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Just the Beginning for Young Adults With Disabilities in Utah

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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Youth and young adults with disabilities in Utah are standing tall and making their voices heard through a unique program that started three years ago at the CPD.

Becoming Leaders for Tomorrow (BLT) project training specialist Jeff Sheen gathered together several youth and young adults with disabilities across Utah to teach them how to develop strong skills in self-determination and self-advocacy. Once they were empowered to direct their own futures, these youth were ready to become leaders in helping other youth develop those skills and realize their own goals.

These empowered youth worked with project staff to develop youth friendly training materials that evolved into a Youth Leadership Toolkit. The Toolkit, available on their website, is now used to train other young adults, parents, professionals, and local organizations across the country that youth and young adults with disabilities must have a voice in what direction their futures will take.

Three of these BLT young adults joined two other youth from Utah to meet with young adult representatives from 26 states at a national conference in North Carolina hosted by the National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) this past summer. The purpose of the conference was to train young adults with disabilities how to use a new curriculum, "Reap What You Sow." This curriculum was created by youth with disabilities and designed to help others like themselves build support systems in their own communities to become stronger self-advocates.

"The excitement and energy that was generated when all of these young adults were gathered together in one place was amazing," stated Jeff Sheen, representing the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council and one of the adult leaders who accompanied the Utah youth team.

The NYLN young adult organizers and presenters shared their philosophy that "Too often, we separate groups because of their title, education, or experience, but to NYLN, teamwork is key." This was portrayed in the Youth Power armbands worn and the chants that were shouted throughout the conference. The message was loud and clear—"We all belong together because of this movement."

Claire Mantonya, Director of the Utah Developmental Disabilities Council who also attended the training with the Utah team, "was very excited and pleased to watch the young people with disabilities work together across disability without any of the resistance and barriers that have traditionally occurred within the disability community." She explains, "The idea of focusing upon "interdependence" without any apologies for seeking assistance is a rather new emphasis. Traditionally the disability community has focused upon being independent, and this new emphasis on interdependence eliminated much of the old shame-based feelings that having a disability is something one needs to apologize for or needs to fix. This approach felt very empowering and positive."

Andrea Pitts, one of the young adults on the Utah team, agreed that "interdependence" was an exciting, new concept that was modeled at the conference. "It helped you realize that you do not need to be ashamed to ask for help. That it is important to ask others to help with the things that you are not able to do for yourself. It is like needing a hair cut; you can't really cut your own hair too well, so you need to go to someone who can cut hair to help you out."

While there, the Utah team learned about the Chicago Disability Pride Parade that was started in 2004 and the Utah young adults decided they wanted to hold a disability pride parade in Utah. Upon their return, they found that Special Olympics Utah was holding an event at the
University of Utah during the evening of October '15 at the Huntsman Arena. The group approached the Special Olympics and they allowed them to tie in a disability pride parade with their event. This will be the first disability parade event ever held in Utah. Their goal is for this event to develop into a yearly stand alone event that will help Utah feel pride and at the same time become educated about people with disabilities.

“This (curriculum) will be something great for our youth in Utah who need to gain confidence in their own abilities and be able to stand up and articulate their thoughts to others in a professional way,” stated Brandi Dodds, another Utah young adult who attended the conference. “The youth at the conference were so open and could speak out and were able to conduct meetings and present the training with such confidence. This is what we want to share with others in Utah.”

Brandi and Andrea will be training part of the “Reap What You Sow” curriculum to other young adults on the BLT Advisory Board this week. They look forward to being able to train the entire curriculum when it is completed in a few months. The plan is for the trained BLT team members to carry this training out to others statewide and instill a newfound confidence and empowerment in youth and young adults with disabilities in Utah.

The Utah young adult family can now echo the words of the NYLN young adult family, “This is just the beginning...Brace yourselves: We are living in a moment of power!”