

2008 Tools For Life

Introduction

A move across state, a power outage, a waiting list of attendees, and a keynote speaker missing his flight were some of challenges that marked the 4th Annual Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair held March 3-4, 2008, at the Shilo Inn in Idaho Falls. In spite of the challenges, this year's conference also proved to be one of the best. Passionate local support fueled the event with energy, new ideas, creative problem solving, and physical support. Record youth turnout, record number of presenters, and record numbers of registrations, made this year's Tools for Life a continued success.

The Tools for Life conference, a vision of the Idaho Interagency Council on Secondary Transition, and sponsored by the Idaho Department of Education, Center on Disabilities and Human Development's Assistive Technology Project, and the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities, is designed to help high school students with disabilities, and those that support them, plan and prepare for life after high school. National keynote speakers, Rulon Gardner and LeDerick Horne, helped set the tone for the event with their inspiring stories of struggles with learning and meeting their future goals. Attendees could then choose from breakout sessions on self-advocacy, self-determination, assistive technology, higher education, recreation, employment, community life, etc.

The first three Tools for Life events were held in Boise. As conference organizers and sponsors watched students and professionals grow in the area of secondary transition, a wish to reach more Idaho students, professionals and families was expressed. The resulting move to Idaho Falls far exceeded conference organizers' expectations for number of attendees and the quality of the event.

Registrations/Attendees

Record number of attendees participated in the 4th Annual Tools for Life. The Shilo Inn in Idaho Falls was chosen as the southeast location for the conference since it was the only hotel that could provide the space and food needed for an event this size. As registration billowed over 400, conference organizers had to make a decision to limit registration or find more space. Wanting to accommodate as many participants as possible, three additional meeting rooms were annexed at the Guest House Inn next to the Shilo Inn. Registration was closed at 500 attendees even though many more participants would have come if possible. Students made up 42% of the conference attendees (232), with educators, other professionals, family members, and conference organizers, making up the other 58%.

Although most student attendees were from southeast Idaho, students from all over the state attended the 4th Annual Tools for Life. School buses came from as far away as Gooding. Meridian School District chartered a bus for students and educators. With grant money received, conference organizers also chartered two buses to bring students from the north and southwest. Special thanks go

out to the businesses, agencies, and individuals that sponsored students to come to the 4th Annual Tools for Life, and they are:

J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation Education Fund in the Idaho Community

Foundation (North and Southwest Regions)

Key Bank of Idaho

Stepping Stones of Latah County

Basic American Foods

CDHD – Family 360 Project

Tri-State World’s Most Interesting Store!

Wendy McClure

Jim Dennis

Margaret Fraser

Keynote Presenters

The Tools for Life attendees especially look forward to the keynote speakers. With over 500 conference participants in a vast ballroom, grabbing and keeping the attention of the group is a daunting task.

With a welcome from Idaho Falls Mayor Jared Fuhrman and an introduction from Miss Idaho’s Sadie Quigley, Rulon Gardner, the 2000 Olympic gold medalist wrestler who defeated the greatest Olympic wrestler of all time, inspired his audience with his story of family support, sports, academic struggles, choices, and perseverance. Afterward, Rulon was on hand to connect with each and every student who wanted to meet him personally.

Michael O’Bleness, local self-advocate, parent, member of the Idaho Falls Community Transition Team, and Chief Operating Officer of Developmental Workshop, Inc., provided an inspiring luncheon keynote address.

A telephone call late in Day One of Tools for Life proved a challenge for conference organizers. LeDerick Horne, the second day keynote speaker from New Jersey, missed his flight and there was no hope for him to reach Idaho Falls on time. Utilizing a technology solution with the special help of Shilo Inn’s AV Specialist Josh Briggs, LeDerick addressed the full conference the morning of Day Two via web conferencing. Local Z103 DeeJay, Brad Collins, kept the audience entertained with giveaways and humor as the hotel and conference organizers fiddled with the technology set up. Even though appearing two-dimensional, LeDerick, a successful poet and real estate businessman, received a standing ovation for

his heart-felt story of his struggle to succeed in school and college with a severe learning disability. LeDerick's thoughts on diversity and expectations were appreciated by all. LeDerick did not accept the honorarium contracted for and used his missing flight as a lesson for the group. LeDerick's pain at the thoughts of disappointing this group was felt by all.

Breakout Sessions

With breakout session strands on assistive technology, education, self-determination, employment, post-secondary education, supporting rural families, and community living, presenters offered 50 one-hour presentations and five poster sessions. Presenters brought their expertise from all over the state as representatives from state and local agencies, higher education, and as persons with disabilities.

Youth Panel

In addition to the breakout sessions, a local panel made up of young adults with disabilities relayed their stories, ambitions, and skill development during the Day Two luncheon. This panel was brought together by the efforts of the Idaho Falls Community Transition Team through a grant from the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities. The group participated in leadership and recreation activities in the months prior to Tools for Life. The audience gave much positive feedback and attentive respect.

Parent Panel

New to Tools for Life this year was the addition of an evening parent panel session. Facilitated by Michael O'Bleness, parents in various stages of transition with their children gave the audience insights and answered questions. Input was also sought from Charlene Quade, attorney and parent, Steve Dewey, educator, and Clay Pearce, self-advocate. Participants were encouraged to share, network, and form connections for ongoing conversations and activities.

