

September 2020



“YLF Style”

My name is Olivia Johnston and i'm a 27-year-old advocate from the small village of Brandon Wisconsin. I'm a huge fan of running, books, and all things the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum.

When I was in high school, I wasn't very social, honestly because I felt that people were always limiting my potential or in some way or another making fun of me. For the most part I stayed close to my twin brother who was more of my protector. A Lot of the time if you saw him, I was probably close behind him.

If you would ask me what the first thing I think of when I think of summer it would be the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum for youth with disabilities, which is the best week of the entire year. I literally look forward to it all year and sometimes perhaps go a little overboard with counting down the days.

The Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum is a program that is designed to teach high school students with disabilities how to become leaders in their own community. We go through the college process, how to be independent and what an impact that they can be in someone else's life.

I first heard about the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum way back in 2010 from my high school special education teacher who thought that it would be a good way for me to meet new people. I didn't think it would have a huge impact on me but, boy was I wrong. I never could have guessed that it would change my life in so many ways.

When my teacher suggested I apply for the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum, I didn't think I would get accepted to the program. I was quite shocked but very happy and excited when I found out I got in! I went into the program thinking it was a one-time event and participating as a delegate is a one and done thing. It turned out that you can come back as a mentor, council or staff. I worked my butt off and

after going through the program and years of learning from one of the best directors the program has seen, I am proud to say I am the Director of YLF. My first year was 2016 and I don't see myself stepping down as director any time soon.

The previous director (Cassie) taught me how to work with Edgewood to make sure that the program goes smoothly, how to find speakers, how to hire staff members that would be great at working with these young people. She also showed me the process of choosing who would attend the program that summer. It was hard work, but I was determined to make it happen. In my opinion I had BIG shoes to fill. Without Cassie, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to be a part of something so rewarding.

The program has given me so many things to be grateful for, such as something to make me work harder, gave me some of the best friends I could ask for and an opportunity to do something that could impact someone else's life. It is such a blessing and reward to watch someone go through the program and see an individual come out of their shell in only a week!

YLF is important because it has introduced me to some of the most wonderful people I know, who I thank for allowing me to be myself and have supported me since my first day as a delegate. YLF isn't just a training program, it has created a family of advocates from around the state who will stay lifelong friends and will go on to be leaders in their communities. We were all sad having the 2020 YLF sessions cancelled, even though it was the right decision, we look forward to having it in 2021 (hopefully). This is such a great opportunity and we want to see the program grow and continue having youth from all over the state come every year.

It is my hope that the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum gives somebody the confidence to do the unthinkable and to strive for better!

