

# Youth Leadership Today



December 2009

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## From the President

As the year comes to a close I have been looking at all the big disability-related stories in 2009.

We have said goodbye to a great many people who have left this world a better place than before. Senator Edward M. Kennedy's was a tireless champion of health, and was responsible for countless items of legislation that expanded healthcare to children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Locally, Thomas James O'Connors was a dynamic disability advocate and served on a great many boards to promote awareness and independence for people with disabilities. He shall be missed.

There has been a terrific effort to level the playing field for job-seekers with disabilities. During October, which was National Disability Month, President Barack Obama announced that the federal government would plan for a job fair aimed only at people with disabilities in 2010.

In the courts, the Olmstead Act requiring States to eliminate unnecessary segregation of persons with disabilities and to move persons who can function in the community out of segregated facilities was reinforced with three briefs being filed in support of enforcing the Act.

Glenn Close, an actress, has worked hard this year to start BringChange2Mind.org, an organization that strives to inspire people to start talking openly about mental illness. There's been a lot of talk about whether or not there is still "stigma", some sort of secret shame people with mental health issues still endure. Any open discussion is bound to be a good thing, whether we have far to go or we're almost there in accepting people with mental illness with no hesitation as our friends and colleagues, as we do for people who might have diabetes, a learning disability, or other "hidden" disability.

Most important are the smaller stories. Your friends, your families and your own stories. Doing well at college when your high school teachers didn't even encourage you to go. Working full time when people told you it would be hard to get any job. Volunteering and giving back to your community as an advocate to follow in the footsteps of someone you admire. These are the big stories of true heroes today.

If the Youth Leadership organization helps just one person have their story, then all of us here at CTYLP can consider our story for 2009 complete!

*Kathleen Kabara  
President, CTYLP*

# Youth Leadership Today

## 2009 Connecticut Youth Leadership Forum Wrap-Up



The Connecticut Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities completed its 11<sup>th</sup> annual forum from July 26-July 30, 2009 at the University of Connecticut.

Thirty students participated in the week-long forum. These delegates had wide-ranging disabilities, such as learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, blind or low-vision, hearing impairments, mental health issues and varying physical disabilities.

These delegates represented 26 towns and cities across Connecticut, and came together in geographic teams to learn about disability rights and law, self-advocacy, defining personal strengths and strategies for becoming a school and community leader. At the end of the forum, each team must have a "Community Action Plan" that will enhance their communities. This year, the theme was "Going Green." (See page 3 for details on this year's projects.)

The forum puts emphasis on student acceptance and understanding of their disability, while highlighting each of their personal strengths and capacities. Groups are kept small to encourage participation in activities, as well as to be a comfortable environment to share feelings and issues they have as a person with a disability. All staff who directly manage a team - counselor and co-counselors - must have a disability themselves, so students have positive role models to work with. Many other staff have disabilities as well, making the entire forum a very easy place to share experiences.

The delegates spend the days at the forum learning in different ways about being a leader and self-identifying strengths as a person with a disability. There are classroom-style presentations, guest speakers, icebreaker and problem-solving activities, and a day spent on a low-ropes accessible challenge course.

While the forum is meant as a "learning experience", quite a bit happens that cannot be measured by the classroom, or community action plan, or teamwork on the ropes course. There is a talent show where delegates sing, dance, read poetry and tell jokes. This is a great self-esteem builder, especially as friends they are making over the week encourage them to "go for it." There is also a dance where EVERYONE dances, whether they can hear the music, see the other dancers, or roll in their wheelchair to the music. Lifelong friends are made here, ones that are more accepting than some find in social situations at school.

Even after the forum, the effect continues. Delegates remain friends. They are encouraged to keep in touch with everyone through social media outlets like Facebook and Yahoo!Groups. There is a yearly reunion where students from all years attend and catch up, mingle with delegates from different years, and enjoy another social activity in a supportive environment.

Many of the delegates also come back after a couple of years as staff. We now have Counselors and co-counselors as well as other important staff who started as delegates and now want to "pay it forward" to younger people with disabilities. And that is the whole point of the program, to continue pushing for a better future for people who happen to have disabilities.



