

CT Youth Leadership Forum

UCONN Campus – Storrs, CT

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Courtesy PDD NETWORK newsletter

NOTE: The CT Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) is held annually at the UConn Campus in Storrs, CT at the end of July. This was its fourth year. The invitation is sent in early November to all school districts by the chairpersons of the forum under the heading of the State of CT Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (Labor Department). The districts are asked to disseminate the invitation to all high school sophomores and juniors with disabilities.

There is an application process, which involves answering four questions in essay form as well as obtaining two letters of recommendation – one from a teacher and another from a person in the community. Applications are to be submitted by mid-January. A committee reviews them, and each potential delegate is interviewed. The goal of the committee is to give an opportunity to those with varying disabilities to be part of the forum. It is four days and three nights.

Both the public and private sectors cooperate in this endeavor. There is no cost to the delegates, although transportation to and from the forum is the responsibility of parents or guardians. Accommodations are provided including personal care assistants, if needed, dietary needs, etc. There is a nurse on staff. The staff is exceptional, and many are individuals who work for the State of Connecticut (BRS, DMR, Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services, etc.). Some members of the staff are also former delegates.

Understanding, support, and supervision in a safe environment are all part of the environment of the forum. The delegates are encouraged, through large and small group sessions, to learn the importance of teamwork and self-advocacy. Strategies are discussed and reinforced. Each delegate develops a personal leadership plan (PLP).

My Experiences with YLF 2002

7/29/02 – 8/1/02

I'm a 17-year old high school student. I live in Wallingford, CT with my parents, two younger brothers and grandmother. I attend Whitney High East in Hamden, CT. I enjoy school because learning is very important to me. When I heard about the CT Youth Leadership Forum I thought it was something I'd like to try to be a part of.

I was able to obtain two letters of recommendation vouching for my leadership potential – one from my current teacher, Kara Weeks, and another from a former teacher, Anthony Lorenti, who also worked with me in an adult education class. I filled out forms indicating where I go to school, what courses I take, and what my diagnosis is. I answered four questions in essay form as well. I mailed all the forms to Karen Halliday, one of the chairpersons of the forum.

After the packet was reviewed, a nice woman interviewed me at my school. Her name is Judith Moeckel. She was on the committee and works for the Bureau of Rehab. Services. Some time later I received a letter indicating I was picked as a delegate to the 2002 CT Youth Leadership forum (YLF)!

Day 1

The morning of the forum arrived, and I was very excited. It was my first extended overnight stay away from home. Mom drove me to UCONN. We had a little trouble finding the right building. I registered, had my picture taken and was given my nametag and room key. I was shown to my dormitory by a former delegate. My room was nice. I wasn't assigned a roommate, but there were two kids in the other room in my dormitory. We shared a common room and bathroom. Mom and I unpacked my clothes and stuff. I brought my alarm clock from home and set it on the desk by the window. I placed my *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* book next to my alarm clock so that I could read it during free time. We then went to the building next door to the dorms. There was a game room where we hung out for a bit. We went upstairs to the ballroom where we would have our classes. Soon after, mom said goodbye and went home.

Awareness Training was our first session. We were broken down into four groups with approximately ten kids in each group. There was a facilitator assigned to each group. Our group leader's name was Stan Kosloski. We talked about a group name and finally settled on the Arctic Farmers. Then we had a student orientation/icebreakers tour. We went to the cafeteria to have lunch. At breaktime I went to the dormitory to read my book. Most of the kids hung out together but I'm the kind of person who needs a lot of time alone. The afternoon session was about Hopes, Fears, and Expectations. We built bridges out of newspapers as a team. Then we had a barbeque on the patio outside. After dinner there was a team identity activity. We wrote in our journals. Free time followed, but a lot of the kids were practicing for the talent show to be held on Tuesday. I took a shower, put my pajamas on, and went to bed.

