

It's in our power to change.

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YAC : Connections for Young People with Disabilities

What's a young person with disabilities to do after high school? That's the central question that led to the development of Youth Advocacy Council (YAC).

Staffed by Jessie Bachmann and Annie Campbell, Transition Specialists with Disability Network, the program provides social activities and general life guidance for 18- to 26-year-olds with disabilities.

"After high school, a lot of social connections fall out from underneath young people, leaving them isolated at home," explains Bachmann.

"We kept hearing that young people lacked friendships and fun things to do, and they wanted a way to be part of the community."

"Annie and I oversee YAC," she continues, "but the members really take ownership of it and lead the program themselves. They even came up with their own mission statement: To create social and community connections for people with disabilities."

YAC members also vote for officers about twice a year, which gives them a chance to develop their leadership skills. "All of the members really feel like they're part of YAC," says Bachmann. "That's what makes it so successful."

Melissa Jelinek, a YAC member since 2002, explains, "This is our own group and our own little world where we're always included. It gives us a place to accomplish things other people wouldn't think we could."

While the organization's main focus is on social activities, members also suggest topics for monthly classes.

Annie Campbell explains, "We've led classes on budgeting, nutrition, leadership, job skills, self esteem, and goal setting. Some of the members were recently talking about losing weight, so we scheduled Ginny Girard from MSU Extension to talk about nutrition in January. We've also had yoga teachers, a chef, and local artists. We're always looking for volunteers who can share their expertise and provide connections to the community in a fun, learning atmosphere."

Employment is another frequent topic of YAC meetings. "We cover a variety of topics relating to employment issues, beginning with a career assessment to explore interests, identify strengths, and set realistic goals," says Bachmann. "I also bring in sample applications to fill out, answer questions, and help practice interview skills. Employment is not a goal for everyone in the group, but about half of our 50 members do have jobs."

Bachmann and Campbell are also available for individual support and teaching independent living skills. "We've seen remarkable results," says Campbell. "We love it when members start to realize their full potential."

Asked about what belonging to YAC has done for her, Jelinek says, "The best parts have been gaining social skills, meeting new people, and learning who I really am and what I can do."



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YAC Members Doing More

When we first met Rob, he was living at home with his mom and never dreamed he could live on his own. He spent every day playing video games and thought that was just the way it was going to be. We started working on better social skills, such as avoiding disruptions and acting appropriately. We also took Rob to get a haircut and gave him some advice about caring for his glasses and hair. Before long, Rob was dressing nicer, taking better care of himself, managing his own money, and even moving out of his mom's house. Now he has his own apartment, a job bagging groceries, and strong friendships. He's just bloomed!