# Youth Leadership Today

## 2009 Team Project Updates

Submitted by Karen Halliday



Each year at YLF, the four teams are responsible for developing a Community Action Plan they will work on together after they leave the forum. For the first time, all projects developed by the YLF teams focused on “Going Green”

**Team 1** - Team 1 members will work with the Connecticut State Parks and Forests division of the DEP to select one state beach park that needs a wheelchair ramp to access the shoreline. Team members will raise funds to purchase green building materials to build the ramp and solicit the help of builders to support them in completing the project. The team will also schedule a minimum of one beach ‘clean up’ day where all members will work together to clean up a section of the shoreline beach they selected.

**Team 2** - Team 2 members will hold a can and bottle recycling drive from November 14, 2009 – January 9, 2010. Team members will set up signs and boxes at their schools, churches, and clubs and homes. All funds collected will be donated to their favorite green charity.

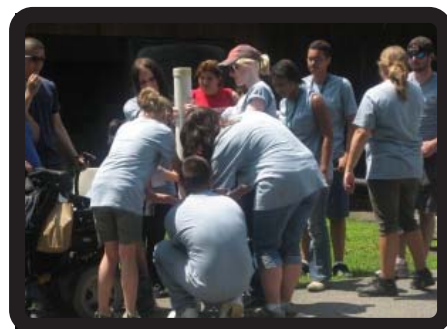
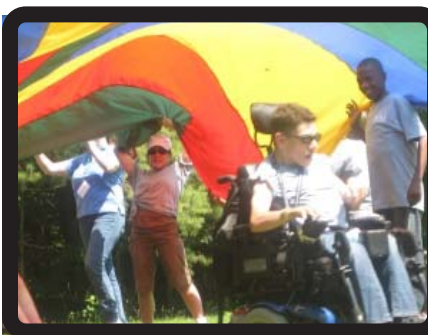
**Team 3** - Team 3 members will work with Camp Hemlocks in Hebron, CT to make several of their “outdoor education” activities” more accessible for individuals who use wheelchairs. The team will participate in clean up and recycling activities, building a new “challenge station” using “green materials” and landscape the area using organic materials safe for our environment.

**Team 4** - Team 4 members will raise funds to help a Connecticut-based organization that works on environmental issues. Each student will personally earn a minimum of \$35 through taking on small jobs such a lawn mowing, pet sitting, bake sale, outreach to businesses and families. This project has been completed and has raised \$260.00 that will be donated to CT “Save the Sound”, a part of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment.



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## PHOTOS!!



# Youth Leadership Today



## Where Are You Now?

### Kasi Kelly - Delegate, 2003

In July of 2003 I attended the CT Youth Leadership Forum held at UCONN. It was my first time ever doing something like this and I had no idea of what to expect. Little did I know that I would be learning a great deal, making lifetime friends and having fun all in just four days. The most important thing I learned from the experience is that no one can tell me that I won't succeed in what I want in life and that good leaders don't have to be outgoing. In order to succeed in what I want out of life I need to speak up and stand my ground for what I believe is right and never give up. The knowledge I gained helped me better to understand my rights when entering college. It also has helped me to not give up in the challenging course I have taken. I am sure I will continue to use this knowledge the rest of my life.

In 2004 I became part of the staff as a co-counselor. In 2004 and 2005 I was in a group which had 2 co-counselors. I learned from the more experienced co-counselor what my role was. The in 2006 I flew solo as a co-counselor. Then in 2008 as I was getting ready to graduate from college I was asked to take on the counselor position. Finally, this year they were in need of a follow-up facilitator so I agreed to help them out. I have grown from the whole experience. The staff has watched me go from a shy high school student to a young woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. The experience has also taught me some life lessons and I feel that I need to pass those lessons on to future generations. That is why 7 years later I am still

involved with YLF and look forward to that last week in July.

