

**Administration on Development Disabilities  
Technical Assistance Institute – Presentation Summary  
Speaking for Ourselves: The Importance of Disability  
Identity and Self Advocacy in Youth Leadership Development  
Thursday, August 10, 2006, 11:45 a.m.**

**Moderator:** Shadetra Robinson

**Presenters:** Amber Smock, Youth Leadership Coordinator, Youth Center for Youth, Information, Education and Leadership for Developmental Disabilities (YIELD) and Jason English, Member, Advance Youth Leadership Power (AYLP), IL

**When youth come to a Center of Independent Living we like to start with these questions:**

Who are You?

How would you describe yourself?

How would other people describe you?

Do people know what you want and need?

When you can answer these questions you are closer to being an advocate for yourself. Being an advocate means speaking up for yourself.

**How can you speak up for yourself if you don't know who you are?**

Know yourself! Choose words that describe you...and use them! Words have the power to get you what you want.

**Handicapped vs. Disability**

Be careful of using words that let people pity you. "Handicapable" – though a speaker used that word and you may have heard it elsewhere, it's a word that lets people pity you. The word "handicapped" started when people with disabilities would beg in the streets with their caps in their hands. Today, we use "person with a disability" because that is more respectful. It is also more powerful.

**Disability power**

We say "disability" as in:

DISABILITY RIGHTS.

DISABILITY PRIDE.

DISABILITY COMMUNITY.

DISABILITY HISTORY.

**Do you know your disability history?**

Let's check out some famous people with disabilities.

**Harriet** Tubman - is famous for helping slaves escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad. When she was 14 years old, her master hit her in the head really hard. As a result, she had narcolepsy, which means she would pass out suddenly. This did not stop her from freeing her people.

**Wilma Mankiller** - has a form of muscular dystrophy. She is Native American. She was the first woman to be Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation.

**Ed Roberts** - had polio when he was fourteen years old. He was quadriplegic. Ed Roberts was the first severely disabled student to attend the University of California at Berkeley. He later helped start the first Center for Independent Living, among many other things. He loved to travel and was an international disability rights advocate.

**Frida Kahlo** – had multiple disabilities from illness and accidents.

She was a very famous Mexican woman artist. She was also a political activist. She was married to the painter Diego Rivera.

**Wade Blank** -did not have a disability, but he was deeply committed to getting people with disabilities out of nursing homes. He helped start the Atlantis Community in Denver, Colorado. He also helped to start ADAPT, which today stands for Americans with Disabilities for Attendant Programs Today.

### **Making Change**

All of the people that we just saw wanted to change their world for the better. You should ask yourself some questions.

What kind of change do you want?

Do you want to change something in your life for yourself?

Do you want to change something that will help a lot of people?

Do you want to work alone or with a group?

### **Where does change need to happen?**

At school? At work? At home? In your community? Using transportation?

Going to a restaurant, post office, mall, or grocery store?

### **Who can help you?**

Your family? Your friends? Your caseworker or counselor? Your teachers? Your youth group? You?

**Who has the power to make the change?** Who is in control? Who can make the change happen? This can be a very tricky question to answer because the person in control is not always the person you think is in charge.

**The power game** - If one person in the room has all the power, what are you going to do about it? Who had the power in this game? What is the best way to take the power from that person? Did you feel like the person in power “crossed the line” with you? When did you decide that they should not have power anymore? In order to take action, you have to get mad.

**Taking action** - So, you’ve thought maybe you’d like to make some changes in the world around you. You know what the problem is and you know who can help you.

When is it time to TAKE ACTION? YOU decide when it is time to take action.

Many times, you might find yourself in a situation and you want to say, “That’s just wrong!” That is one sign that it is time to take action.

**So what do you do???**

Do you wait for problems to get resolved or do you take action? You also can take action when the problem is personal. You are more likely to fight if it is YOUR problem.

**Problem: The Chicago special education budget fight**

Our problem: When people graduate from our program they go to the Advance Youth Leadership Power (AYLP). AYLP is a group of young people with disabilities in Chicago who work on disability rights. AYLP heard that the Chicago Public Schools planned to cut 200 special education teachers and 750 aides for next year. That is a \$26 million budget cut. This was a big deal. Chicago has the third largest school district in the country. The problem is that they were cutting teachers and aides. 95% of Chicago juniors with disabilities cannot read at grade level. 40% of Chicago students with disabilities drop out of high school. Without teachers and aides, students can't get the help they need.

**AYLP decided they had to try to stop the cuts. What did we do?**

AYLP decided to do a few different things.

AYLP spoke out against the cuts at the Board of Education meeting.

AYLP met with the chief of staff for special ed to ask her to stop the cuts.

AYLP collected over 500 signatures on an online petition.

AYLP met with the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools. They asked him to stop the cuts.

AYLP got their story in the newspaper and on TV.

AYLP demonstrated outside the Board building and spoke at a press conference.

**So...did AYLP stop the cuts?**

No. The Board passed the new budget with the cuts.

The good news is that they spoke up! AYLP inspired special education advocates to work harder than ever before. Next year, the fight to improve special education services will be bigger than ever.

**What did AYLP learn?**

You have to speak up for yourself.

You have to try different things to get what you want. You can't be scared.

You have to be able to WORK TOGETHER. Listen and be respectful.

You have to have youth, not adults, decide what to do.

You can't be shy about talking back to people with more power than you.

AYLP learned that people listened to them!

**The adult advisors learned:**

To let youth solve their own problems and learn from their mistakes;

To challenge everyone to take risks.

Have fun and don't always be so serious.

To let youth be in charge!

**Why does AYLP work?** They know who they are and they use the word "disability" as a way to show power. They know disability history and feel confident that other people with disabilities have made a difference. They know what problems they want to change,

who can help them, and when to take action. They work TOGETHER and they know you have to try different things to win what you want.

**Spreading the power** - Taking action can also inspire your friends, family and other support people to take action in other ways and they may decide to take action WITH you.

**Leadership styles –**

A self-advocate speaks up for what he or she needs.

A systems advocate works with elected officials and agencies to change laws.

A grassroots leader works with a group of people to do things like marches, testimonies and sit-ins.

An organizer empowers other people to take action for themselves.

**What kind of leader are you?** It takes time to develop your leadership style.

**RESOURCES**

Amber Smock

asmock@accessliving.org

**This entire presentation and supplemental handout materials can be found at the following link:**

**Speaking for Ourselves Power Point** – [http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD\\_0806/08-10-06%20-%200006%20-%20Speaking%20for%20Ourselves%20-%20A\\_Smock.pdf](http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD_0806/08-10-06%20-%200006%20-%20Speaking%20for%20Ourselves%20-%20A_Smock.pdf)

**Chicago Journal Article** – [http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD\\_0806/08-10-06%20-%200007%20-%20Chicago%20Article%20-%20A\\_Smock.pdf](http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD_0806/08-10-06%20-%200007%20-%20Chicago%20Article%20-%20A_Smock.pdf)

**Stop Cuts Flier** – [http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD\\_0806/08-10-06%20-%200008%20-%20Stop%20Cuts%20Flier%20-%20A\\_Smock.pdf](http://www.ent-s-t.com/ADD_0806/08-10-06%20-%200008%20-%20Stop%20Cuts%20Flier%20-%20A_Smock.pdf)