



# ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUMS (AYLF)

Volume 3, Issue 1

October 2014

## 2014 Youth Leadership Forum

- Arizona and Indiana held their first Youth Leadership Forums in 2014
- California had to choose delegates from over 200 applications!

This newsletter issue features summaries and photos of the 2014 Youth Leadership Forum events around the nation.

To stay involved in the AYLF, join the monthly conference calls, every third Thursday from 2:00 - 3:00 p.m. Eastern time. The calls provide a time to talk to representatives from other states that are involved in the planning of a YLF in their state.

Conference call topics for the remainder of 2014 are:

October: Employment of Youth and

Young Adults with Disabilities

November: Strategic Planning Revisited

December: A Year in Review



October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

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## About AYLF

It is the purpose of the Association of Youth Leadership Forums (AYLF) to improve employment and independent living outcomes of youth with disabilities transitioning from high school by promoting throughout the United States and its territories, the replication of the California Model: Youth Leadership Forum for Students

with Disabilities (YLF).

Stay connected with the AYLF through monthly conference calls. Contact Dawn Evans at:  
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 Web: www.aylf.net  
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## CALIFORNIA YLF



Delegates started to trickle in by about 11:00 AM Monday morning. A couple of them even came earlier. They arrived, checked in, got their name tags, room keys and delegate workbooks, and unpacked their bags. After that, they began to get accustomed to their surroundings, socializing with other delegates and staff, while waiting for lunch and the beginning of the first general session.

At about 2 o'clock, after lunching and settling in, the delegates were invited to group sessions, where they went to meet the people in their specific groups as well as their group leaders.

YLF Project Manager Rachel Stewart addressed the delegates, beginning by letting them know that they were the cream of the crop selected from a pool of over 200 applications, and that they had a lot of reason to feel proud of their accomplishments.

2002 YLF alumnus Dani Duran, who graduated from CSU Northridge in 2011, won the 2009 Miss Deaf CSUN contest and appeared in music videos such as *On the Floor* by Jennifer Lopez. She told the story about how she came into her own as a deaf woman with the help of the Youth Leadership Forum, and came to be an ASL teacher.

Rebecca Cokley, the Executive Director of the National Council on Disability talked

about her life growing up, and coming in to the disability movement. She grew up with two parents who were both little people, and her father was also paralyzed, so from her earliest beginnings, she always identified as having a disability.

The primary message that delegates took from this motivational speech was that everyone must have a voice, and you can never have enough voices at the table.

The theme for Tuesday was Disability Community, Culture, and History.

Delegates participated in the X games, followed by a discussion on what disability history and identity was to the delegates.

Allie Cannington and Ki'Tay Davidson gave a presentation on disability history and culture, and diversity. Delegates also learned about how the notion of independence is really a myth, and that we are all interdependent, meaning that everyone, even the able-bodied, must depend on someone or something to get along in the world. Learning about the protests to strengthen Section 504, and key legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) left delegates with a sense of how their personal and community advocacy could create a difference in the overall course of history.

The Walk and Roll Dance Team, including Katie, Maria, Kim and Chelsea, continued

the program by performing a number of adaptive dances, from a variety of genres including hip-hop, pop and country.



At 5 o'clock, everyone went out to the quad, to enjoy a barbecue with live music with the Dream Achievers, a band consisting of all autistic musicians.

The delegates then had the opportunity to hear the perspectives of their counselors in a series of panels touching on education, independent living, bullying and personal advocacy, dating and relationships, as well as navigating multiple identities.

Wednesday's theme was: Discovering Resources to Reach My Goals. The delegates attended a resource fair to learn about a variety of organizations, access technologies and service animals. The delegates also had the opportunity to try an accessible voting machine, and to register to vote if they were of age. Following the resource fair, the delegates visited the university bookstore.

The delegates heard from a panel of successful professionals with disabilities including UC Berkeley Web Accessibility Expert Lucy

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**I promise you that  
YLF will change  
your life. . .**

**Co-Facilitator  
Andy Arias**

## CALIFORNIA YLF

Greco, children's author Jeff Acosta, CFILC Reuse and Finance Coordinator Shannon Coe, Youth Employment Opportunity Program Student Assistant Jeremy Lopez and Disability Access Services Program Manager in the division of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Yomi Wrong. They answered questions related to a variety of different topics, from how and when to disclose your disability, to ways of marketing one's self, to ways of managing SSI/SSDI benefits. The panelists emphasized the importance of treating the disability like an asset rather than a problem, self-confidence, creativity, and never taking "no" for an answer.

