

A SPIRIT THAT IS NOT AFRAID



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2024 Youth Leadership Forum: Disability doesn't define you



Aubie fist-bumps a delegate at the Alabama Governor's Youth Leadership Forum.

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By [Ella Walton](#) | [Newsletter Editor](#)

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The Alabama Governor's Youth Leadership Forum, previously held at Troy University, made its way to Auburn University this summer on June 2, 2024. The forum, a week-long program, is dedicated to helping high school students with an array of disabilities grow their leadership abilities.

The Youth Leadership Forum is sponsored by the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Alabama Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Auburn University, Alabama Department of Mental Health and Alabama Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Roughly 30 high school students from all over Alabama, referred to as delegates, partake in the program each year.

Alongside the forum's delegates are mentors, forum alumni who graduated from the program in previous years. Volunteers, Auburn students who are in their practicum, also accompanied the delegates through the week's activities.

The forum has a wide variety of activities arranged to encourage and further develop delegates' leadership skills, including a self-advocacy panel, table etiquette lessons, living independently skills, career exploration and a technology expo. The program also provides delegates with the opportunity to tour the Alabama state capital in Montgomery to learn about legislation.

Greg Thompson, an [ADRS](#) Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, was the guest speaker for the self-advocacy panel. During the panel, he discussed living with Morquio syndrome and what it means to have a disability.

"You and me are people — with a disability. You're not a disabled person. You're not a disabled American. You're an American — with a disability. You're an American — that walks funny. You're an American — that doesn't do well in math. You're an American — who can't take notes," Thompson said.

Thompson stressed the importance of not allowing a disability or disabilities to define oneself. He encouraged the delegates to speak on their own behalfs, to know themselves, their needs and how to get their needs met.

"I think this week is important because nobody's here to speak for you. You need to do it yourself this week," Thompson said. "Choose for yourself. Choose if you want to go to college or go right to work. Choose if you want to have a certain type of degree or not. Choose friends wisely — but choose them yourself."

Tasha Betts is the forum's director and ADRS' Statewide Transition Coordinator. Betts loves seeing the growth among delegates each year.

"Some [delegates] may have never spent the night away from their parents or their homes. Then they get here and they bond and make friends and they just come out of their shells," Betts said. "You'll see it the last day for graduation — it's just amazing, like a complete turnaround."

Her favorite part of the program is the talent show because it allows delegates the opportunity to showcase many different talents and show who they are. By the end of the week, Betts said, delegates are speaking up for themselves, have made new friendships and are working on their leadership plan.

JeTaelar Samples, a student at University of Alabama at Birmingham, returned to the forum for her third year. In her first year, Samples joined the program as a delegate, but she now serves as a mentor.

"My favorite part of the program is to meet individuals like me, people with Autism, because I can give them a lot of advice about college and a lot of things they probably don't know that don't involve their parents, like living on their own," Samples said.

Thompson's speech on self-advocacy touched Sample's heart. While she knew what it was to have a disability, Samples said it took her a while to process what it meant for her in particular.

"I really loved the speech on self-advocacy — knowing who you are as a person and not letting other people define you just because you have a disability," Samples said. "You define yourself and your disability does not define you."

With the assistance of its mentors, volunteers and sponsors, the Alabama Governor’s Youth Leadership Forum provides students with disabilities the opportunity to strengthen their leadership skills, make meaningful connections and become confident in who they are. The program has impacted the lives of many high school students living with disabilities in Alabama — and will continue to do so for years to come.

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