

Students return from annual Able Trust forum

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TALLAHASSEE -- Nearly 50 high school students with disabilities gathered in Tallahassee for four days last month to identify career goals and develop leadership skills as part of the Able Trust's annual Florida Youth Leadership Forum (YLF).

The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council unite each year to host and co-sponsor the forum--designed to teach students with disabilities about personal leadership through workshops, social activities and mentoring opportunities. Throughout this educational and motivational assembly, the delegates are exposed to many different experiences that prepare them for life after high school.

Among those attending from the First Coast were Britney Howard, James (Jimmy) Melanson, both of Palatka; Justin Fellin, Ponte Vedra Beach.

Junior staff members included Atticus Wright, Ponte Vedra Beach.

"YLF changed me greatly," said 17-year-old Valerie Baker of Tampa. "The forum taught me how to plan for my future and help others with disabilities. It was the first time I went away without my parents and it was a great first experience."

Various events, such as an etiquette dinner and mentors' luncheon, equipped participants with the skills and knowledge needed to interview for jobs and be successful in the workforce. A career fair also gave the students a chance to meet face-to-face with employers in various career fields and learn about employment opportunities.

"Our mission at The Able Trust is to provide fair employment opportunities to Floridians with disabilities, and YLF helps to prepare these young people to enter the workforce," said Susanne Homant, president and CEO for The Able Trust. "It's unfortunate that some of the students who've attended YLF in the past have taken their talents to other states because no one would hire them here. The Able Trust is working to address this problem and break down barriers for people with disabilities who want to join Florida's workforce."

In addition to professional training, students participated in a variety of social events--including meetings with dignitaries at the State Capitol. Formal events along with fun activities like a dance and talent show, allowed them to interact with each other on a personal level.

"As a delegate last year, I really enjoyed the dance and the day at the capitol," said Valerie. "It was really fun and educational to explore the Capitol and learn how government works."

A mentors' luncheon featured Chancellor Frank Brogan of the State University System as a keynote speaker.

The former Lieutenant Governor of Florida is a faithful YLF supporter, having attended the event in past years to visit and interact with attendees.

Florida House Speaker Larry Cretul also provided guidance and encouragement to the delegates during the forum's annual mock session at the State Capitol Building.

"For many of these students, YLF opens the door to a world of opportunities," said Homant. "The forum gives them the encouragement they need to realize that they can be self-supporting members of the community with a great deal to offer employers."

About The Able Trust:

The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, is a 501(c)(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 \$26million 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 information about The Able Trust, go to www.abletrust.org or call (850) 224-4493.