After the panel, the delegates were addressed by Dolores Tejada, systems change advocate, on the importance of voting. After Dolores finished her lesson, everyone divided up into the legislative groups. Each one discussed themes that were relevant to them in their communities, and came up with a series of issues to advocate for in the legislative visits for Thursday. Each group also designated a reporter, note taker, facilitator, presenter, as well as storytellers in order to organize the meetings, and make sure that their message would be most effectively delivered. The groups came up with a variety of subjects, such as disability awareness in schools, treatment of people with disabilities by the police, emergency preparedness,

and public transit.

The night ended with a fantastic talent show.

Thursday's theme was: Getting Involved with the Community.

The delegates rose bright and early, to catch the buses at 8:00 AM, which would transport them to the capitol in downtown Sacramento. For many, this was the first time visiting the seat of government in California, and there was much anticipation at what they would find, and at how their representatives would react to their concerns and policy recommendations. The delegates filed into the capitol building, and to the governor's office, where they heard from Patrick Henning, director of the Employment Development Department, as well as Sarah Triano, the Executive Officer of the California Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. With these positive messages, the delegates went on to meet with the representatives. Through this process, they became not only the leaders of tomorrow, but the leaders of today.

The delegates attended a luncheon, where they had the opportunity to network with a variety of professionals with and without disabilities, including many YLF alumni.

Mark Goffeney gave the keynote performance of the afternoon, telling about his life growing up in the 1970s as a kid without arms, while he

strummed out songs on guitar with his feet.

After the keynote, the delegates heard from one of their own, YLF counselor and alumnus Cynthia Cadet, who related how the heroes in her life, such as her mother, as well as her experience at the 1998 Youth Leadership Forum, helped her to get through her Lupus diagnosis when she was 13, and supported her in growing up to be comfortable in her own skin, and a mentor to young people with disabilities. What better way to celebrate the day's victories than with the traditional YLF dance.

Friday: Now we Begin the Rest of Our Lives

Friday morning was marked with a general somber air, as delegates prepared to leave. The delegates all wore blue shirts, to mark their transition to this new phase of their lives as YLF alumni, in which they had not only found a community of other people with disabilities, but a sense of their own potential and self-worth. The final large group meeting began with presentations from each legislative group. Then, the small groups came up in front of everyone and received their certificates of completion. Finally, the delegates were surprised by a video that showed the great time they had had, from their arrival to the final YLF dance. After goodbyes, delegates departed for their home towns, to begin the rest of their lives.



**Well, when I first came to YLF, I thought the experience would change me, and so far it has, but it also allowed me to help and meet so many other people. So, I think recognizing that part is really cool. I didn't think I would meet so many people. . .**  
**Samantha Aguirre**

## ARIZONA YLF: A to Z It's Your Life!



Arizona held its first Youth Leadership Forum for Students who have Disabilities, June 23-27, 2014, at Arizona State University, in Phoenix.

There were 21 youth who participated, hailing from more than half of Arizona's counties, and representing diversity in disability and the culture of Arizona. The volunteer staff of 15 was comprised of people who have disabilities, who will serve as mentors for each graduating

Delegate for one year.

In addition to the workbook based on the California model, Delegates participated in 13 presentations provided by disability related community leaders and role models, a tour of the Arizona State Capitol with an overview of the Legislative process, a Unified Sports basketball game with Special Olympics Arizona while at an accessible Fitness Center, an evening at the Arizona

Diamondbacks' baseball game, and a formal recognition banquet and dance.

Funding is secure through 2016, and plans are underway for AZYLF 2015! For more information about Arizona Youth Leadership Forum, please contact Melissa Ann Santora at (602) 262-2900 or by e-mail: melissa@azsilc.org.

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Delegates had an unexpected surprise visit by Indiana Governor Mike Pence.

## INDIANA YLF

The IN-YLF 2014 at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) was a fantastic success where 23 youth leaders with a variety of disabilities were able to gain vast knowledge and information on leadership, advocacy and legislation.

The Youth Leaders were able to hear from a variety of speakers all with eclectic backgrounds on issues about transition, adaptive technology, financial planning, healthy living, self-advocacy and what it means to be a leader within their community.

We were able to visit the State Capitol where they met Senator Randy Head.

