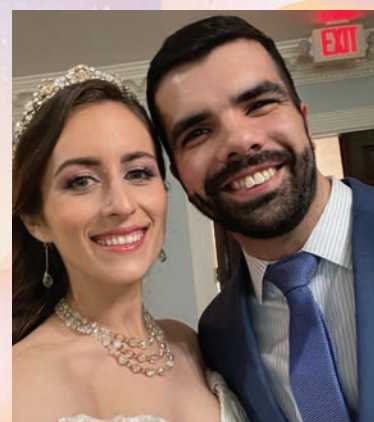
## WHERE ARE THEY NOW? (CONTINUED)



### CARLOS VAZQUEZ CONSTRUCTION PROJECT MANAGER

I remember finding the Orlando Youth Alliance (OYA) through an internet search for local gay youth groups back in 2009. It took some time to build up the courage to finally attend a meeting, but I did so that summer, and it changed my life in more ways than one. Until then, I had never had any LGBTQ friends or mentors, so everyone I met through OYA gave me insight into what it means to go through life as a member of our rainbow community. My fellow youths were the LGBTQ friends I'd never had, and the facilitators personified the many ways in which I could grow to be a happy, thriving gay person in adulthood—beyond all the stereotypes that were and continue to be portrayed in media.

With OYA, I attended for the first time Orlando Gay Pride, Gay Days at Disney World, and even a gay prom put on by the group. All things I either never knew existed and/or never thought I would be a part of. The connections I made and the things I experienced contributed in such deep ways to molding me into the person I am today. Words cannot begin to express my gratitude for all that OYA did to enrich my life.



### OYA VETTED MENTAL HEALTH REFERRAL PROGRAM

Orlando Youth Alliance welcomes local mental health professionals who have an interest in supporting the needs of LGBTQI+ youth to join our referral program. Such professionals are listed on our web site ([www.orlandoyouthalliance.org](http://www.orlandoyouthalliance.org)) and on informational materials (e.g. brochures) so that our youth and their families may access them as needed.

### GSA GRANTS

The Orlando Youth Alliance provided grants to fund the creation and ongoing missions of Gay-Straight Alliances / Gender Sexuality Alliances throughout Central Florida. The grants are named after former OYA Board member Ginger Malcom who recognized that GSAs are an essential resource for LGBTQ+ youth attending school. She conceived the GSA grant program before her passing in 2017.

**Want to apply for your school's GSA?**  
Visit [www.orlandoyouthalliance.org](http://www.orlandoyouthalliance.org) today!



## OYA 2021 DONOR LISTING

### Legacy Society

Sandy Neubarth  
Michael Slaymaker

### Over \$10,000

Daniel Niccum  
Orange County Government

### \$5,000 - \$9,999

David Dorman & Scott Penyak  
Network for Good  
The 49 Fund at the  
Central Florida Foundation

### \$2,500 - \$4,999

Niki & Scott Friedman  
Al Leach & Rev. Jim Merritt  
Se7en Bites  
Neil Starkey  
The Walt Disney Company Foundation  
Tim Warzecha & Bill Neighbors  
Watermark Media

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(formerly Watkins Dental)  
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Justin Gatzemeyer  
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Maureen Morley Orzel  
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 Scott Woodrick  
 Caleb Woods  
 Katharine Zimmerman  
 Linda Zouzoulas Fishkind

## OYA'S LARGEST GIFT

The largest gift OYA received in 2021 was the gift of volunteer time. OYA has over 30 volunteers who serve our youth on the board of directors, group facilitators, chaperones for activities, drop-ins, fundraising, marketing and program design and implementation. As of July 2021 the estimated national value of each volunteer hour is \$27.20. Our dedicated volunteers donated 2,269 hours to support the youth. That calculates to **over \$61,716 in volunteer time** to OYA and its chapters.



**PLEASE REMEMBER  
 ORLANDO YOUTH  
 ALLIANCE IN YOUR  
 WILL OR TRUST.**

### Ways to donate:

#### 1. Make an online gift.

Log onto

<http://orlandoyouthalliance.org/donate>

Just click on the "donate" button to make a credit card gift via PayPal.

#### 2. Mail your gift.

Send a gift through the mail to:

**Orlando Youth Alliance**

**PO Box 536944**

**Orlando, FL 32853-6944**

#### 3. Put OYA in your Will or Trust.

Individuals wishing to include Orlando Youth Alliance in their will or estate plan, can find information on our website. For more information please call 407-244-1222 or email us at [info@orlandoyouthalliance.org](mailto:info@orlandoyouthalliance.org).

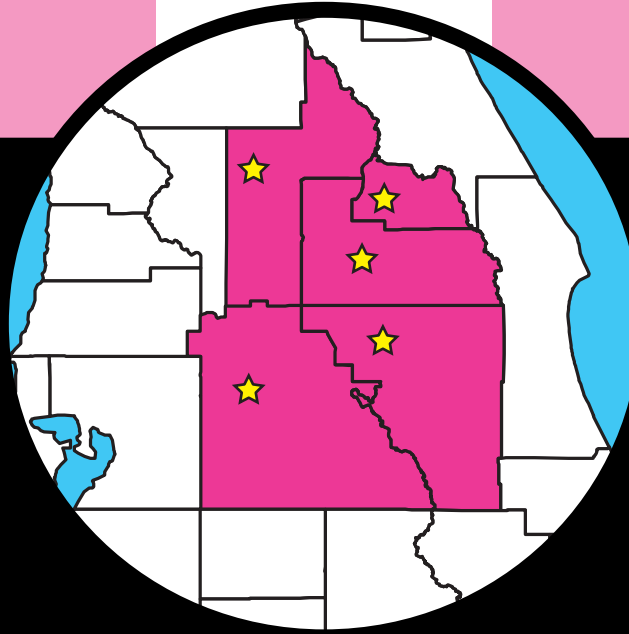
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# THE COMMUNITY GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

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