Outside of YLF I continue to work at my first job in which I started at the age of 15. I work at my local pool as a lifeguard, swimming instructor and lifeguard instructor. Also, my 6 last summers I spent lifeguarding at a camp for children with special needs. I graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 2008 with a Bachelor in Science. I majored in marine biology and minored in psychology. Presently I am pursuing my dream job as a marine mammal trainer. Last year I had a 9 month internship at Mystic Aquarium in which I was able to gain important experience needed for me to get a job. Besides my internship I have presently put in just under 1000 hours of volunteer work. I have volunteered in many departments including interpretation and education. My favorite volunteer work is SCUBA diving and working in the husbandry department with the animals. Now I am just awaiting my dream to come true and will continue to be a part of YLF as long as I can.



# Youth Leadership Today



## Where Are You Now?

### Rajiv Root - Delegate, 2005



I am living in Rochester, NY and I moved there in June 2008 from my former hometown in Fairfield, CT. It was very challenging unlike YLF and I had to overcome real life barriers which included getting sufficient Personal Care Assistants (PCAs). I applied for Medicaid, but I was told that I must come in for interview and public transportation was horrible during that time. 2 PCAs carried my body in their van and took me to the interview. When I finished the interview, they took a VERY, VERY long time to process my case which forced all of PCAs to work for 6 months with a very little money that I paid using my Social Security benefits. Then a few months later, I got a letter from Medicaid that I had to spend down and I did not even know what that meant. I asked them what the term, "spend down" meant and they told me that I had to pay half of my Social Security benefits just to be poor enough to receive medical services. I did not like it at all for the reason that I needed

enough money to pay for college and food as well! When September came, I began to notice that all of PCAs were starting to quit on me so I had to accept the fact that I had to pay "spend-down" every month and PCAs began to get paid in November 2008. It was very difficult for me to budget with a very little money thus I applied for a supplemental trust account under independent living center a few months ago. Now I can put spend down in that account then turn it around to pay tuition, rent, and so on.

In addition, I am currently a part time student at Rochester Institute of Technology. I began with a general computers major then I did not realize that programming was required. I did my best then looked at myself and I changed my major to undecided. I always loved to write and I am thinking about either business or journalism major. RIT is awesome and I love meeting new people and sometimes, I have to be aggressive when people have no patience with people in wheelchairs. I spoke up to Student Government and told them that RIT should set up a day about disability awareness so that students, faculty, and staff would understand better about what is it like to be disabled and how students with disabilities live and take care of themselves.

# Youth Leadership Today



## Where Are You Now?

### Heather Walton - Delegate, 2008

YLF has opened my eyes to so many opportunities that have stuck with me since I attended in 2008. I have made long lasting friendships and connected with people that will help support my goals and dreams for many years to come. I never knew a small leadership program that lasted only four days could have such an impact on me for the rest of my life. That first day decided for me a dream job that I hope will one day become a reality. YLF and the people it helped me meet made me realize what my true calling was. From that day forward I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life fighting for the rights of people with disabilities.

I want to change the world of the disabled by teaching people how to advocate for themselves. Our mission may be difficult, but our message simple. This forum taught me that there are many people fighting the same battle and that with the power in numbers we can make a difference. The mentors I have gained have inspired me to grow with and embrace my love for helping others and my desire to get involved. I have joined committees within the state and at the university I am attending in order to raise awareness of the youth perspective.

What people don't realize is that the more youth that are willing to get involved today the more changes can be made for the people of tomorrow. YLF has shown me

the importance of youth involvement in order to make changes that will impact the future in a positive way. Being disabled is a group anyone can join at any given moment because we live in a world where everyone is temporarily able. I can guarantee you that I will be involved with this life changing organization for years to come and I can't thank each volunteer and sponsor enough for making it possible for me to experience YLF and the amazing opportunities it has provided me with.



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## Where Are You Now?



Jeffrey Quesnel - Delegate, 2005

Hello everyone, it's Jeffrey Quesnel! I was at YLF in 2005. YLF was so much fun! I got to meet new people and find out why people like me should go to this event. Since I went to YLF no other students from my school have gone.