Senator Head provided us an excellent afternoon. He explained what roles and responsibilities he has as a representative of the state and gave career advice to any of our inspiring politicians in the groups.

We had an unexpected surprise visit by Governor Mike Pence. Governor Pence stopped by to meet our Youth Leaders and spent a good time taking pictures with the group, and even a couple of "selfies" were put on social media sites.

On Wednesday evening, we were joined by INDYPROV, a local improv group that provides training and shows that engage and empower their audience. The YLs got fully involved and were able

to express their artistic and performance skills. It was fantastic to see all the young adults being involved with an evening of fun and laughter.

On the last evening they let their hair down at Victory Field with the Indianapolis Indians baseball team. Even though the result wasn't what we wanted, the whole evening was a great success with it being great to see the young leaders develop their social skills and build friendships that they will have for a lifetime.



Youth Leaders meet Governor Pence at the State Capitol in Indianapolis. #selfadvocacy #legislation

## KANSAS YLF

“I am UNSTOPPABLE!” This is exactly how 19 youth felt as they left this year’s 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Kansas Youth Leadership Forum (KSYLF). The delegates spent the week gaining the tools, resources, and support to reach their goals and take on the world! Now they are ready to go out and fulfill the “unstoppable” theme in their everyday lives.

This year’s KSYLF was held on July 15 – 19, 2014 at Washburn University in Topeka. Nineteen energetic, positive young leaders with disabilities attended the Forum. There were 23 staff members present throughout the week, including six KSYLF alumni who returned to serve as volunteers and share their experiences.

The KSYLF week was full of empowerment, great memo-

ries, and growth amongst the participants. The delegates demonstrated developing leadership and advocacy skills, as well as a determination to reach their future goals. The young leaders bonded as a group, but also showed their individual personalities and abilities. The delegates experienced many fun activities throughout the week and heard from important community leaders on a variety of topics. Speakers touched on topics such as leadership, disability awareness, disability heritage, goal setting, advocacy, and assertiveness. Delegates debated an anti-bullying mock bill in the Senate Chambers of the State Capital. Five alumni shared their experiences with employment, education, and independent living during an alumni panel. The “Real Life

Affair” and Resource Fair provided the delegates with community resources to survive in the “real world.”

One of the highlights of the week was the Mentor Luncheon where delegates were paired with a mentor from their area who had a similar career interest. Audience members also enjoyed a motivational speech from Teresa Nguyen, youth advocate and speaker from Colorado.

Three awards were given out at the Luncheon. The Justin Cosco Scholarship Award was presented to Trey Morgan, 2011 KSYLF Alumni. The Mentoring Matters Award was presented to long time KYEA mentor, Ranita Wilks. The Spirit of Hope Award was given to KSYLF 9-year volunteer, Traci Turner.



### Nineteen Youth Delegates Gain Tools to Become Unstoppable



Delegates meet in the office of Kansas Governor Sam Brownback

## MARYLAND YLF

Fifteen (15) delegates from across Maryland attended the Youth Leadership Forum on June 7, 24 and 25 at Montgomery College in Silver Spring and Towson University in Baltimore.

Students listened to speakers and participated in activities that taught them about the culture and history of disability and disability rights. They

watched a video about ending the R word where participants on the video held a shredding event. YLF delegates held their own shredding event where they ceremonially and therapeutically stood in front of their peers and shredded words that they found offensive and hurtful.

Students were also given

opportunities to connect with each other and share their experiences and goals for their future through group work and structured free time. At the end of the program on June 25 all of the students left with new friends and a greater understanding of who they are and how to achieve their goals.



## MISSOURI YLF



The 13<sup>th</sup> annual MO-YLF was held July 20-23 and introduced students to activities that included: a community service project, in which students brought items to the Forum from their hometowns to put together youth care packages for young people who are removed from their own homes; visiting the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City, where they learned how to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities and to simulate debating a bill that affects the rights of people with disabilities, and also visiting the office of Governor Jay Nixon; an employment event focusing on career exploration, interview skills, networking, and disclosure, followed by a resource fair; participating and learning about adaptive sports where they were able to use sport wheelchairs to play basketball; as well as many other activities.

During the week, the delegates also got to listen to a presentation by motivational speaker and chalk artist Ben Glenn. During his presentation, Glenn talked about overcoming obstacles in life and shared his experience of living with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and encouraged the youth to be proud of who they are. Throughout his talk, Glenn worked at producing a chalkboard drawing on a canvas of a man running across a mountain bridge with a beautiful sunset in the background.