Day 2

I got up in the morning and read my Harry Potter book for a while. We were going to Camp Hemlocks so I got my backpack ready. I took my book in case I had a chance to read it. All the kids had breakfast in the cafeteria. We took a bus to Camp Hemlocks. It was a nice outdoor summer camp. We split up into our teams and did some activities such as stepping through hoops and unbinding rope handcuffs while connected to another person. A few of the climbing activities I didn't take part in. We broke for lunch and continued with the activities. Later we departed on the bus back to UCONN.

When we got back to the dormitory, I read my Harry Potter book some more and took a shower before dinner. After we ate, the talent show was held. One of the acts was much like the British Monty Python. It was funny! Then we went back to our dormitories and got ready for bed.

Day 3

I got up and read some more of my Harry Potter book. Then we all went to breakfast. After that we wrote in our journals about Camp Hemlocks. Our first session of the day was setting goals and overcoming barriers. We had a break. Next was a continuation of setting goals and overcoming barriers. Then we had lunch. I went to the cafeteria, but the rest of the kids had gone outside on the patio for a barbeque. I missed most of it by mistake!

A couple of the other kids and I visited the UConn Co-op. There were a lot of great books. I bought a book entitled *Technologies of the Future*. It was 75% off the original price! Then we went back to the dorm building and I read more of my Harry Potter book. We all met in the ballroom for the session Vision/Mission YLF and Introduction to Personal Leadership Plans (PLPs). We then broke into our small groups to further discuss PLPs. We had some free time after which we went back to our small groups. We discussed advocating for others.

We went back to our dormitories to get ready for the sponsor dinner. I put on my dress shirt, slacks, and nice shoes. I read my Harry Potter book while waiting for the time to go to dinner. Then we went to the sponsor dinner in the ballroom. I sat at a table with other delegates and sponsors. I enjoyed being with everyone. I didn't eat very much, but the entertainment was great. A young lady sang with piano accompaniment. She was as good as the singers you hear on the radio! The sponsors were thanked for their support of YLF. Soon after the dance began. I hung around for the start of it, but not being a dancing kind of guy I decided to go back to my room. I took a shower and got ready to go to sleep. The other kids in my dorm didn't get back until I was already in bed!

Day 4

On the last morning of the forum I got up, got dressed, and read my Harry Potter book for a while. Then I went down to breakfast. We all went up to the ballroom and worked on developing our PLPs. After that we had a session about the Gift of Happiness. Each of us had to write something about all the kids in our group on index cards. I needed some help with that exercise. We then had the session Final Thought for Sharing.

Our last lunch was held in the ballroom. Parents were invited to attend. After lunch was the YLF finale. Each group presented its team identity where one member shared his/her PLP and another talked about the group experiences. Each team also put together a cheer. We sang lyrics we wrote about each other to the 70's tune "Jeremiah was a Bullfrog". Certificates were then handed out to all the delegates. We said our goodbyes to each other. My mom and I went back to the dorm to pack my stuff. When we were done we walked out of the dorm building with one of the staff members, Lisa Thompson. Mom drove the car around while I waited and talked to Lisa. We put my suitcase in the trunk and said goodbye to her. Mom and I left for home.

I enjoyed my experience at the CT Youth Leadership Forum and would recommend it to other sophomores and juniors. You get to meet other kids with disabilities, stay overnight in a nicer place, and learn about the importance of setting personal goals, self-

advocacy, and working as a team. All of the delegates were nice, and the staff was terrific!

We also received a backpack filled with neat gifts such as T-shirts, writing pads, and photo albums. The CD Inspiration (which helps with organizational skills) was included as well as a great reference book packed with information about IEPs, SSI application, assistive technology, how to write a resume, the dos and don'ts of interviewing for a job and much more!

If you are a sophomore or junior in high school and are interested in applying to be a delegate to YLF 2003, contact your school district in mid-November and ask for an invitation. Give it a try. I'm glad I did!

If you think your child would benefit from the program itself, or even from being on their own for a few days with others with disabilities, you might want to consider participating in the YLF. I do caution you however that there are many students with autism spectrum disorders for whom this program would not be designed appropriately, and so I would urge parents to look further into the details and not to be afraid to ask questions.

Our thanks to Laura Jean and Charles for this snapshot of the Youth leadership Forum!