

## San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center *Volunteer Spotlight*

*September 2010*

### **Mika Watanabe**



Mika Watanabe joined the Center's Health and Wellness Department this summer as an intern working to complete her Master's in Public Health degree from UCLA's School of Public Health. Having braved her first year at UCLA, she returned to the Bay Area to reconnect with her family in Sunnyvale as well as explore the way communities respond to specific health issues they face. Mika in particular worked with the Center's SNAP Program (San Francisco Newcomers' Assistance Program) which aims to prevent isolation in gay/men, and the HIV risks associated with it. She developed key resource referrals and evaluation tools, revitalized and coordinated the volunteer component of SNAP, and helped restructure client services to better serve the gay/bi men's community of SF. Mika's tireless contribution this past summer helped guide the way SNAP currently responds to the gay/bi men's community health needs as well as how it provide it's unique services for the years to come.

### **So what brought you to do an internship at the Center?**

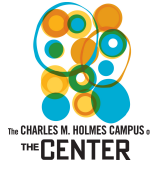
Growing up in Japan and then migrating New York City, Virginia state, and finally Sunnyvale I always felt like a fish out of water in some of my surroundings. As a result I connected a lot to the young gay men I met in my life who had similar experiences. There was a bond we shared while going through school that informed me about some of the health disparities people face, even people I am close to. It made me want to learn more about how some of the issues my friends have to deal with as young ethnic gay men can put them at risk beyond what's covered in text books. I had volunteered in Mexico, Honduras, and Ghana helping small communities with their health needs, but this seemed much more closer to home. I wanted to learn more about the health concerns of the LGBT community and bring that back to my circle of friends and support. I came to the Center because it seemed like a logical choice: it's a non-clinical, community centered organization that deals with a broad spectrum of communities.

### **What are some of the things you take away from interning at the Center?**

Wow, I learned a lot about communicating and building bridges with so many different community members. I was impressed at how well I was shown how to find common ground with people regardless of background, and to build trustful relationships to enact change. Every staff and volunteer person at the Center constantly displayed this to me in some form or another. I was really impressed at how welcoming the Center is to anyone regardless of how they identify- as a straight ally I was welcomed and included into so many aspects of the Center. I noticed it's a running theme of building alliances regardless where one stands in their community. Everyone at the Center took their time to explain and detail certain histories and politics facing the LGBT communities whenever I had a question.

### **What aspects of your experience at the Center helped with your internship goals?**

Interacting with community members and volunteers helped shape the way I see myself tailoring health care to be more holistic and community driven. The Center is big on being accessible to anyone, and it really



influenced my experience with the SNAP program. I was constantly gauging our success not by numbers, but by how clients expressed satisfaction and by following their suggestions. It wasn't about looking at gay/bi men as lacking or unhealthy, but about using the strength of experience, especially those of the volunteers, to make a positive change in the community. There is a lot more to a community's health than its disparities, and it was good to see a holistic approach to that at the Center. We are taught these concepts in school, but rarely do we get to see it done successfully in the real world.

**What is your most memorable experience at the Center?**

The people I worked with! Everyone is so laid back, funny, and committed to their cause. It's a great energy to work with, it also influences a lot of the volunteers I coordinated and clients I managed. Because they encountered such a fun committed staff, they let their guard down and welcomed me into their lives, and it was a great experience to share in their involvement with the Center.

*The Health and Wellness Department would like to give our indebted thanks to Mika for sticking with us this summer, meeting the challenges we placed on her shoulders, and having a good laugh with us at the end of every workday. Good luck on your journey, you'll definitely be missed.*

**-David Gonzalez, HIV Services Manager**