The 17 young adult delegates

were chosen from a list of applicants and represented 12 counties from the State of Missouri and a diverse list of disabilities. Selected delegates demonstrated outstanding leadership potential, a passion to serve their community, and were highly recommended as positive role models.

Along with the 17 delegates, 28 staff members helped facilitate the program, most of whom have a disability themselves. More than half of the staff members are alumni of the YLF and return because the experience was so meaningful to them.

Derek Smith, a 27-year-old lawyer from Osage Beach, MO, was a delegate in 2004. At the time he attended the Forum, Smith said he was in the midst of the most traumatic adjustment of his life after a motor vehicle accident in 2000. By seeing that he was not alone in his struggles, Smith said the Forum helped him come to terms with his situation and see that there were others who shared his experiences. Through his own experience at MO-YLF, Smith has taken on the passion of civil rights advocacy and enjoys passing that passion onto others. "That is why I enjoy coming back to work with the Forum and the youth," Smith said. "I feel that if I can help one young mind as I was helped, my time is completely worth giving."

At the end of the Forum, the delegates create a leadership plan and a letter to themselves in which they could

move forward with everything they learned from the week. As they completed their leadership plans, delegates focused on the importance of setting goals in the areas of independent living, education and career training, community involvement, as well as the tools they need to achieve their goals.

Here is one letter to self written by a delegate this year to serve as a reminder of his/her strengths and goals. For confidentiality reasons, the delegate's name is not mentioned.

*Dear D.,*

*Today is the last day of our Youth Leadership Forum. When I return to my community, I want to remind myself to do the following things to make my life and my community better. "I learned so much during the forum. I learned that a patient, open-minded leader is the best leader. We should educate and fight against those who pick on us and call us names. We are to be respected, no matter how different we are. I learned how a bill becomes a law and that I should watch the news to see how I am being affected.*

*Continue to try and pursue your dream career. Don't let being disabled stop you from being who you want to be. Always strive to be the best you can be. Go to college and learn all the necessary things to make your career successful. Leadership now, leadership in the future! Remember what you learned!"*

*Sincerely,*

*D.*

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The Missouri Youth Leadership Forum is the beginning, but the leaders attending will continue to grow and lead on!



Opening keynote speaker Ben Glenn is pictured with his chalk painting

## OKLAHOMA YLF

June 10-14, Oklahoma had 21 aspiring young leaders attend the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Youth Leadership Forum! This year's YLF was held on the campus of the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha. Our 21 delegates were supported by 4 fabulous YLF graduates and 12 outstanding staff members.



The week was full of learning, unforgettable memories, and a "whole lotta fun"! Delegates participated in mock "IEP" meetings, improved their leadership skills through various problem-solving activities, met and talked with leaders of disability field and state legislators, debated the issue of a disability history week at the Oklahoma State Capitol (which passed by a vote of 14-7), and played YLiFe! YLiFe gave a 'real life' experience to delegates, while introducing them to community resources.

Oklahoma YLF couldn't have done it without the awesome support from the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Oklahoma National Alliance for Mental Illness, Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation, Oklahoma Disability Law Center, Jersey Mike's, Home Creations, and many private donations from YLF Graduates, their families, and staff.



## VIRGINIA YLF

Each year, planning of the Youth Leadership Forum begins where it ends--with personal reflection and review of program evaluations completed staff and delegates. As an in-house program of the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, YLF coordinators consider new ideas and improvements to keep the content strong and meet with staff mentors a number of times prior to YLF Week to gain further input.

YLF coordinators arranged three mentor meetings (May, June, and the day before the YLF week began, July 28). Four experienced mentors were selected to guide alumni who would be working closely with delegates in their groups. Mentors, organized into four teams, went over the roles and responsibilities of team members to each other and to the delegates. They reviewed activi-

ties planned for the week and were introduced to a positive support idea called "Caught Caring" that would recognize a number of delegates each day for a moment during the week when they were caught demonstrating leadership. Mentors brainstormed thoughts to represent YLF and voted on a theme. This year's theme was: **Persevere • Advocate • Dream • Succeed!** Mentors learned each word in sign language and led delegates in verbal and signing chants throughout the week.

