

Dear Park and Rec Commission,

I hope this letter finds you well. When I was asked how I felt about having a youth center available for those within the LGBTQIA+ community, I had mixed emotions and I really sat on it, not knowing how to answer. My gut reaction was yes, absolutely. The excitement of knowing there could be a safe space for our youth to hang out, build friendships, and have the availability of resources sounds amazing. But writing a letter to express how important this would be for our community felt like I was coming out all over again. Many people don't know this, but living in my true authentic self as a 45-year-old, who also happens to be an active community member, feels like I have to come out of the closet all the time. So, this hasn't been easy. It required me to dig deep and remember what life was like growing up in Merced County.

I grew up in the small town of Delhi right down the road from here. Growing up, I didn't have people around me who I felt safe to even be able to express, let alone share, the feelings I was having. I didn't understand them myself, let alone to get them out and put them into words. I actually just did what I thought I was supposed to do, which was date girls and stay in my lane. I grew up with religion and religious beliefs, always looking for answers and acceptance. I attended every church my friends invited me to just hoping to get some kind of answers and hoping I would run into someone like me.

Growing up, my earliest memories of being bullied started in first grade and never stopped. There was never a week or month that went by that I wasn't teased by someone. I was told to walk away and be the bigger person. So I held it in and took the hits, mostly verbally, but I was always watching my back and watching my surroundings because I didn't want to have to fight anyone if I didn't have to. My parents, until recently, didn't even know I was being harassed at school. I didn't want to burden them; they were working hard to feed four kids and had their own problems. Unfortunately, when I was younger, I don't remember there being safe spaces on campuses for people like me. I was lost, confused, and had moments where I thought, "I wonder if anyone would miss me." I had friends, but even at a young age, I still knew to keep some things to myself because I just wanted to fit in and have friends. "Stay in your lane, Adam" was what I would tell myself to get through the days, months, and years to come.

As I got older and eventually graduated high school, I got married and was on a path to start a family. I was eager to feel that unconditional love, from someone who had no preconceived thoughts or feelings of who I was and would just love me for who I am. After just a few short years, my then-wife and I had an uncomfortable conversation, and I told her I was Bi. At the time, that's the only thing that made sense. Our relationship for the most part was healthy, but I was missing something and didn't feel whole. We went our separate ways, remaining friends, but I felt even more lost than ever. I felt guilty for hurting my wife and now I needed to tell my family.

When I called my family together, I felt the need to apologize to my siblings because they had to hear and deal with an older brother who was being bullied to the point of having rocks thrown at me by other kids. I felt bad my friends had to deal with it. I had nowhere to go or anyone to talk to. I felt guilt, confusion, and frustration and again feeling alone even though I was surrounded by family who's trying to understand and friends doing their best to find the right words. I felt bad because they thought I was coming home to announce we were having a baby, but instead I broke their hearts. My siblings didn't say much; they didn't know how to comfort me or what was the right thing to say. After all, I was the older brother who was taking care of them and who they leaned on because my parents were in survival mode. My dad was only concerned if I was going to start wearing makeup, and my mom said it was just a phase and asked if I was doing it because it was on TV. After further conversation and some research, the closest place for my mom to take me was Modesto. At that time, that was the closest PFLAG chapter we could find. My mom felt I should get counseling, and maybe she was hoping I would get more answers. So I went and I talked and I watched my mom cry. I just wanted to take it all back and act like nothing was said or done. What I didn't realize until many years later is that the program was not only there for me but also for my parents because they needed guidance as well. I will be forever grateful

for PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). They helped me, but they helped my mom. My parents are my world, and the last thing I wanted to do was cause problems or hurt them.

As I got older and started becoming my more authentic self, I realized wow wouldn't it be great if Merced County had a safe space where someone can find a support system not just for the youth but also for parents and guardians. We need a space where anyone who needs more information in the form of education, resources, and support can be found in one place. We should not have to travel to the next largest city to get help for problems or issues in our own backyard and neighborhood. Somewhere that is welcoming to everyone, including our straight allies who sometimes don't know how to protect their friends and family. Somewhere safe and without judgment.

