

Hi, my name is Megan Zahneis. I'm a first-time delegate and a senior in high school from the Cincinnati area.

I've never been away from home for an extended period like this without my family, so I was pretty scared to even come to YLF. Of course, I was excited - my interview with Brianne at my school in the spring went really well - but my nerves overtook me, which was a predicament my family saw coming. So my dad drove me up to Columbus, because we all knew that if my mom and I got in that car together, we'd both be bawling before we even reached the interstate!

The other thing I'll admit to being nervous about before I came to YLF was the social aspect of things. Here I was in a brand-new city with absolutely no one I knew. I was terrified that YLF would be a repeat of one of those scenes we've probably all seen play out at school...the awkward lunch-table moment where you have no idea where to sit.

YLF isn't like that. I found that I was totally fine with sitting down for lunch with a table full of strangers. My thinking was, if they're wearing one of those infamous YLF T-shirts, they must be kind of okay.

That's the thing about YLF. It's all about the people. Without Donna and Bri and Larry, without the peer mentors and staff members, without the nurses and PCAs, without the session leaders and special guests like Dr. Sauer and Miss Sammons, without us delegates, and without the support of places like the Arc of Ohio, the Butler County Board of Developmental Disabilities, the Governor's Council on People with Disabilities, and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, YLF just wouldn't be complete.

So when you get all these people in a room together, there's never a shortage of good times to be had, whether it was the trip to the Statehouse, swimming or playing wheelchair basketball, watching Darius Goes West, engaging in heated debates while playing Apples to Apples, or the dance (with a bonus visit from the fire department after someone saw smoke in the laundry room!).

We learned about advocacy and leadership from the talented session leaders and panelists, and from our small group counselors, but I'd argue that we as delegates learned even more from each other. The way I see it, everyone attending this forum has a story, one that can inspire others and push them to do more. That's something that can never be underestimated. It's also something you can't even attempt to put a price tag on.

For the first time in my seventeen years, I didn't have to worry about being "different". The truth is, we're all different here at YLF. And I actually felt like I belonged this week. Who cares if I needed someone to cut up my food sometimes, or that I accidentally called the PCA waking me up one morning "Mom"? (Sorry, Kelsey!)

To paraphrase one of my favorite authors, I "fell in love (with YLF) the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once". So I hope everyone here can see how many dividends their hard

work has paid off. Especially Donna, Larry and Brie - could you please stand up so we can applaud you guys one more time?

So as I prepare to go back home, a few thoughts come to mind. Firstly, to my mom and dad, the food here is absolutely amazing (especially the desserts), so just to warn you, my culinary standards were set pretty high this week!

The other thing all YLF parents should know is that we're gonna have a lot of sleep to catch up on. We were at breakfast by 7:30 every morning and lights out wasn't till 11pm, but we all stayed up past that because - at least for me - I never wanted my days at YLF to end.

That's saying something from the girl who was, this time last week, holing up in the house and begging my parents to let me stay and binge-watch Netflix instead of going to Columbus.

Thank you.

Sent from my iPad