To ensure that everyone is able to fully participate at YLF, personal care attendants and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were hired to support delegates and mentors during the week. YLF contracted with professionals in each field who had a history of working with the program. They were responsible

for supervising a small team of personnel in their prospective fields.

YLF 2014 was held on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, VA. The majority of the week's activities took place in the meeting spaces of VCU's Student Commons with delegates and some staff staying overnight at nearby Gladding Residence Hall.

One day was planned off site, Capitol Day, the highlight of the YLF week for students and staff. For the past four years, our local public transit system, Greater Richmond Transit Company, has offered to provide a free ride to our state capitol, less than 10 minutes away from campus. Their generosity enables YLF to fill a bus with everyone who can walk on, while a hired paratransit service

This year's theme was:

**Persevere • Advocate • Dream • Succeed!**



Delegates and staff arrive at VA's state capitol in Richmond on Capitol Day.

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## VIRGINIA YLF, continued

(Continued from page 7)



transports others who use mobility devices.

YLF delegates are asked to come to YLF with a testimony they prepared at home. This year, students testified about subjects such as: accessibility of forms in doctor's offices, bullying, SOL testing, emergency response systems in rural areas, disability etiquette and awareness in schools, and language interpreters for parents who do not speak English during IEP meetings. A panel of legislators and community leaders were genuinely interested in the delegate's testimonies and gave helpful feedback concerning their topics. Capitol Day gave students a noticeable boost of confidence which inspired staff.

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Challenge Discovery encouraged students to adopt their motto "Learn, Experience, Grow, and Change".

Delegates were encouraged to make a statement about who they are, where they are in their lives now or how they feel, and what or where they want to be in the future. In their small groups, each delegate developed their individual "I AM" statements; "I Am... Today I Am... Tomorrow I Will Be..." Their statements were video recorded to share with parents during the graduation ceremony. Students verbally shared their statements with guests at the Networking and Mentor Luncheon.

Throughout the week, students heard from a variety of national speakers, including an opening keynote from

LeDerick Horne who inspired delegates with his poetry; Micheal Beers, a comedian whose session on Disability History got the delegates moving and involved in a passionate discussion on disability; and luncheon entertainer Mark Goffney, who played guitar with his feet. Other presentations on employment, assistive technology, social media & personal branding, no IEPs in college, and living with a disability helped students gain a well-rounded understanding of leadership.



Student delegates worked together in small groups to create a poster that defined who they were as team; individually, they created Personal Leadership Plans to set a course for their futures. A local organization that promotes leadership and teamwork through hands-on learning (Challenge Discovery), gave students the opportunity to work together to strategize and trust via games that were a physical and mental challenge. Challenge Discovery encouraged students to adopt their motto "Learn, Experience, Grow, and Change".

Youth Leadership Forum 2014 persevered through changes

and challenges to successfully graduate 20 delegates on August 1. Planning begins soon for YLF 2015. By reflecting on this year's activities and the recommendations suggested by students and staff, the process begins again; making necessary improvements, securing event space, inviting speakers and presenters, and recruiting high school rising juniors and seniors with disabilities statewide for a competitive opportunity to experience the YLF.

## WISCONSIN YLF

Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum held its 2014 forum on the campus of Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin, July 13-18. We welcomed 28 students from throughout the state of Wisconsin to participate in this leadership training and career awareness opportunity tailored to high school students with disabilities.

We had sessions on advocacy, team building and community organizing, how government works and voting at the State Capitol. We also spent time on State Street and our students received a tour of Edgewood College from one of our staff members who is currently a student on campus. We also

tried something new called "Girl Talk/ Guy Talk" where we split into groups and talked about dating relationships as they relate to disability.

Representatives from Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Centers for Independent Living, and Think College gave presentations to the students as well. Our staff led sessions on life after high school and what it takes to run an effective meeting. Our previous YLF director informed the students of youth leadership opportunities available beyond YLF in the state of Wisconsin.

Finally, we held elections where the delegates elected one of their own to serve as

YLF delegate chair, basically like becoming student body president of YLF. The young man who was elected to that position will be welcomed on our Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum, Inc. Board.

In addition to the classroom sessions, we also had a mentor picnic where each delegate was paired with an adult with a disability. This mentor will stay in contact with the delegate in the following year. We also had great participation in our talent show. There was singing, dancing, skits, and comedy, and so much more! We ended the week with a dance, deejayed by one of our staff members.



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**We're on the web!**

**[www.aylf.net](http://www.aylf.net)**

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