

Don't 'dis'— these kids have ability

Easter Seals youth group fosters leadership

By Melissa McKeon
CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — If the word “disability” sounds to most of us like something that you whisper, listen closely — there’s a group of young people out there for whom the whisper has become a roar.

“DON’T DIS ME, I HAVE ABILITY,” they chanted at a recent celebration of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and, indeed, the abilities of these disabled youth, the leaders of tomorrow, are growing.

They’re members of Easter Seals Youth Leadership Network, a group designed to help those who may have fewer mentors than other youths their age find them among their peers, others with disabilities.

“It brings youth with disabilities from the community together so they can develop leadership skills,” said Massachusetts Easter Seals President

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Kirk Joslin.

The group meets monthly and shares experiences that can encourage each other to achieve goals that, for some, are far more difficult than for their differently abled peers — like learning to drive a car, passing MCAS, even living independently.

The youths involved in the YLN range in age from 14 to 26, and their range of disabilities is broad as well.

All can benefit from some-

thing else the group provides: It brings them together with adults with disabilities, adults who encourage them to pursue their goals by being an example of just how much can be accomplished.

One of those adults is YLN Camp and Youth Services Manager Colleen Flanagan, whose list of accomplishments — and acknowledgments thereof — is pretty long.

She was the 2012 winner of the Disability Law Center’s Outstanding Individual Award, the recipient of a Hero Among Us Award at a Boston Celtics game in 2011 and recognition from the Federation for Children with Special Needs for her community outreach.

Ms. Flanagan herself was an Easter Seals client from the time she was 3, but has little to say about the past. It’s the future that drives her, and as the group prepares for its statewide meeting, she is thinking about the meeting theme, an issue that troubles many teens and can be particularly troubling for youths with disabilities: bullying.

“We want youths with disabilities to understand their right not to be bullied,” Ms. Flanagan said. “This is a line that cannot be crossed.”

She also hopes the youth in YLN will understand that bullying is a social problem that needs to be changed.

Changing bullying, she agrees, could be a lengthy process, especially for youth who are vulnerable and sometimes disempowered. As they discuss both their feelings and their actions, and the actions of others around bullying, they’ll also learn about their legal protection and be encouraged to know that the power to invoke that protection is theirs.

Empowerment might sound like a buzzword, but it is at the core of everything Ms. Flanagan does with this group of young people, whether they’re discuss-

ing their small goals for themselves, or their larger goals for a community that sometimes doesn’t understand — or know — their disability.

“Lots of young people live with disability, some with disabilities you can’t see,” Ms. Flanagan said.

She encourages those outside the YLN network to understand that someone they meet might be struggling with just such a disability.

But empowering the group to learn and share and bond to find strength with each other is what the regular monthly meetings in several Massachusetts communities (New Bedford, Boston and Springfield, in addition to Worcester) are all about.

These teens, like any others, also share on social media, sometimes sharing their stories of triumph or challenge that can benefit their YLN peers.

That sharing has helped the group grow, she said, from a small group of teens and adults to a much larger community, where “they feel a sense of belonging, know that they’re not alone.”

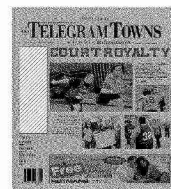
When Ms. Flanagan was a youth growing up with a condition that stunted her growth by making her bones brittle, she remembers the atmosphere surrounding her condition.

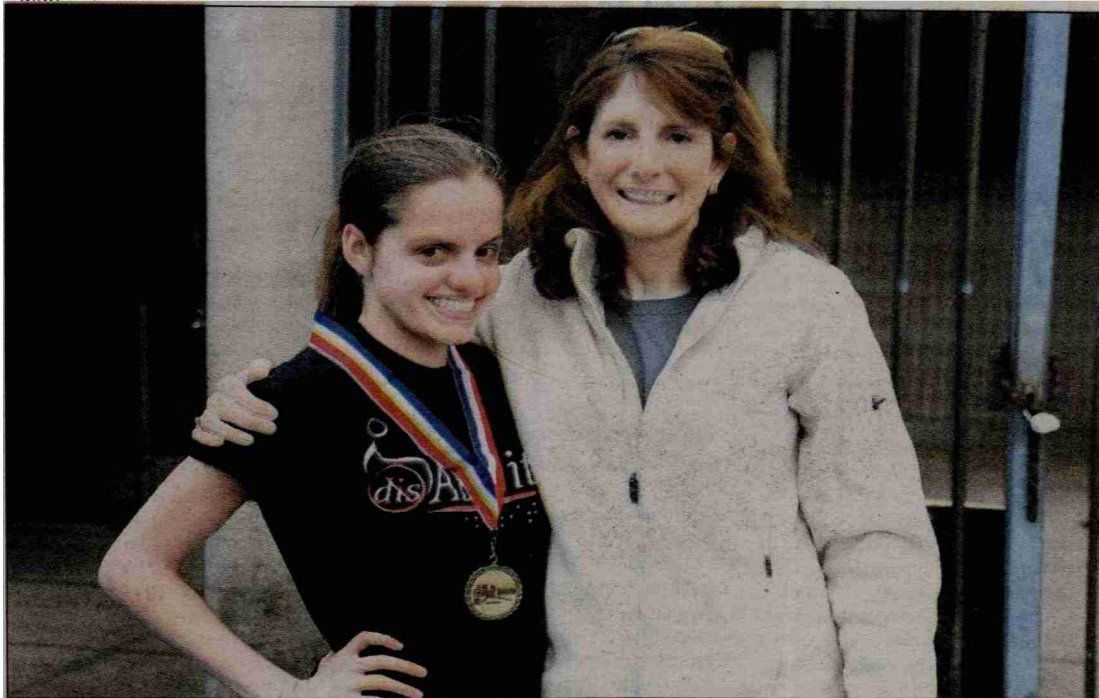
“When I was growing up, disability wasn’t talked about,” she recalls.

For the youths in the YLN, there is little such silence. Even when they are not chanting aloud, a T-shirt they designed says it for them: “Don’t dis me, I have ability.”

All are welcome to attend the Worcester Easter Seals Youth Leadership Network meeting from 1 to 3 p.m. on the second Friday of the month at the Worcester Easter Seals office, sixth floor, 84 Main St. View the YLN’s blog at

<http://yln.easterseals-ma.net/>.





SUBMITTED PHOTO

Stephanie Polito of Worcester, left, a facilitator for the Easter Seals Youth Leadership Network, with Easter Seals Volunteer Dawn Seiple of Northboro at the Easter Seals Walk With Me event in June 2013. A former YLN member, Polito's work as a facilitator involves reaching out to youth with disabilities in the Worcester area.