My husband and I just celebrated our 20th anniversary, and just like anyone who is married knows, there are ups and downs to all relationships. He loved me enough to stay with me in Merced County because he knew how important it was to stay home and make things better here. There have been many times we could have run to the nearest large city where I would not have to deal with the conservative Bible belt that we call the Central Valley. I didn't want to run, and believe it or not, not everyone is eager to leave Merced County. I stayed because I vowed to myself I wanted to make things better. We stayed, opened up a successful small business, and have encountered so many wonderful people who may not have always felt comfortable around us, but have learned over time that we are no different than anyone else. My goal was simply to be exactly who I am because I wanted to show and prove that we are regular people, just like everyone else. I also felt that I wanted to show our youth that they don't have to leave their home to feel like it's their home. We don't have to leave our family and friends to feel accepted. That life can be beautiful and rewarding in Merced County with the right environments that encourage and support our youth.

Don't get me wrong, we have a long way to go and It's been a tough journey, but great strides have been made and that's because we have people like Jennifer who have and continue to be the beacon of hope we all need. She has accomplished so much in just the last few years and has inspired me to do more for the LGBTQIA+ community. The growth and progress Merced has made can be felt by all. I feel it every day when I walk downtown, when I'm amongst our fast-growing community. I am proud to live and have had the opportunity to grow up in Merced. I want that for everyone, and having a safe space like the McNamara Youth Center would do just that. I can't wait for the day I can help build it alongside those who have been fighting for us every day. I will use my experience and knowledge to help foster the love and support our youth needs and to help the adults in our lives understand and guide them with compassion so that our kids can grow up healthy and happy here in Merced.

Now I stand here, asking the community I grew up in to support our youth, friends, and family by helping our Central Valley Pride Center provide a safe space that I know will be filled with love and acceptance and the kindness one needs on this journey we call life. I'm asking you to give us something I wish I had growing up. I'm one of the fortunate ones who have been blessed with a family & friends who love me and support me. But so many kids are not and they have nowhere to turn. We have an opportunity to do what is right and what Merced needs so badly.

Together, let's build a brighter future for our youth, families, and our entire community.

With gratitude and anticipation,  
Adam Castro  
(He/him/his)

Dear planning commission,

Thank you for considering Central Valley Pride Center as they request to utilize space at the McNamara Youth Center. It's imperative to have LGBTQ resources embedded throughout the community instead of having it all being located in one space. Merced's LGBTQ community saw immense growth only after the Merced Pride Center on G street closed in 2018 and we chose to relocate our groups and events to a variety of community gathering spots, including Merced Public Library, Merced Adult School, Merced Multicultural Arts Center, Coffee Bandits and multiple locally owned businesses. We found that by holding gatherings and offering resources at multiple places we were able to make the most effective changes for our community at large. It's my hope that McNamara Youth Center can be included in this list of community centers that house LGBTQ resources. I have no doubt that the positive effects and cultural impact of having such resources made available there now would create the greatest amount of change in the fastest and easiest way possible for Merced.

I've been heavily involved in Merced's LGBTQ community since coming out at the age of 30 in 2015. Because of what I learned from 2019 -2022 during my time as board president for the Merced LGBTQ+ Alliance I 100% fully advocate for Central Valley Pride Center and Jennifer McQueen for the opportunity to occupy this space.

-Adam Lincoln Lane  
(He/him/his)

Arianne Huffman  
ASUCM External Vice President  
ASUCMEVP@ucmerced.edu  
08/21/23

To Whom It May Concern,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for Central Valley Pride's application to utilize the McNamara Youth Center space for youth and family programming. As a member of both the LGBTQIA+ community and a resident of the Central Valley, I have had the privilege of witnessing the transformative impact that Central Valley Pride has had on our community.

As a current student at UC Merced, I understand the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for all individuals, especially LGBTQIA+ youth and families. Central Valley Pride has consistently demonstrated its dedication to fostering an environment of acceptance, support, and growth for this marginalized population. The proposed youth and family programming, which includes support groups, art days, movie nights, and skill-building activities, would undoubtedly contribute to the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQIA+ youth and their families.

Growing up, I often wished for a dedicated space where I could freely express my identity and find a community that understood and embraced me. Having a facility like the McNamara Youth Center, which offers multipurpose rooms, a teen hangout space, and various recreational amenities, could truly be a beacon of hope for the younger generation. Reflecting on my own experiences, I recognize the positive impact that Central Valley Pride's programs could have on the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth, including those at UC Merced who may seek a supportive community beyond campus. As External Vice President, one of my goals is to increase student involvement in the community. This space could be a fantastic means of connecting youth with the university and vice versa.

