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LGBT STUDENTS AND SERVICES RECEIVE MLK PEAECMAKER AWARD 2011

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LGBT STUDENTS AND SERVICES RECEIVE MLK PEACEMAKER AWARD

The URI Chaplains Association presented seven Martin Luther King Jr. Peacemaker awards to the URI Gay Straight Alliance and the URI Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Center on Wednesday February 9th during a luncheon on the URI campus. Individual awards were given to Riley Davis, Kevin Cruz, Justin Willner, Brian Stack, and Joseph Santiago. Current GSA President Brian Sit accepted the award on behalf of the GSA. Mathew Silva and Andrew Winters, founder of the GLBT Center, accepted on behalf of the GLBT Center students and staff. The awards acknowledge the ongoing contributions of the URI GSA and URI GLBT Center, as well as the leadership and courage of LGBT student organizers of an on campus nonviolent protest last October.

On October 14th, 2010, a nine day sit in at the URI library followed an August 13th meeting which had been initiated by concerned LGBT students and staff with President Dooley, various URI faculty and staff members, and prominent representatives from the Rhode Island LGBT community. Ongoing anti-LGBT campus harassment and insufficient support for LGBT campus services motivated students to request the August 13th meeting which happened at Dooley's house. Seeing little progress after that gathering, students organized a nonviolent sit in the 24 hour room at the URI library where they collected more than 1400 signatures in support of their demands. The demands emphasized the need to create a safer campus climate, increase GLBTQ campus resources, and encourage a more invested response to legitimate expressions of concern from LGBT students and staff.

Kevin Cruz, one of the protest organizers is very appreciative of the awards given. "The awards were a fabulous acknowledgement on behalf of the University. They recognize the sacrifice and perseverance of the students who want to work with the University to make our campus a safer and more accepting place". Cruz acknowledges that progress can be slow and there is a lot of work to be done. "I am hoping that things on campus will continue to improve".

During the award ceremony students made a surprise presentation of their own award to Andrew Winters, in recognition of ongoing service and citizenship in support of the LGBT community. Students indicate Winters acts as a pillar of support to the students who come to the Center, and as a mentor, guide, and friend. "I am very grateful for this expression of appreciation from the students." Winters said, "I am even more appreciative of their vision and courage in addressing these long standing challenges".

The award ceremony was a part of a week long series of programs dedicated to the memory and work of Dr. Martin Luther King. The Luncheon was attended by students, parents, administrators, faculty, staff, and community members from throughout Rhode Island.