

# TSA Youth Ambassador Update



## Teens from Across the Country Trained as TSA Youth Ambassadors

**T**wenty-one adult/teen teams gathered near Washington, D.C. for an intensive TSA Youth Ambassador (YA) Training from March 10-13. The training presenters included YA Program founder, Jennifer Zwilling and her mother, Jane, Dr. John Walkup and TSA President Judit Ungar.

Judit welcomed the teams before Jen ran through the TSA Youth Ambassador Program and the use of the TSA YA kit materials. The teams then broke up into small groups where they learned to use the cue cards with key facts about TS, discussed the importance of fundraising and public relations, practiced making presentations and integrating their own experiences into the program. Dr. Walkup graciously answered medical questions, helping the teens develop the confidence that comes from knowing how to address basic medical issues related to TS.

The teams came from 13 states across the U.S. including Illinois, Florida, Utah, Massachusetts and Hawaii. The 7 girls and

14 boys came with parents or guardians. While the teens focused on the content of the YA presentations, the adults learned about the important role they play in facilitating and organizing their teen team member's presentations. They also watched the training and were shown how they could coach their teen's presentations.

There was also plenty of time to network and socialize, with new friendships growing in the atmosphere of shared experiences. The Hawaiian team, Zach Pezzillo and his mother Susannah Christy, both commented on the instant camaraderie among the training's participants.

"One of the best parts of this trip was meeting other kids my age who also have Tourette Syndrome. We spent a lot of time talking and sharing our stories. I was humbled and inspired by them and I've made some lifelong friends. Going to the YA training in D.C. offered me many 'firsts.' It was the first time I had ever been around other kids with TS. It was the first

time I didn't feel 'different.' Mostly, it was the first time I can remember when I didn't feel the need to suppress my tics in a social setting," Zach said of the experience.

Ms. Christy also said she was, "...humbled and inspired by the parents who deal with the challenges of TS with such wonderful openness, humor and grace. I drew comfort and support. I think, as parents, having an opportunity to share our stories was equally important for us as it was for the kids. I came away with a wealth of new information."

Jen Zwilling said, "The 2009 Youth Ambassadors were an amazing group! I was touched and struck by the bonds that all the teens formed." As the founder of the program, Jen has big ambitions for the future and hopes that one day there will be a TSA YA in every school that has a student diagnosed with TS. "My hope is that the program continues to grow and more and more Youth Ambassadors are trained every year so that this generation of children will grow up to be the next generation of doctors, lawyers, politicians, teachers, police officers, etc., all who will understand and accept individuals with a diagnosis of TS and not misinterpret the symptoms."

Jen also credited the support of everyone at national TSA and the Mallah family in particular, for their generosity in helping to make her vision a reality. This training was underwritten by a donation from the Mallahs and a grant from Burger King.

The new Youth Ambassadors also took their message of TS awareness to Capitol Hill on Thursday, March 12. They met with representatives from their home states in a "Trip to the Hill" and participated in TSA's Champion of Children Congressional Luncheon and Briefing. (See page 6 for story.) ●