A leadership conference for youth with disabilities will take place at USU June 10-12. (Photo courtesy of OPTIONS for Independence)

Ropes course. Barbeque. Motivational speaker. Two nights in a dorm room. Sounds like a typical youth conference held on college campuses nationwide every summer—except every participant in the upcoming youth leadership conference at Utah State University has a disability. Jeff Sheen, a policy analyst and project director at USU’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, is one of the organizers of the event, which will take place on campus June 10-12. Sheen is the chair of Utah’s Statewide Independent Living Council’s youth service committee. The youth leadership conference, Sheen said, is an initiative to get youth involved as consumers and prepare them to be leaders in disability advocacy. Advocates who have worked for years on disability issues are getting ready to retire, he said, and not a lot of effort has been made to groom young adults to take over. “The youth have always had services,” he said. “They haven’t had to fight for it,” leaving people wondering who will take their place and be passionate about advocating for people with disabilities. Two or three youth and one or two adult chaperones from each of Utah’s six Independent Living Centers, including Logan’s OPTIONS for Independence, will participate in the conference, Sheen said. “We’re all geared up to give them a vision of leadership, so they can say ‘I’m a leader and this is how I’m going to improve my community,’” he said. The youth will leave the conference with leadership projects to discuss and implement. “Hopefully this is the start of a statewide youth council,” Sheen said. Tuesday’s events include sessions with motivational speaker Todd Christensen, who is on the board of directors at the Red Rock Center for Independent Living in St. George and has a daughter with developmental disabilities. “Todd is a world-class leadership trainer, really dynamic,” Sheen said. “It will be a lot of fun, but meaningful and focused.” The University Inn and Conference Center is facilitating the event, and is adapting the ropes course, Sheen said. Planning the conference has been a good way to introduce the concept of People-First language, and to allow staff members to see what is necessary to make activities accessible and inclusive, Sheen said.