



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Action Camp: Ten Years of Illinois LGBTQ+ Youth  
Bringing to Life the World They Want to Live In**

*Chicago, IL* – LGBTQ+ young people and adult allies gathered under the sun and stars earlier this month for the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Action Camp, co-hosted by PHIMC’s Illinois Safe Schools Alliance and Youth Services’ Pride Youth Program. Since 2012, Action Camp has evolved from a weekend retreat at a local university to a five-day sleepaway camp that brings together leaders from Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs) across the state to learn from one another and shape the safer schools movement. Action Camp is often described as “magical” because young people see their identities reflected back to them, sharpen their critical lens, strengthen their anti-oppressive frameworks, and practice creating spaces where all identities are safe, supported, affirmed, and celebrated.

Nat Duran, Youth Engagement Manager for Illinois Safe Schools Alliance (the Alliance), which made its home at PHIMC in 2019, identifies the goal of camp as, “Putting into practice a vision of the world we wish we lived in.” Nat talks about the values which underpin the camp experience. “Some people hear that we are ‘non-punitive’ and think that means a lack of accountability – but in actuality, it means a lot more work goes into our accountability practices. I think it’s really cool to give young people and adults such an immersive experience to live the values like this, to plant seeds in their home and school communities. Post-camp surveys tell us six months later how campers put some of these values into action in their GSA or youth spaces.”

Action Camp 2022 highlights are too many to name, but include an Alice in Wonderland-themed game, in which staff dressed as the Queen of Hearts and Mad Hatter hosted a friendly competition, forging camp friendships and demonstrating that even rule makers love to play. Campers reveling in their own bodies – swimming, playing sports they would never play at school – was another joyful highlight.

Much has been accomplished in ten years towards building a society beyond spaces like Action Camp which are truly safe and affirming for LGBTQ+ young people, yet there is plenty still to do. Illinois’ [Inclusive Curriculum Law](#), for example, took effect on July 1, 2020, mandating that all Illinois public schools include the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in the teaching of Illinois and United States history. Yet advocacy organizations throughout the state received reports of harassment, discrimination, and bullying against LGBTQ+ students with greater frequency in the last academic year than in the years leading up to COVID, and the American Civil Liberties Union reports staggering [legislation affecting LGBTQ rights across the country](#).

In this context, the magic of Action Camp is life-giving.

Immediately following Action Camp 2022, 88% of evaluation respondents reported feeling more prepared to advocate for themselves when others say or do things that are hurtful in relation to their identities after attending camp. “Advocacy is never done,” one camper commented, saying they learned at camp “how to advocate for myself and others.” Other campers noted that camp built leadership skills that they can use in everyday life, helped them understand “how to be aware of other people’s trauma,” “how to interact in a trauma-informed way,” and sharpened skills in “confidence, better communication, [and] promoting social change.”

Action Camp has not always been five days and it did not begin outdoors. In 2012, Action Camp was a weekend retreat at Roosevelt University for fewer than ten Alliance Youth Committee members. In 2013, Action Camp included 32 campers outdoors and except for one year at a different site, remained in the same location until going remote in 2020 and hybrid in 2021 -- in cooperation with 360 Youth Services, Chicago Public Schools, Uniting Pride of Champaign County, Youth Opportunity United, and Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook. In 2018, Youth Services joined as an official co-host, with programming planned now by Alliance Youth Committee members alongside youth leaders from Youth Services’ prideLEAD program.

To support LGBTQ+ young people in building an affirming society beyond Action Camp, student allies are encouraged to [join or start a GSA](#), and educators and administrators are invited to participate in one of the Alliance’s many [professional development opportunities](#).

Photos available upon request.

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*Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago (PHIMC)* advances health justice and strengthens public health through innovation and partnerships that align people, strategies, and resources. The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, which made PHIMC its home in 2019, promotes safety, support, and healthy development of LGBTQ+ youth in Illinois schools and communities through advocacy, education, youth organizing, and research.