Youth conference participants build friendships.

For the 10 youth with disabilities who attended a leadership conference at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, the possibility of future conferences was never in question. “For an inaugural event, it went really well,” said Jeff Sheen, CPD policy analyst and project director who helped plan the event. “Everyone was saying ‘when we come back next year, and the next year after that’ -- not if we come back, but when.”

The youth leadership conference, which was held on the USU campus June 10-12, was an initiative to get youth involved as consumers and prepare them to be leaders in disability advocacy, said Sheen, who is also the chair of Utah’s Statewide Independent Living Council’s youth service committee. The idea of the conference came from a similar event organized by Montana’s Statewide Independent Living Council, said Jennie Ostermiller, youth coordinator at Logan’s OPTIONS for Independence. After many conference calls with the six Centers for Independent Living which make up USILC, the organization agreed to fund the event. Advocates who have worked for years on disability issues are getting ready to retire, Sheen said, leaving them wondering who will take their place and be passionate about advocating for people with disabilities. “Montana’s (conference) is more legislatively focused,” Ostermiller said. “They do more advocacy than we did, but because it was the first year, we wanted it to be fun. The first year was a learning year, and it turned out so well.”

Motivational speaker and leadership trainer Todd Christensen challenged the participants to find their strengths.

“If you find something you are passionate about, you will make a difference,” Christensen said.

Christensen asked the 10 young men and women to define what makes a leader. Their responses included: “Always directing a cause,” “showing you can be a leader and not a follower,” “a person who’s not afraid to be themselves” and “a person who stands up for themselves or someone else.”

During the two-hour session, Christensen led the students through several exercises meant to help them define the concept of leadership, how the principles of leadership could be applied to their own lives, and the importance of moving outside of one’s comfort zone.

“The youth were fantastic,” Sheen said. “They had amazing insight, thoughtful insight on what it means to be a leader.”

The youth, clad in t-shirts donated by the Campus Bookstore and the CPD, also found out what it means to be an Aggie, thanks to games and adapted activities at the USU Ropes Course and on the Quad.
“The staff from University Inn and Conference Center really showed Aggie pride, really showed what it meant to be Aggies,” said Sheen. “Anything we suggested they said ‘sure, let’s try it, we’ll figure something out.’ It was really cool.”

Program Coordinator Tyler Johnson and his staff will work with about 4,800 conference attendees this summer.

“This was probably the most fun and most flexible of the groups,” Johnson said. “These kids were all your friends and made it a lot of fun to interact with them. They kept telling us ‘thank you.’ It was really refreshing on our side to have the kids express their appreciation. I hope they can come back next year.”

Johnson said some, but not all, of the activities were modified. For example, instead of Ultimate Frisbee, they played Bucket List Frisbee, where the participants stood in a circle and as they tossed the Frisbee, had to say something they wanted to do.

“The kids actually liked that,” Johnson said. “It helped them put out there the things they wanted to accomplish and what they wanted to do with their life.”

There was not a lot that could be changed at the rock-climbing wall, Johnson said, so the staff just helped as much as they could. All the participants, including a young man who uses a wheelchair, enthusiastically gave it a try.

“I cannot say enough about the staff,” Ostermiller said. “They were awesome and amazing.”

In preparation for the conference, Johnson spoke to both Sheen and Ostermiller, gathering ideas to modify the activities and learning about People First language. Two staff members also work with children with special needs, so Johnson asked them to share their knowledge as well.

Other activities included a barbecue, a movie under the stars, a tour of Aggie Ice Cream (with treats) and a keynote address with Christensen, Miss Wheelchair Utah 2010 Kellie Babcock and long-time disability advocate Chris Fossen.

Vision for the future

The group’s priority for the next year is to stay connected, as friends and as advocates, with regular meetings via phone calls or Skype.

“These are all youth that did not know each other, but they shared this common experience,” Sheen said. “It was so cool to see these really genuine friendships forming. There was no hesitation to reach across and start talking and just be friends.”

The participants all want to come back next year as peer counselors to plan next year’s event.

“The idea is to come the first year as a student to learn, and to come the second year as a counselor, and then maybe even a third year,” Sheen said. “That’s building that really continuous commitment as youth leaders.”

The idea is they will come back with more youth that they recruited, Ostermiller said. “The youth will take the lead on it, theoretically,” she said.

Participants brainstormed ideas for service projects, and how they could be advocates right where they are, through their local newspapers, blogs and other types of information sharing. Some groups, like those from Salt Lake City and Provo that are close geographically, may try to do things together.

At the Provo center, Sheen said, the conference participants are going to teach classes to the other members of their youth group. Topics include how to be a leader, based on Christensen’s presentation, advocacy and the history of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The seeds of advocacy are being planted in Logan as well.

“One young man from Lewiston is passionate about basketball and is actually on the mayor’s youth council in Lewiston,” Sheen said. “We asked him if he could work to get nets on all the basketball hoops in Lewiston, and eventually maybe an adjustable hoop so anyone can play.
It’s a little seed, and we’ll continue to work with him. We want to tie it into their passion.”

Another young man’s goal is to establish more of a friendship/social/support network with a youth leadership Facebook page, Sheen said.

“The cool thing about it is that (another participant) is really super good about computers and they asked him to be the administrator,” Sheen said. “He was really pleased.”

Sheen said the organizers are still trying to come up with a name for the conference, but it will likely have something to do with ninjas, which became something of an inside joke among the participants during the course of the event. Suggestions have included Ninja Advocates, USILC Ninja Advocates or some other combination of words that can utilize the acronym NINJA. Despite the lack of a name, organizers deemed the event a success.

“The conference totally lived up to my expectations,” Ostermiller said. “It was awesome. Better than I thought it could be.”