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Students get their chance to speak *Maine Youth Action Network holds annual conference*

By Lucas Knowles
Editor

Like many other students involved in the Maine Youth Action Network, Jeff Poulin wants to make a difference in his community. “When I found MYAN, I found where I want to be,” Poulin said. “They try to make a difference.” Poulin, along five other members of the Scarborough High School Student Council, will be attending MYAN’s 23rd annual Peer Leadership Conference this week.

The annual event includes workshops that cover topics such as youth activism, policy change and health subjects such as nutrition, suicide prevention and tobacco use. Poulin, a senior at Scarborough High School and president of its Student Council, found MYAN after “stumbling onto their Web site.”

MYAN is a network throughout Maine that includes a wide variety of student organizations and has helped to create groups such as gay/straight alliances in schools and student health centers. Genell Vashro, a training and projects coordinator for MYAN, said the organization, which is part of PROP’s Youth Resiliency Project, wants to help youth make a change in their communities. “We want to advocate for youth to speak and make positive change,” Vashro said.

Near the conclusion of this year’s conference, which is being held in South Portland, the various groups who attend the event will each meet and formulate a “plan of action.” MYAN will then follow up with those groups and collect their thoughts, along with helping them through the process of implementing those changes.

Poulin, who is also working as an intern with MYAN, said it is gratifying for him to see the effects that the organization has had for youth across the state. “At trainings, I get to see the effects (MYAN) has directly,” Poulin said. “When I hear people share their success stories, it is so empowering.” Poulin said many students around the state know him as “as the guy who does the funky chicken dance,” which he uses as an “ice breaker” exercise to talk to groups.

The annual Peer Leadership Conference has become more student-led over the past few years as a “youth planning team” has been assembled and has planned many parts of the event, including speaker, workshops, activities and other details.

This year’s event will include a fundraiser to benefit people with HIV and AIDS in Maine. PROP’s Youth Resiliency Project also includes Neighborhoods for Youth, Open Door Community Arts, the Peer Leader Program and Support for Champs. This year, nearly 500 participants will attend the MYAN Peer Leadership Conference.