



## Pensacola teen motivating young people with disabilities

Lara Blosser • Reader Submitted • July 26, 2010

Pensacola, FL Jonathan Heimowitz was told at the age of nine that his vision would be completely gone in five years. Today, seven years after being diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)—a genetic eye condition that eventually leads to incurable blindness—Jonathan is planning a career in the field of medicine with no change in his vision loss to date.

"I have never had perfect 20/20 vision, but I can still see clearly with glasses," said Jonathan, a 16-year-old student at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology. "For the time being, the disease is at a stand still. There is a chance that it could eventually progress in the future, but as of now there have been no changes in my vision."

In addition to RP, Jonathan has also been diagnosed with Usher Syndrome—another progressive disorder linked to RP that also results in hearing loss. Although he can hear most everything, certain pitches and tones are inaudible to Jonathan.

Despite his impending loss of sight and current amount of hearing loss, Jonathan has big plans for the future. His drive to accomplish his goal of a career in medicine regardless of what the future holds for him not only exhibits his optimistic personality, but serves as inspiration for young people struggling with disabilities.

Along with the support of his parents Jeannie and Brian, the Florida Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) that Jonathan attended last year—co-sponsored by The Able Trust, a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring fair employment opportunities for Florida's population with disabilities—gave him this encouragement.

For five days, July 21st -July 25th, Jonathan will serve as a junior staff member to nearly 50 delegates coming from across the state to participate in the 2010 YLF held annually for the past 11 years in Tallahassee. The forum is hosted by The Able Trust and co-sponsored by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council. It is designed to

teach students with disabilities about personal leadership through workshops, social activities, and mentoring opportunities.

"YLF is a life-changing experience for these students. They leave the forum with more confidence and courage to pursue their career goals," said Dr. Susanne Homant, president and CEO for The Able Trust. "Our mission at The Able Trust is to provide fair employment opportunities to Floridians with disabilities. At YLF, participants are exposed to many different experiences that prepare them to live independently and build skills needed to enter the workforce."

Following his experience at YLF last year, Jonathan dually enrolled at Pensacola State College (PSC) to establish credits towards a nursing degree. Recently completing his junior year of high school, he already has a semester's worth of credit toward a nursing degree at PSC. He will dual enroll again at PSC during his entire senior year. By the time he reaches college, Jonathan plans to have a year of credits under his belt. Eventually, he would like to use this credit toward receiving a bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of West Florida (UWF).

"I have always found medicine fascinating. As a faith-based person, I like learning about the intricacies of such a complex creation as the body and having the ability to help others," said Jonathan. "After getting my nursing degree, I would like to work my way up to becoming a physician, depending on the progression of my disease at that point. I understand that my disability limits what I

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can do with my interest in medicine, but I plan to reach the highest level of the field as possible. I will not be held down by my disability.”

Ultimately, Jonathan says that his dream job would be to work as a pediatrician because he could practice medicine and work with children in the process. His backup plan, in the event that his disability would eliminate his ability to work in the field of medicine completely, is to either be a teacher or radio show host, which would allow him to extend his passion for education to the public.

“If you want something, no one will get you a better future than yourself. I like to be independent and the YLF showed me that this is possible. I met people who understand what I deal with on a daily basis and together we discovered that we can do anything we set our minds to, regardless of our disabilities,” said Jonathan. “I’m returning to the YLF to share my story and show what the future can hold for each of this year’s delegates.”

For more information about the Florida Youth Leadership Forum, visit [www.floridaylf.org](http://www.floridaylf.org).

About The Able Trust:

The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, is a 501c(3) public-private partnership foundation established by the Florida Legislature in 1990. Its mission is to be the leader in providing Floridians with disabilities fair employment opportunities through grant programs, public awareness and education. Since its establishment, The Able Trust has awarded over \$26 million to individuals with disabilities and nonprofit agencies throughout Florida for employment-related purposes, enabling over 2,000 Florida citizens with disabilities to enter the workforce each year. The Able Trust youth programs provide career development and transition to almost 2,000 students with disabilities annually, helping to reduce the dropout rate and prepare young adults for life beyond high school. For more information about The Able Trust, visit [www.abletrust.org](http://www.abletrust.org) or call 850-224-4493.

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