I am still a firefighter in my home town which is in Stonington. Also I still do things to help in my town like on voting day I helped our town selectman with his campaigning all day long. That was good for me and the Town of Stonington. I also help out at the local soup kitchen! I miss all the people and staff from YLF. So when December comes I would like to give back to YLF and become a staff person for next year's forum at UConn and find some sponsors for YLF!

Interested in knowing what more YLF alumni are doing? Make sure you come to the reunion Saturday, January 9, 2010, 12noon-4pm.

Please RSVP by January 2, 2010 to John Gentile - [jmgshr1550@aol.com](mailto:jmgshr1550@aol.com)  
Phone: 203-869-9916

OR Kathleen Kabara - [Kathleen.kabara@ct.gov](mailto:Kathleen.kabara@ct.gov)  
Phone: 860-424-5068

Let us know where YOU are now. We'd love to hear from you! Contact Kathleen Kabara - [Kathleen.Kabara@ct.gov](mailto:Kathleen.Kabara@ct.gov) - and give us the scoop!

# Youth Leadership Today



## A Tribute to Tom

*Thomas James Connors, PhD.*

*Submitted by Stan Kosloski*

On Saturday, October 17, 2009 Thomas James Connors, PhD. left this world a sadder and poorer place. He left behind his wife, Maria with whom he shared 42 amazing years and his son, Christopher, as well as two granddaughters, Haley and Alyssa.

For those who did not know Tom, he led a extremely rich and full life. Having survived a diving accident which left him paralyzed at the age of 19, he proceeded to Fairfield University where he received BA degrees in both History and Philosophy and obtained his MA in Counseling. He then went on to the University of Connecticut earning his Ph.D. in Rehabilitation Research in 1976. As Chief of Rehabilitation Services for the Connecticut State Department of Education (1978 to 1988), Tom administered the statewide provision of rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities.

In addition to this work, Tom had a long career as an advocate and rehabilitation consultant, serving on numerous boards and commissions relating to disability issues. At various times, he served as the President of the Connecticut Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, the Chairperson of the City of Hartford Commission on Disability Issues, as well as the President of Personal Services Enabling Independence, Inc. His lifelong achievements have been recognized by multiple local, state, and national awards, a sample of which include the Secretary of State's Public Service Award (2003), National Spinal Cord Injury Association, CT Chapter Award (1999), the

Gaylord Lyman Gold Medal (1983), and the Fairfield University Alumni Association, Man of the Year Award (1978). Tom was selected by President Jimmy Carter as a recipient of the Outstanding Handicapped Federal Employees of the Year Award, an honor presented to him in a 1978 ceremony in Washington, DC.

In retirement, Tom remained vibrant and active. A lifetime learner, Tom attended Southern Connecticut State University where he studied Creative Writing and Poetry. He also participated in the Institute for Social and Policy Bioethics Working Group on Disability at Yale University and was the Chair of the Connecticut Statewide Independent Living Council. As a poet and humanitarian, Tom used his tremendous gifts for the benefit of others. As a patron of the arts, he supported various local theaters such as the Long Wharf and Yale Repertory Theaters. A devotee of all musical and visual art forms, Tom was most particularly drawn to music, not only as a listener but also quite often as a rowdy, joyous performer.

Three features of Tom's personality stand out in this writer's mind – his warmth toward others, his strong belief in the independent living philosophy, and his ability to analyze complex issues and articulate a well thought out rationale for positions he would take. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him.

Our sincere thanks to Tom's family for selecting CTYLP to receive donations in his memory. Contributions in Tom's name may be made to the Connecticut Youth Leadership Project (CT-YLP), c/o John Bendoraitis, Treasurer, 370 Levita Road, Lebanon, CT 06249.

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## Make a Difference – Donate Today!

The act of making a donation to the Connecticut Youth leadership Project will help assure that High School Students with disabilities are given opportunities to increase their leadership potential. As a 501(c) 3 corporation, a donation to the Connecticut Youth Leadership Project is tax-deductible within the fullest extent of the law.

Please accept my contribution to the Connecticut Youth Leadership Project.

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**Mail this form and your donation to:**

**The Connecticut Youth Leadership Project  
c/o John Bendoraitis  
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