

## ***Self-Determination Youth Summit: A Path Toward Self-Determination***

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*This is a companion article to "I'm Determined" from the previous page*



**W**e rarely ever get heard from and it's important to hear from us." Matthew Shapiro, a 17 year-old rising senior made this statement after attending the 2008 Self-Determination Youth Summit in Roanoke, Va.

The event was held in conjunction with the annual Virginia Transition Forum. Matthew, along with 37 other youth from Virginia and Delaware met for two days to discuss ways to address issues that affect young people with disabilities and to learn what it means to live a self-determined life. They participated in youth-driven sessions focusing on leadership, self-advocacy, problem solving, and breaking myths and stereotypes about young people with disabilities. The delegates also socialized, saw some old friends, made new friends, and became empowered to speak up for themselves and for others. Matthew said that young people need to be heard and they were. In fact these self-determined youth presented five goals developed during the summit to 1,100 Virginia Transition Forum luncheon attendees. These goals included: increasing awareness about youth with disabilities and the law; increasing youth involvement in academic decisions; changing perceptions about youth with disabilities in school to open up more opportunities and ensure implementation of accommodations; addressing the perception that youth with disabilities are broken and need to be fixed; and developing a youth credo for support to address all of the negative and stereotypical perceptions that exist about youth with disabilities.

As a project planner for the Youth Summit, I had an opportunity to interview some of the youth who were in attendance and find out their perceptions about the two-day experience. Matthew Shapiro immediately caught my attention as a person with a clear vision for his future. He established himself as a good role model for the other Summit delegates because he was not afraid to respectfully express his opinion to his peers or to any adults. He told me about his plans after graduation to attend college, become a journalist, and advocate for people with disabilities. When I asked Matthew what helped him develop such a clear vision for his future he stated, "Programs like the Self-Determination Youth Summit

and the Youth Leadership Forum (YLF). I learned how to have a stronger voice in certain situations and set goals for myself." Matthew said he came away from the Youth Summit with a better understanding of how he could help himself and others with disabilities. "We are all part of the disability community and

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should support each other." As I continued to talk with Matthew I learned that the Youth Summit experience led to other events in his life. He is going back to YLF this year as a staff person and wants to support and attend the 2009 Youth Summit. He just attended "Say Yes to College" at Old Dominion University and recently led his first IEP meeting. In fact if there is any meeting for Matthew at school, he was quick to tell me that he is in charge.

When I talked to Julia Blitz, I was impressed with her

drive to make a difference in the lives of others. She loved her experience at the Youth Summit and was amazed to meet young people with so many different kinds of disabilities who also shared similar experiences and challenges. She stated that during the Summit, "We came together to do something productive and meaningful and still had fun while doing it." Julia is a recent high school graduate and she plans to use what she has learned from her experience and speak to youth with disabilities about making their own choices and decisions about their life. She wants to design a website for teens with disabilities to share experiences and information. Julia was the final youth delegate to present at the luncheon and she told the audience that youth would continue to communicate their opinions to those with local power and authority. She then pointed to the audience and said, "We are talking about YOU!" - emphasizing that youth with disabilities intend to be self-determined and work with others to create a successful future for all youth with disabilities in Virginia.

It is rare to find a teenager who makes the effort to meet an adult but this is exactly what Adam did when he wheeled up to meet me before the summit began. I was excited to have him in the mix because I knew others at the summit would find inspiration in his personality. Adam confirmed this during the interview when he told me that he had hoped "to have a lasting impression on people at the summit and vice versa." He said that he felt this happened and the youth he met from around the state had a great impact on him too. Adam stated that, "I

believe that the Youth Summit helped me better understand self-determination and self-advocacy through the videos that we watched and the activities that we did. It made me think that I really can't sit back and do nothing. I have to stand up and make sure my voice is heard."

Planning for the 2009 Youth Summit in Norfolk, Va., is already underway. Matthew, Julia, and Adam plan to volunteer their time to organize next year's summit and hopefully attend as youth leaders. There will be an application process for potential youth delegates. We are asking parents and educators to encourage youth to apply. When I asked Matthew what he would say to youth who might be interested in applying for the 2009 Youth Summit, he said: "Go for it! It's an amazing couple of days and a great learning experience. You meet young people with different disabilities and you make friends. It's a great program." Adam followed this by saying, "I would tell them to not pass up this opportunity. You will enjoy this event!" We hear you all loud and clear and hope there are other youth out there ready to take your challenge! ■

*Darren has been with the T/TAC at Radford University since 2004 and has a master's degree in education with concentrations in social studies, special education and classroom technology applications. Darren's interests and primary areas of focus are Instructional Strategies and the Strategic Instruction Model™, secondary transition, Social Studies and Citizenship education, including self-determination and self-advocacy.*

## Youth Leadership Forum : Ready, Set, Lead!



The Youth Leadership Forum — or YLF — is a leadership training program for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities sponsored by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities. The YLF provides students (called "delegates") with opportunities for learning, sharing, and developing skills that enhance their leadership potential in schools, work, families, and communities. The week-long training program is held each summer, usually in July, at one of Virginia's community colleges or universities. During the forum, delegates live on campus and participate in diverse activities designed to teach leadership skills, enhance their knowledge of leadership concepts, and build self-confidence in demonstrating personal leadership abilities. The faculty, presenters, mentors, and students involved in the YLF are all individuals with disabilities. All expenses — including transportation to and from the forum, and personal care assistants, if needed — are paid for by the Board. After completing the YLF, alumni delegates become part of a growing network of dynamic, new leaders in the Commonwealth.

Delegates are selected for the forum in a competitive process that involves submission of a completed application form, recommendation letters, and a personal interview. Application materials are available from high school guidance counselors or special education teachers throughout Virginia, usually in January/February.

Detailed information about the YLF and application materials are available at the Board's website [www.vaboard.org](http://www.vaboard.org) or by calling the Sponsored Program Manager at 800-846-4464 V/TTY.