

2009 Tools for Life

Introduction

In an effort to reach every Idaho student with a disability during their time in high school, the Fifth Annual Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair moved north to Coeur d' Alene. Tools for Life organizers were faced with new and unique challenges specific to the area, but were rewarded by the maximum number of enthusiastic and grateful attendees.

Although new to north Idaho, the Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair is well-established and one of Idaho's largest educational conferences. Tools for Life is a two-day conference for high school students with disabilities and all those who support them. Tools for Life motivates, educates, and inspires attendees with keynote speakers who have faced various challenges as individuals with disabilities and with breakout sessions presented by representatives of Idaho agencies and individuals with disabilities (self-advocates) on self-determination, self-advocacy, assistive technology (devices and software that lead to increased independence), resources for higher education, employment, and community living.

Tools for Life is the brainchild of the Idaho Interagency Council on Secondary Transition (IICST), a collaboration between many agencies and individuals. Members of IICST include representatives from education, rehabilitation, and employment, transition specialists, the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, self-advocates, parents of children with disabilities, and the Idaho Council for Developmental Disabilities. IICST members meet bi-monthly to collaborate, network, and to promote activities and resources around the state that lead to better secondary transition outcomes for Idaho students. The main financial sponsors of Tools for Life are the Idaho Department of Education (SDE), the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, and the Idaho Council for Developmental Disabilities.

Attendees

472 individuals attended Tools for Life 2009. Of the 472 attendees, there were 167 students, 85 educators, 44 family members, and 48 college mentors/volunteers; service providers, professionals, adults with disabilities and vendors made up the remainder of attendees. Attendees from northern Idaho (Region I) represented 43% of attendees. 27% of attendees were from the greater Palouse region (Region II), 19% from the greater Boise area, 7% from south central Idaho, and 4% from southeast Idaho. Although the majority of attendees came from northern Idaho, conference organizers stress to educators and students around the state that this is a statewide conference and provide stipends for student registrations and travel.

Besides the base financial support, Irene Lunsford, one of the conference organizers from the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, seeks extra support each year to bring students to Tools for Life from every part of the state. Travel to another part of the state is an educational and empowering experience. Many students who have travelled from different parts of Idaho to attend Tools for Life have never stayed in a hotel, eaten at a restaurant, or been away from home overnight.

Mountain View High School in Meridian stands out in their determination to attend Tools for Life. This group of 26 students, 4 special education staff, and 3 family members began early in the school year to raise money for travel to Tools for Life. They sold coffee each morning, hosted a silent auction, and sold over 4,000 cookie dough balls! The group flew to the event, which was a first-time experience for many of the students.

Keynote Speakers

Each year conference organizers look nationally, regionally, and locally to find motivational and inspirational keynote speakers, and this year's speakers were exceptional. Their stories touch everyone in the audience; they inspire us, and give us strength, strategies, and resources to reach our goals.

Leading off the event was keynote speaker LeDerick Horne, poet, playwright, and successful businessman, who conveyed the challenges he faced as a result of having a severe learning disability. LeDerick has been a Tools for Life keynote speaker at three of our conferences. District 91 in Idaho Falls was so impressed with LeDerick that the school district brought LeDerick back earlier this school year to be a presenter for their diversity week, "Celebrating our Differences." LeDerick's story strikes a chord in many conference attendees with his message of celebrating differences, needing high expectations, and having the technology to level the playing field. Following the keynote address, LeDerick continued to help students in a jammed packed breakout session. LeDerick also facilitated the lunch panel comprised of high school students and young adults who candidly talked of their disabilities, transition challenges, successes, and insights.

The second day keynote speaker, Michael Beers, a young self-advocate from Missoula, Montana, gave Tools attendees a chance to laugh and see the lighter side of disability. Mike is a stand-up comic who is gaining an audience across the country. Mike has also been involved as a delegate and staff member for the Montana Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), an advisor to national and state disability organizations, and works part-time for the Montana Independent Living Center in Missoula. Mike kept the Tools for Life audience in stitches as he relayed his transition from hiding his disability to embracing it.

Logan Olsen, co-founder of *Logan Magazine* was the second day luncheon speaker. After a heart attack at age 16 that left her in a coma for three weeks, Logan woke to find her world drastically changed. Logan had to relearn to sit up, stand, walk, speak, brush her teeth, put on her make-up, etc. It took Logan two years to return to high school where she graduated (literally) one step in front of her younger brother. Logan was a fashionista before her heart attack. She had no intentions of changing that as a person with a disability. During her recovery, Logan and her mother, Laurie, set out for the Spokane Library to find a fashion magazine for people with disabilities only to find that no such thing existed! Thus the beginnings of *Logan Magazine*, filled with fashion tips, products, and inspirational stories. Logan and Laurie's story is that of persistence, collaboration, and determination. With four issues per year, Logan Magazine boasts over 5,000 subscriptions and growing. Tools attendees loved Logan's story and swamped her afterwards for autographs and magazines.

