



## **A life-changing chapter**

### ***Wildwood teen takes part in Florida Youth Leadership Forum for students with disabilities***

By PATRICIA STEELE

WILDWOOD — Ronisha Mitchell confessed to a few jitters last week as she waited for the bus that would drive her to Tallahassee.

The Wildwood Middle High School senior didn't have a lot to say except that she was both nervous and looking forward to the trip.

A week later, Mitchell was all smiles and eager to share her experiences at the annual Florida Youth Leadership Forum for students with disabilities.

Mitchell and dozens of other high school students gathered in Tallahassee for the annual event that encourages teens to think beyond their disabilities and envision their possibilities.

Reticent about sharing her thoughts before the trip, the week that had passed had made a world of difference to the young woman from Wildwood.

"I was scared at first," Mitchell admitted. "There was lots of people there, and I really only knew a couple of people. But everybody was so wonderful. They were pleasant; I mean, they shook your hand and they were ready to help if you had any problems."

Watching her daughter animatedly describe her trip, Satina Mitchell was amazed.

"I was a little concerned about letting her be this far from home for so long," Satina said. "But I knew the experience would be good for her."

"The first day at the forum, she called home and was concerned at the people in wheelchairs and using walkers," Satina said. "She wondered how they would be able to do everything. She was really concerned for their well-being. And she quickly realized just how lucky she is."

Satina told her daughter not to worry, that everybody would be fine.

During the forum, Ronisha's eyes were opened to another world. And she gained a better understanding of how people persevere and succeed with what she at first considered insurmountable disabilities.

Ronisha's dormitory leader was missing an arm and leg; one of her teachers was blind.

"They were all so inspiring," Ronisha said. "There were students having to use walkers or wheelchairs to get around, but it didn't stop them. They are so determined. I quickly realized I'm very lucky."

The experience gave the 18-year-old even more empathy for others.

Ronisha, who struggles with a learning disability, has difficulty maintaining her focus.

"We had several exercises where we learned what it was like to have a (physical) disability," Ronisha said.

Teachers put weights on their legs and had the participants use a walker to propel themselves down the hall and to get in line.

"It was really hard, but you saw what it was like for someone paralyzed and (who) can't feel their legs, trying to move dead weight and get around with a walker," Ronisha said. "Then we had our eyes covered and had to make our way around a room so we knew how it felt to be blind. There were a lot of activities like that during the day."

### **Looking for leaders**

For the program's participants, exceptional education teachers and guidance counselors throughout the state were encouraged to look for students with disabilities who also had outstanding leadership skills.

At Wildwood Middle High School, Joyce Sherrill, ESE employment specialist for the district, asked teachers to recommend several students.

Sherrill helped the students fill out the necessary paperwork and return it to the selection committee. From Wildwood Middle High School, Ronisha and Joshua Henderson were chosen to attend. Other students attending from Sumter County were Leah Haefner and Jessica Crews.

"I felt this would be a great experience for these kids," Sherrill said. "It was a chance to expand their horizons and see beyond Sumter County."

Sherrill learned about the program through the Sumter County School District office.

"Our superintendent, Mr. (Richard) Shirley, encouraged us to find students to take advantage of this program," Sherrill said. "He thought it was a great opportunity."

Ronisha came back from the forum with a goal of returning next summer as a junior staff member.

"If there's one thing I learned, it was 'just because you have a disability, it doesn't mean you can't be successful,'" Ronisha said. "You may have to work harder, but you can succeed."

### **About the forum**

The annual leadership forum for high school students with disabilities is sponsored and funded by the Able Trust and held at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

During the five-day program, the students visited the old and new Florida state capitols, held group discussions about dealing with disabilities, participated in disability sensitivity training, performed in a talent show, enjoyed a "red carpet" dance and learned about various employment options.

Since Ronisha's goal is to become a licensed practical nurse, she was interested in the workshops on opportunities in the medical field.

Rich Cole, Village of Glenbrook resident and vice chairman of the Florida Endowment Foundation, explained that the Able Trust and the Youth Forum are part of the endowment foundation.

The nine-member board is appointed by the governor, each for a three-year term. The foundation was created by state legislation in 1990.

"Our mission is to provide fair employment opportunities for people with disabilities," Cole said. "We do that through several programs, including high school high-tech classes that encourage students to move on to technical school or associate degrees. We're in 37 counties at this point."

One of Cole's goals is to have the Sumter County School District involved in the high-tech program. He was pleased to see the district participating in the Youth Forum.

"It's a great opportunity for students with all types of disabilities to come together and share experiences and realize they can succeed," Cole said.