

TSA Holds Fourth Annual Youth Ambassador Training

The TSA Youth Ambassadors have added 42 more teams to their growing roster of 13 to 17-year-olds and their parent/guardian partners. The teams came from all over the U.S. including Alabama, Kansas, New Mexico, Iowa and six teams from California, to the training in Washington, D.C. from March 29 to March 31.

The goal of the Youth Ambassador Leadership Training Conference was to help the new members of the TSA Youth Ambassadors to develop the skills they will need when they give TS awareness presentations in their communities. The new YAs practiced public speaking and learned to handle the questions that often arise when ambassadors speak before school and community groups.

The teens were very enthusiastic about the training and the prospect of going home and spreading awareness. "It's an honor to be chosen as a TSA Youth Ambassador representing Texas. I'm excited to now have the tools needed to spread awareness and educate others. Going to Washington, learning to become a Youth Ambassador and meeting the other teams is one of the best experiences of my life," said Leigh-Andrea Zegarelli. Justin Bachman of Ohio agrees, saying, "This was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I would do it again in a heartbeat."

The parent/guardian partners were also thrilled by the event and how the training helped their teens develop self-assurance while offering a unique opportunity to bond with other teens. "The TSA Youth Ambassador Conference was a life-changing experience. The connections we made and the confidence Tanner gained is something I will be forever grateful for," said Shelley MacDonnell from Maine. Katrina Walker of Utah said, "As a parent, I think that the experience of becoming a Youth Ambassador is one of the best things that a child with TS can do. They learn to advocate for themselves and others; they learn to become experienced public speakers; and they learn tolerance and understanding. The training is an absolutely wonderful experience, especially the Trip to the Hill where we were able to advocate on a national level."

"This conference was highly energizing and truly comforting all at the same time. Watching the kids and seeing their level of commitment to raise awareness made us feel like we could get out there and conquer the world through education. It was so comforting to see the camaraderie that developed so quickly between

all of us; kids and parents alike. We all quickly developed a community where we can help each other not only with Ambassador stories, but for sharing experiences in general. This was a life experience that will stick with all of us for many years to come," said Lisa Bachman of Ohio.



The training weekend included an ice-breaking game of BINGO created by TSA YA founder Jen Zwilling and her mother Jane. This game gave the teens an opportunity to get to know one another and become comfortable quickly. A presentation by TSA YA Hunter Lindberg was part of the training and he, Jen Zwilling and Ethan Kempner discussed how to handle frequently asked and challenging questions about TS that are often posed during the Q&A sessions that follow most YA presentations.

Jen also introduced the new ambassadors to the contents of the YA kit. The kits, thanks to a generous donation from the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation, contain everything a new ambassador needs including a PowerPoint presentation on flash drive, tips on how to do presentations and 27 colorful cue cards. The new YAs used the cue cards in a role playing game that helped them hone their presentation skills.

Other presentations included an enlightening discussion on bullying presented by Julie Hertzog of the PACER Center. Additional topics covered during the training included the importance of

fundraising and how to book presentations. An optional "Latte and Learn" for the adult members of the teams was a huge success. Laura Preskin spoke to more than 30 parents about how to give in-service presentations at school and gave important tips on talking about TS to educators.

The training concluded with the annual Trip to the Hill and Congressional Briefing, two events that will linger in the memories of all the new ambassadors and their parents.

"The training was exactly what was needed to be confident and effective in spreading awareness to educate others about TS. The Trip to the Hill was exciting and they were genuinely interested in what my daughter, Leigh-Andrea, wanted to share," said Tammy Zegarelli.

The participants shared personal stories and a common commitment to becoming Youth Ambassadors.

"I really enjoyed this trip and am now advocating better for myself, and also for everyone else with TS. I have already given some presentations to my classes at school. I hope to give many more presentations, and not just to my classes. I also hope to go to college and become a teacher. I know that I will continue to advocate for myself my whole life," said Joseph Walker, Utah Youth Ambassador. ■