

Keeping the Momentum... Staying Connected to LGBTQ+ Activism After High School



Congratulations! You're about to graduate from high school and enter the "real world". We hear people use that phrase all the time: The Real World. Does that mean that high school is any less "real"? Of course not. But the world outside of your school walls does present an additional set of challenges and opportunities.

Let's take a moment to discuss some of those opportunities: In high school, your Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) gave you the chance to flex your leadership and activism muscles. You got to facilitate discussions, plan events, organize campaigns, and lead educational presentations on the issues facing the LGBTQ+ community.

Once you graduate, you won't have access to that same environment. But that doesn't mean that your activism needs to halt once you're out of high school. The "real world" needs activists, too. Here are just a few ways that you can stay connected to LGBT, or queer, activism.

Campus Organizing

If you plan to continue your education after high school, a university or college setting can be a great place to continue fighting for LGBTQ liberation. Regardless of whether you're on a private campus with just a few hundred people, or on a larger public campus with thousands of other students, there is always room for awareness raising.

First, find out if your new school has any kind of LGBTQ student organization. Some schools have campus centers that specifically address LGBT issues. Others have less formal student-led organizations, like a GSA. If the school has student housing, there may even be a group that is in place to ensure that the dormitories are safe places for LGBTQ+ students. Find a group that best fits your passions: it could be social (organizing student events and discussion groups), educational (leading presentations for classes or other student groups), or activist (working to change or improve school policies to best meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students and staff). In addition, you may have the opportunity to get involved with a political group that seeks to change the climate for LGBTQ+ people on a larger, governmental scale.

If you find that your campus is completely lacking in LGBT-related organizations, you can use the skills that you learned being a GSA activist to form one. As you did with your GSA, you'll want to investigate the policies and procedures set in place for your school, and find out what steps other groups have had to take to in order to form. Every college campus is a little different, so make sure you do your research before trying to get something off the ground.

And don't forget: Even if your college already has a half-dozen LGBT student organizations in place, that doesn't mean that you will find one that meets your needs and fulfills your passions. If you don't like what you see, it's totally within your power to create something new and different.

Community Organizing

While many social justice movements are born from student organizing, many start in the grassroots of the community. Community organizers are the people behind the movements, the people behind the people. Many of the skills you learned being a GSA activist would translate well into community organizing: You know that big change happens one step at a time, that it takes strong leadership as well as shared responsibility to make things happen, and that a small group of organized people can change the world for the better.

In Wisconsin, many of the organizations working to change the climate for LGBT people started as a small group of volunteers, working tirelessly (and for free) to get some movement going around an issue which was important to them.

Fair Wisconsin, the statewide organization that was the main force campaigning against the ban on marriage and civil unions, got its start in the basement of the Social Justice Center in Madison. What began as a couple of dedicated individuals grew into a huge organization that, at the height of the campaign, employed over 50 staff people at more than 10 offices across the state. Fair Wisconsin has scaled down considerably, but they still rely heavily on volunteers all across Wisconsin to continue their fight for fairness and equality for all people. If you'd like to learn more about how to help Fair Wisconsin in their efforts, give them a call at (608)441-0143.

Many communities in Wisconsin have **LGBT community centers**, which serve to connect LGBTQ+ people to services, events and support. Milwaukee, La Crosse, Racine, and Superior are just a few of the cities in Wisconsin that have such organizations. Most of these organizations have only a few, if any, paid staff members. The rest of their work is done by dedicated volunteers. Volunteer activities could include answering phones, joining a speakers' bureau, facilitating social/support groups, and helping to organize special events, such as Pride.

Faith communities can play an important role in the LGBT equality movement. Many churches, synagogues and other faith organizations embrace LGBT people and offer support services to them and to their families. If you are a member of a particular faith organization, find out what their stance is on LGBT issues. Offer to facilitate a discussion group about issues of sexual orientation or gender identity, or to lead a presentation on the issues facing LGBTQ+ people.

In the community, there are a multitude of ways that an individual can create greater awareness about equality for LGBT people and their allies. Does your local library have books about LGBT issues, or written by LGBT people? Does your local paper report on stories about the LGBT community in a positive way? Are anti-discrimination laws abided by in your community when it comes to housing and employment for LGBT people? When you start asking yourself these questions, the possibilities for social activism in your community seem endless.

Keep in mind: It's not just the LGBT community that is concerned about justice and fair treatment for all people. Think about what other groups of people might have common goals, and reach out to them. Coalition building is a vital part of successful community organizing, and allows you to tap into new resources and meet other activists.

Professional Activism

If organizing in your free time doesn't quench your thirst for creating social change, it's entirely possible to pursue a career in activism. Right here in the Midwest, there are a number of ways to jumpstart such a career.

The **Midwest Academy** is one of the foremost training programs for activists who wish to become organizers in the progressive movement. Their rigorous, five-day training focuses on the key aspects of community organizing, such as coalition building, lobbying your legislators, direct action organizing, working with the media, and much more. These trainings are scheduled numerous times throughout the year. In addition, the Midwest Academy has a number of summer internships available. Training with the Midwest Academy opens many doors and many of the people who attend their trainings go on to become full-time paid organizers. You can find out more information about the Midwest Academy at www.midwestacademy.com.

Today, many colleges and universities offer courses and certification in community organizing. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for example, offers both an undergraduate and graduate certification in community organizing through the School of Education. This program gives students an opportunity to gain a practical, historical and theoretical understanding of strategies for promoting social change through collective action. In addition to the coursework, students in this program are required to intern at least 100 hours with a community organization, to help them receive some "real world" experience.

In conclusion, there are countless ways to stay connected to queer activism after leaving high school. Whether you volunteer a few hours a week making phone calls for Fair Wisconsin, or pursue a full-time career in community organizing, your efforts have a ripple effect. The work being done by the GSA movement and youth activists today will be felt by generations to come, as we make our way towards equality and fair treatment for LGBTQ+ people.