

UW Oshkosh youth leadership program wins Chancellor's Award

by Jennifer Monroe - Wednesday, September 12, 2012

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/21005/uw-oshkosh-youth-leadership-program-wins-chancellors-award/>

As Aila Arndorfer stood at the base of the *40-foot* climbing wall, she could feel the butterflies in her stomach. *"I'm so afraid of heights,"* she thought.

When Hunter Gordon sat at the tables the first night of camp, she felt nervous about being so far from home. *"I don't know anybody,"* she worried.

And as Olivia Engelhardt thought about becoming a leader, she doubted herself a little. *"Do I have what it takes to be a leader?"* she questioned.

Each student had doubts. Each student had questions. And each student transformed into a confident, assured leader, thanks to their strong will to learn through the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Wisconsin Youth Leadership Academy (WYLA).

To honor WYLA's focus of civic engagement and community outreach, the UW System has awarded the program a 2012 University of Wisconsin College and University of Wisconsin Extension Chancellor's Award.

The award will be presented Thursday, Sept. 20 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Pyle Center.

<http://youtu.be/tIRdKeIFI3c>

A dedication to youth

The Award for Excellence in Community Engagement recognizes outstanding performance of an individual or team that has advanced UW Colleges' or UW-Extension's commitment to civic engagement, community outreach or service learning.

"I'm so happy for our students and our staff. This award recognizes the importance of our work, and it honors the young people we serve," said Chris DeJuliis, WYLA program manager.

The program was initiated because of DeJuliis' passion for youth leadership.

"WYLA attracts kids who are often struggling in darkness. We help them discover their lights within so they can find their way out," DeJuliis said. "They then go on to help others find those lights."

Now in its second year of operation, WYLA continues to transform lives of students between the ages of 14 and 16. The award recognizes DeJuliis, Melinda Pollen and Rene Mehlberg. Pollen and Mehlberg are both youth development educators for county branches of UW-Extension.

The focus of the program is ethics-based leadership and civility, and WYLA seeks to inspire students to make positive changes in their lives, schools and communities.

A dedication to leadership

The program begins with a week-long camp, where students are immersed in leadership and personal growth lessons. Students develop a leadership mission and set leadership goals. The program continues throughout the year, as mentors connect with each student and discuss progress on their goals.

Arndorfer, Gordon and Engelhardt are all part of the 2012 WYLA class. Like all WYLA students, each brought a unique background to the program, and each says they will apply the lessons learned at WYLA in a different way.

"I want to be a good example for my younger sisters," Arndorfer said. "WYLA helped me become a leader by giving me the confidence and tools to not be bossy, but to help others achieve what they strive to achieve."

Gordon said the biggest lesson he took from WYLA was about trust.

"Chris taught me that we will have days that will set us off track. But you'll never get the full experience if you don't trust yourself," Gordon said.

And for Engelhardt, WYLA served to boost her self-esteem and show her that she has the skills to be a leader.

"WYLA taught me that anyone can be a leader, and you don't have to be popular or have tons of followers," Engelhardt said. "The best way to lead is by example, and talking is not going to get you as far as showing will."

A dedication to continue

The program just completed its second summer program in June 2012. While dates are not yet set for next year's program, DeJuliis says the program will continue.

"We want to change the world," he said. "We start by changing our kids' lives, and we expect them to change other people's lives. It's sort of like 'paying it forward,' where our reach extends far beyond the students we work with directly.

Arndorfer conquered her fear of heights as students cheered her on while she climbed. Gordon made friends the first night as students began to open up and share their stories. And Engelhardt discovered the strengths she has that enable her to make positive change.

Gordon said one of the best things about WYLA is that students leave with a group of friends that support them throughout their leadership journey.

"I want to tell Chris, 'we did it!' I know WYLA is going to be amazing for years to come," she said.

Engelhardt said she agrees.

“WYLA deserves this award because they really do change lives, and it’s such a powerful camp,” she said. “They supply so much guidance and help. It’s such an amazing experience.”

WYLA is co-sponsored by the Division of Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement at UW Oshkosh and by UW-Extension.

Learn more:

- [Wisconsin Youth Leadership Academy](#)
- [Division of Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement](#)