Central Valley Pride's commitment to promoting diversity and equality has been evident in its past initiatives, and I have personally witnessed the organization's tireless efforts to create a more inclusive Central Valley. From collaborating on community events to providing essential resources, Central Valley Pride has consistently demonstrated its dedication to improving the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families.

I firmly believe that granting Central Valley Pride access to the McNamara Youth Center would be a significant step toward building a more inclusive and accepting community for all. The proposed programming aligns perfectly with the organization's mission, and the opportunity to establish a dedicated space for LGBTQIA+ youth and families holds immense potential for positive change.

Thank you for considering my endorsement of Central Valley Pride's application. I am hopeful that the Parks and Recreation Commission will recognize the value of this endeavor and wholeheartedly recommend Central Valley Pride's utilization of the McNamara Youth Center space.

Sincerely,

Arianne Huffman



**Board Chair**  
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**GSA Outreach**  
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**GSA Outreach**  
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**Social Media & Web Design**  
Jamie McNeil &  
Lexie Pivrotto

August 22, 2023

Dear Central Valley Pride,

GLSEN Merced is honored to work with and support Central Valley Pride in all the great work you do. LGBTQ+ representation and advocacy through community-centered events, on-campus support groups, and professional development are key components to providing quality support for the queer community. GLSEN Merced is proud to support the constant work and services you provide to the LGBTQ+ community in Merced county and across California.

GLSEN Merced looks forward to providing you continual support in years to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon McFarland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jon McFarland, Ed.D.  
GLSEN Merced, Chair  
[jon.mcfarland@merced.glsen.org](mailto:jon.mcfarland@merced.glsen.org)  
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Hi, I'm Isabella Rodriguez, one of the many other kids that attend the pride youth program! I sincerely believe that this youth program has helped me! It made me a lot happier, I get to attend events, I definitely know a lot more people and the people who work there are just so nice, the youth program is such a calming, relaxing, yet bubbly area, I appreciate it so much, the youth program is so much fun and I'm sure other kids who attend can agree too! There's also, a bunch of things we're allowed to do there, they host activities, they make sure it's an open area so if we have any problems they'll let us talk about it without putting us down or telling us bad things, some activities we do in the program include, drawing, painting, sometimes puzzles, or books, and some things we can find. Not to mention, some of the workers there, for example, Naomi parra or Jennifer McQueen are so kind! Naomi has such a kind welcoming and bubbly



Caption

personality while Jennifer is also very kind and welcoming, the hosts are always so happy and make sure everyone feels safe. I love this program so much and I thank everyone in it!

August 18, 2023

Parks and Recreation Commission:

The McNamara Youth Center would be a great space for the Central Valley Pride Center to call home.

The Central Valley Pride Center has been beneficial to my family as a safe place to meet and engage with other LGBTQIA+ families and allies, whether it's a movie night, art activities, or simply support as a LGBTQIA+ parent and support for my LGBTQIA+ teen.

The McNamara Youth Center would allow the Central Valley Pride Center to expand upon the services/activities they provide to Merced County. It's so important for those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (of all ages) as well as their families and allies, to know they have a place to gather together; whether it's for support or just to hang out and have fun.

I truly hope you consider recommending the Center Valley Pride Center for this amazing opportunity to further the good work they are doing in providing support, inclusion, acceptance, and love to Merced County as a whole.

Thank you,

Jamie Shaw



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Dear Parks and Recreation Commission,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to express my wholehearted support for the Central Valley Pride Center's (CVP) application to utilize the McNamara Youth Center space for youth and family programming. The prospect of having a dedicated space for CVP's initiatives is not only exciting but also a crucial step toward creating a more inclusive and supportive community for our youth and families.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the positive impact that CVP has had on our community. The support groups for both youth and parents have been invaluable in providing a safe and nurturing environment for individuals to share their experiences and find a sense of belonging. The range of programs offered, from Family Picnics at the Park to Youth Art days, speaks volumes about CVP's commitment to creating spaces where families can come together to connect, learn, and grow.

As someone who has engaged with CVP's programs, I can attest to the significance of having a dedicated teen space for drop-in hangout time, job skills training, and more. The prospect of offering resources like a free food pantry within the new space is a testament to CVP's dedication to addressing real community needs. Furthermore, the McNamara Youth Center's amenities, including the multipurpose rooms, playground, pool, and skate park, present an incredible opportunity to expand the reach of CVP's offerings.

