Becoming a Leader

By Neha Shabeer,
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Positive changes in a town should come equally from the contributions of its youth and adults. I am glad Ashland High has youth forums for community involvement and leadership opportunities. I personally would like to consider myself a leader. It just didn't happen in a *bipidee-bopidee-boo*, though. I've been gradually working at it, but when I attended the National Youth Leadership Initiative (NYLI) at the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) Conference in Washington DC, a new window opened.

The purpose of NYLI is to empower youth and give them the opportunity to fight for a cause they believe in. Our case is to fight against substance abuse in our town. Ashland has Decisions at Every Turn (DAET) Coalition which currently holds a Drug-Free Communities (DFC) grant that helps create awareness among children and adults to prevent substance addiction. DAET graduated the National Coalition Academy this year at CADCA for completing staff training and requirements to promote a successful drug-free community. DAET sent to the CADCA Conference four high school students (Haley Boccuzzi, Selma Chamime, Stephanie Moscaritolo, and Neha Shabeer) along with the wonderful Coalition Coordinator, Jemima Valdouin, and STAND campaign organizer and parent, Betsy Emberly. Using the Coalition's resources, NYLI taught us a framework of evidenced-based community problem-solving processes researched and documented by the World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre Workgroup to assess our community's weaknesses and how to fix them. At the youth meetings, there were young, fun speakers to rev up the group and interactive activities to make connections with other youth from all over the country. It was interesting to see what they did in their towns, how substance abuse affected their lives differently, and of course—gain new Instagram followers!

DAET sent four high school students, Selma Chamime, Stephanie Moscaritolo, Haley Boccuzzi and Neha Shabeer, to the CADCA Conference. *(Photo/submitted)*

Students meet with Senator Elizabeth Warren in her office conference room. To the left of Senator Warren, stand Ashland students, Haley Boccuzzi, Neha Shabeer, Stephanie Moscaritolo and Selma Chamime. *(Photo/submitted)*

This all culminated in Capitol Hill Day. CADCA makes appointments for youth to speak to state senators about what they're doing to promote healthy and safe towns in the hope of persuading officials that prevention matters. The night before, individual states met in conference rooms to make a game plan of how to make the short time with Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Ed Markey count. Massachusetts town coalitions were split in cohorts and our cohort got a meeting with Senator Elizabeth Warren. The following day, we got dressed in our finest business clothing ready to march the hill to make a change. And then Mother Nature happened.

We got dropped off by shuttle in the middle of Capitol Hill to walk to the office building when torrential downpour started. We were ran through DC like we were being chased by wolves. Once we finally reached the Hart Senate building security line, my hair was soaked, my blazer was clinging to my arms, and my tights were see-through. We all looked like we had just been through a car wash.

Like any resourceful Ashland Clocker would do, we promptly went to the bathroom to dry our clothes and hair with the hand dryer. After becoming slightly more presentable, we went up to Senator Warren's office. She shook all of our hands and was very kind and intelligent. We spoke to her about the Students Taking A Noble Direction (STAND) social norms campaign we have at Ashland High School that creates positive peer pressure by promoting the message that the majority of students make healthy choices. STAND puts up student-elected posters around school promoting the cause and stickers at local liquor stores reminding people that buying or supplying drinks for minors is illegal. Sen. Warren asked us about our stance on marijuana legalization and left an open floor for discussion. It was an afternoon to remember.

At the end of the NYLI training, we did a bonding activity in which we made a large circle and had to cross it if the statement spoken described you. It started off with easy commands like, "Cross the circle if you are an only child" and progressed to "Cross the circle if you were ever shamed because of your physical appearance." It put everyone in a vulnerable state but helped us find a sense of togetherness that we weren't the only ones going through problems no matter our background and age. Later, we had a discussion about social and mental health that ended the conference perfectly.

The trip wasn't all about work, though! We went to Nando's, went on midnight adventures in the resort that must be kept top secret, went on a Ferris wheel, and became best friends with a shoe shiner named Clinton. Overall, it was an experience I'll never forget. I would like to thank the DAET Coalition for sponsoring this trip, Principal St. Coeur for being supportive, and all my teachers who helped me make up work. For more about the happenings at Ashland High School through my eyes, keep reading my monthly column :)

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Recommendation for Changes to School Start Times

School Superintendent Jim Adams emailed on Feb. 17 his recommendation to change school start times to the community. The change of times had been discussed since September 2014 by the School Start Time Committee. Adams made some modifications to their proposal and sent it in February to the School Committee for approval. He said that he did not anticipate a vote on it until March. For more information, visit http://ashlandhs.libguides.com/StartTimes.

The following changes are proposed for the 2017-18 school year:

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