IDASL brings together students, professionals, people with disabilities and their families. By Connie Pehrson Renee Magnusson will not soon forget the experiences she had this past year in the Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning (IDASL) class at Utah State University. That is the ultimate goal of the class. "I learned about 'people first language,' and I have tried to use it ever since," Magnusson said. "People first language moves away from the implication that disabilities define people. For example, it moves away from terms like 'autistic kids' and instead, it leads me to talk about 'kids,' or 'kids with autism.' I think that this subtle change in the way that I talk reflects a deeper change in my understanding of what disabilities are...and what they aren't." The IDASL class, a part of the Interdisciplinary Training Division (IDT) at the Center for Persons with Disabilities, offers opportunities for seniors and graduate students from all disciplines to increase their awareness, knowledge, and understanding of people with disabilities and their families across the lifespan. The IDASL class was designed to give students an understanding of and experiences with persons with disabilities that they might not gain anywhere else. Individuals with disabilities and their family members also participate in the weekly seminars, sharing their personal experiences and expertise. The students have a unique opportunity to listen to their stories and ask questions to help them better understand the challenges that individuals with disabilities and their families face. Cami Slade, a student in the 2008-2009 IDASL class, said that "The IDASL program was very thorough and professional in providing experiences and information which helped me understand the world from the eyes of individuals with disabilities more clearly than before. This understanding and knowledge has influenced how I perceive, treat, and possibly even advocate, at times, for persons with disabilities." This growing awareness of looking at individuals with disabilities in a new, positive way is exactly the impact that the training specialists are hoping will happen to every student who takes the class. IDASL students are also required to participate in a variety of activities that are examples of interdisciplinary, family-centered services in the community. Students are able to select the service learning sites they will participate in according to their time commitment, the requirements of their individual disciplines, and their own personal interests. "We want them to take all of the class experiences and lectures and put them into practice at the community sites. That is when the learning pays off," said Alma Burgess, the IDASL Development and Training Specialist. The Service Learning sites that IDASL students have worked in this past year included: --The Assistive Technology Lab at USU. Creates and supplies assistive technology to individuals with disabilities. --The Bear River Activity and Skill Center (BRASC) at USU, which provides day training and support for adults with disabilities and respite services for school-age children; --The Common Ground program, offering outdoor recreation for youth and adults with disabilities in the Logan area; --The Utah Disability Law Center, providing disability-related legal assistance and education; --The OPTIONS for Independence, a local independent living organization that offers services that promote independence and choices to people with disabilities; --The TOP Sports program, a local community program that offers sporting activities for children with disabilities and their families --The Up To 3 Early Intervention Program at the CPD, providing services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Burgess added that the ultimate goal of the IDASL class is for students to "take all of the experiences and interactions they have in the classroom and the Service Learning sites with them as they go out to work in their chosen career fields. This is where the greatest change will occur." Heidi Blake took the IDASL class five years ago. The impact the class had on her is still evident today. "I really appreciated the class because it has helped me to know better how to treat individuals who have disabilities, and what I can/should expect ... I enjoyed learning about the different resources available for people with disabilities. I work for LDS Family Services and most people don't realize that we are a counseling and adoption agency. They think we have all the answers. So we do try to keep abreast of at least names of agencies they can call to find the help they need." Elizabeth Findlay, who completed the program this year, sums it up: "The IDT/IDASL Program I feel greatly impacted both my personal and professional life. I learned a lot about advocacy and how important it is to speak up for yourself and others. As members of a community, we can make a lot of difference for those with all types of disabilities if we take the time to get involved in serving those around us. I had so many wonderful
experiences volunteering around the community! I was able to do things such as bowling with children with disabilities and playing BINGO with participants of the Options for Independence program. All of the experiences I had are forever going to be with me and are things that I will forever benefit from." The IDASL class is one that anyone in the community could benefit from. It is a class that changes peoples' lives forever.