I firmly believe that CVP's presence in a space like the McNamara Youth Center would be a game-changer for our community. The chance for LGBTQIA+ youth and families to access specialized services and support in a welcoming and affirming environment cannot be overstated. It would create a lasting impact on countless lives, enabling young individuals to find their voices, build skills, and thrive.

Having closely observed CVP's growth and the remarkable work they have done, I wholeheartedly endorse their application for this space. The thought of seeing their vision come to life in the McNamara Youth Center is truly inspiring. I am excited about the potential this opportunity holds and am confident that CVP's continued efforts will shape a brighter future for our community.

**first. further. forward.**



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As the UC Student Regent, I am acutely aware of the significance such a space holds not only for the broader community but also for the students of UC Merced.

CVP's application to establish a dedicated space within the McNamara Youth Center is an opportunity that carries immense potential for both the youth and families of our region, as well as for our university community. The ability to offer a wide spectrum of programs, from support groups and family events to skill-building sessions and free food initiatives, signifies a commitment to addressing multifaceted needs that often remain unmet.

From my vantage point, I recognize that the prospect of a designated teen space within the McNamara Youth Center holds particular promise for UC Merced students. This space would not only provide a platform for students to engage in various activities and programs but would also foster integration between the university and the broader community. By encouraging interaction and collaboration, this space has the potential to bridge divides, foster understanding, and enrich the lives of both the students and residents of our city.

Moreover, the McNamara Youth Center's location and amenities offer a unique opportunity for UC Merced students to become an integral part of the fabric of our city. The notion of a shared space that brings together diverse voices, backgrounds, and experiences aligns seamlessly with the principles of inclusivity and community building that our university holds dear.

Thank you for considering my perspective, and I am hopeful that you will see the immense value that CVP's presence in the McNamara Youth Center can bring to our community.

Sincerely,  
Josiah Beharry  
Jbeharry@ucmerced.edu

Hello my name is Mireya Rodriguez,

I would like to share with you today my personal reason why Central Valley Pride has helped my family and I.

I was born and raised in San Francisco & since have made friends with a diverse amount of people in the community including many friends who are part of the LGBTQIA+ family. Since moving here 5 1/2 years ago I've seen Merced expand beautifully, I've been a volunteer in so many areas of Merced because I feel that my kids and I should always make community a part of our everyday lives to make us stronger and more knowledgeable in how to communicate with a diverse amount of people. Unfortunately my friends felt uneasy going to a town that may not be that diverse when it comes to the Pride community. Little did I know that there was a community, small but still in the works.

In 2019 my daughter Isabella Rodriguez came to me and told me how she felt about the same sex. Of course she had the best supportive family to just accept her and love her for who she already is not what sex she prefers. I did however want a group of people she can talk to or relate to to make her feel comfortable in her own skin and proud all around for so she is. I went to the Mercado one night and Central Valley Pride along with Jennifer McQueen was there handing out adorable flags and stickers and speaking to anyone who wanted to know more about their program. My daughter inquired and I encouraged her to go to the program at the MAC. There we both met Naomi Parra and Jennifer McQueen who was on conference call. Everyone was so welcoming and friendly and excited to see us! We both felt it was a safe and secure space. I felt good letting my daughter openly speak about herself. She had a great time! Since then she had met many friends and feels secure in the person she is. She is not ashamed and is very confident in the overall direction her life is going, she feels that this program made her felt included, open to speak what's on her mind and a sense of leadership!

My hope is for Central Valley Pride to get more resources and a larger area for all the LGBTQIA+ community, to be involved in more community functions and to open the minds up of the community as they show their kind nature, open arms, and loving spirit, I feel this way because we as people need to learn not to have division, but instead, be kind, and to have an open mind.

Thank you for your time,

Mireya Rodriguez



Caption

August 10, 2023

To: Park and Recreation Commission  
Merced City Council

I am aware that the McNamara Youth Center is considering Central Valley Pride to be housed at the Center to run youth and family programming and support groups. Being a third generation of the City of Merced I strongly support and recommend this affiliation.

This relationship with McNamara Center and Central Valley Pride will positively impact our community, support diversity, and demonstrate the acceptance of marginalized groups.

Merced City has too long been divided by discrimination and prejudice of ostracized groups. The acceptance and the merging of McNamara Youth Center and Central Valley Pride Center will be advantageous for all of Merced City.

Nancy Reding  
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