Breakout Sessions

New to Tools for Life and a new collaboration with the University of Idaho's Latah County Extension Office, was a hands-on financial literacy session entitled *That's Life*. Taking up 1,000 square feet of the Shilo Inn with 17 stations and many props, *That's Life* was a real-life simulation introducing students to the basic skills of financial planning decision making and goal setting in a fun way. *That's Life* presenter, Karen Richel, and 20 University of Idaho business major student volunteers, kept Tools for Life students engaged and active for an extended session each day. This session took many hours of planning and preparation and was appreciated by all who attended.

In addition to *That's Life*, Tools for Life hosted over forty breakout sessions (see attached Conference at a Glance) in assistive technology, higher education, self-advocacy, self-determination, recreation, leisure, and employment resources, skills, and tips. Parent sessions on Monday evening featured sessions on legal and financial planning and considerations, parenting tips to promote independence, higher education services and resources, parent advocacy, and career development. Thirteen presenters were individuals with disabilities who were able to relate first-hand experience.

Exhibitors/Computer Lab

During scheduled breaks, Tools for Life attendees were able to visit 30 exhibitor tables featuring assistive technology vendors, disability services, agencies, advocacy/self-advocacy groups, higher education, employment services, recreation, and leadership. A scavenger hunt included in every conference folder provided attendees with the incentive to visit many exhibitors. In addition to exhibitor tables, attendees were able to visit the assistive technology (AT) computer lab with laptop computers generously loaned by the Wallace School District. Students and other attendees were able to get some hands-on experience with assistive technology software to assist with reading and writing.

Evening Entertainment

After devouring 40 pizzas, The Country Boys, featuring Chase Doty as lead singer/guitarist and his father, Randy Doty, provided the music and karaoke for over 100 students and chaperones. The dance floor could barely contain the exuberant dancers. In addition to the dance, students enjoyed the hotel pool and cozy fire in the lobby. Many old friendships were renewed and new ones forged.

Consumer Satisfaction

Satisfaction surveys were collected on the second day of Tools for Life. High marks continued for Tools for Life even with the challenges of such a large crowd in a facility with accessibility problems. 56% of students were highly satisfied with the event, 39% satisfied, and 5% somewhat satisfied. Non-student attendees rated Tools 2009 as 68% highly satisfied, 30% satisfied, and 2% somewhat satisfied. In addition, attendees add comments on overall conference, what they would like to see at future Tools for Life conferences, and accessibility of the facility.

Conference organizers take attendee satisfaction very seriously, working each year to incorporate their ideas. Tools 2009 attendees were very complimentary of conference organizers, bringing the conference to the north, keynote speakers, the lunch panel of self-advocates, and the financial literacy session. Without question, students want to hear from more working individuals with disabilities. Other attendees requested more sessions on independent living, information on transition of children in foster care, sessions around mental health issues and services, vocational education, etc.

Support and Thanks

It takes many people and agencies to make a conference of this size and scope successful and viable. The Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair is product of the Idaho Interagency Council on Secondary Transition, made up of representatives from sectors of education, employment, assistive technology, independent living, advocacy, and disability

agencies. Special thanks go to major financial sponsors, the Idaho Department of Education, the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, and the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities. Additional funds to help students travel to and attend Tools for Life were received from the Idaho Community Foundation (Northwest Area Foundation Fund and the Herbert D. McAvoy Fund), Stepping Stones of Latah County, Key Bank of Idaho, Mountain West Bank, and the Idaho Department of Labor.

In addition to financial support, special thanks go to the Wallace School District, Ed Chilgren, and Dave Ewers for lending, setting up, and manning the laptop computers used in the AT computer lab. Karen Richel, University of Idaho Latah County Extension Office went above and beyond to organize and make props for the *That's Life* financial literacy session. College mentors from University of Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College, and the College of Southern Idaho helped tremendously with sessions, crowd control, and a myriad of other jobs. Volunteer Emergency Medical Technicians, Frank and Marianne Howe and Randy Doty, were on hand for the inevitable medical emergency. Their skills were very much appreciated. Interpreters June Flannery, Ann Flannery, and Schawn Hardesty provided high quality sign language interpretation for the event, and volunteer interpreters, Paula Mason and Patti Durham, helped fill the interpreting gaps. Master of Ceremony, Michelle Doty, did another great job of keeping the event rolling and organizing the college mentors. The staff of the Idaho Assistive Technology Project at the Center on Disabilities and Human Development, Kristen Hagen, Sue House, Irene Lunsford, Evann Tveden, and Nora Jehn put in countless hours/days/months planning and organizing this event. Other members of the Tools 2009 planning committee providing year-long input and help with this event include Yvonne Wright, Kathy Buswell, Beverly Benge, Ed Chilgren, Erin Delaney, Susan Fauntleroy, Tracy Warren, Trisha Miles, Andy Covington, and Vernita Proctor.

Tools for Life 2010

Next year's Tools for Life: Secondary Transition and Technology Fair will have come full circle, back to Boise and the Doubletree Hotel. Organizers have shown that Tools for Life can move to three different areas of the state and maintain its statewide conference distinction. Students who travel to the conference from different parts of the state have a bonus educational experience of travel, and those local students have an opportunity to attend an event they might otherwise never have.