Evening Entertainment

Fueled by 30 pizzas donated by the local Domino's Pizza, live music was provided by The Country Boys featuring Chase Doty, a self-advocate, with the help of his father, Randy Doty. To add to the excitement of the evening, a semi-truck hit a power pole and the whole block lost electricity for two hours. After local students left on school buses and parents and students were reunited, Chase Doty continued the entertainment in a candle-lit hotel lobby with his acoustic guitar. Students and adults staying overnight in the hotel joined Chase for a country music sing-along. The hotel brought out complimentary snacks and drinks to add to the cozy gathering.

Attendee Satisfaction and Suggestions for Future Conferences

Parents showed the highest level of satisfaction (68% "highly satisfied") with the Tools conference. Parents appreciated the broad range of topics, the chance for their children to make new friends and socialize, and were happy for the opportunity to hear other parents' stories. In the future,

parents would like to see more legal aspects of trusts and guardianships, more time for question and answer periods with each presenter, and more sessions geared toward students with cognitive impairment.

Educators and other professionals were also happy with the broad range of topics and especially appreciated the keynote addresses and student lunch panel. They were also very appreciative that the conference had moved to Idaho Falls to benefit the students in southeast Idaho. Many good suggestions were made by educators for future Tools for Life conferences. Some of these suggestions included an easier way at a glance to identify sessions students would enjoy and benefit from, more interactive sessions with students, more hands-on sessions for students, more panels of young adults that have successfully transitioned, and more employers represented.

Students appreciated the opportunity to socialize, the keynote speakers, and reported how much fun they had. Students were quite specific about what they would like to see in the future such as speakers representing jobs that involve animals and jobs in general, voting, college scholarships, technology, and how to live on their own.

Overall, 62% of attendees were “highly satisfied” with the event, 32% were “satisfied,” 4% were “somewhat satisfied,” and none were “not at all satisfied.”

Testimony

For Vernita Proctor, an instructional assistant from Deary, Idaho, who has traveled with students to the past two Tools for Life conferences via Charter buses provided by grants from local agencies, the experience has been invaluable to her students. For the Deary students, some who had never been so far away from home or stayed in a hotel, the learning experience went far beyond the conference itself.

“For some of my students, it will be a trip that they will always cherish in so many ways. They each gained new knowledge from the sessions and all the other unplanned lessons cannot even be weighed on a scale. The special dinner was fabulous and what an unexpected etiquette lesson. Absolutely incredible.... It makes me want to be a part of your team to get involved and help other students after seeing what it has done for my students.”

After returning from Tools for Life, Vernita’s students gave a presentation to their school administrators, wrote papers about their experience, and were featured in their local newspaper (see attached).

For Martha Frymire, a special education teacher at Highland High School in Pocatello, the Tools for Life conferences gave her a sense of direction for her class.

“...the first Tools conference I attended in 2006 was an eye opener. I had just taken the job of 18-21 year transition teacher in our district and was swimming upstream because my previous experience teaching elementary resource room for 25 years was not helpful in the new assignment. I was just told to ‘take them into the community to shop, have work experiences, and eat out.’ It seemed like a high

school program with field trips. I really was at a loss as to the purpose, curriculum, everything. That conference saved me. I came away with a purpose, a plan, and a vision for the future for my students. For the first time in five months I knew what to do to help my students. As it turns out, the district was at a loss of what to do with 18-21 year old students. Since that first conference, the district has been urged toward a true community based transition program and we are re-inventing the program. The information I got at this conference was outstanding. “

A member of the Idaho Falls Community Transition Team passed on the following observation:

“Yesterday I attended a meeting with a young lady and her mother. They had been to the Tools conference session on empowering students to take the lead in their IEP meetings, and put it to use immediately! The student conducted much of the meeting, and presented an excellent summary of her strengths, challenges, successes, and frustrations. All the adults in the room were taking notes madly because so much pertinent information was presented so succinctly. We were especially impressed because this is a young woman who has historically had a difficult time making her own desires and feelings known.”

A student from the Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind also appreciated the information:

“....The information you shared will help me make decisions about my future plans and also help me complete a career research project.”

Budget

Total conference costs were approximately \$65,000.00. Base financial support was provided by the Idaho Department of Education (\$20,000.00), CDHD - Idaho Assistive Technology Project (\$10,000.00), and the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities (\$10,000.00). A \$50.00 registration fee also helped offset conference costs, but the vast majority of student registrations were raised by the grant-writing efforts of Irene Lunsford at the Idaho Assistive Technology Project. Student stipends were provided in part by the J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation Education Fund in the Idaho Community Foundation, Stepping Stones of Latah County, Key Bank of Idaho, CDHD – Family 360 Project, and Tri-State World’s Most Interesting Store.

Conclusion

Although moving the 4th Annual Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair to Idaho Falls posed some logistical challenges and many unknowns, the move proved to be a positive one in which many, many more students, family members, educators, and professionals participated than would otherwise have been able to. Conference quality was maintained with high rates of consumer satisfaction and the number of attendees was comparable with the previous Tools for Life events in Boise. The Tools for Life conference also received television coverage by KPVI New Channel 6 with a thoughtful piece on the event and its mission. In keeping with the Idaho Interagency Council on Secondary Transition’s mission, assuring that each and every high school student in the state of Idaho

has the opportunity to gain these skills, resources, and information during their high school career, the 5th Annual Tools for Life Conference will be in northern Idaho March 2-3, 2009.