

YouthACT Team Profile



YouthACT Thundercats

Youth: Alex Miller and Gary Reige

Adult Partner: Marissa Lang

Supporting Organization Contact: Ruth Richardson

Supporting Organization: Minnesota Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (MOFAS)

Introductions

Youth

My name is Alex Miller, and I am 20 years old and live in Minnesota. My strengths include my ability to relate to others, as well as my sense of humor. I am a natural public speaker and have no problem getting up in front of crowds and presenting. I got involved in YouthACT to make a difference and further develop my leadership skills. My short-term goals include ongoing participation as a Thundercats co-chair and working at my job at Menards, a home improvement store. My long-term goals include moving up to a management position at my job and continuing to champion for the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) community.

My name is Gary Reige. I am 19 years old and live in Minnesota. My strengths include public speaking, critical thinking, problem solving, and my sense of humor. I got involved in YouthACT to enhance my advocacy skills and raise awareness about disabilities such as FASD. My short-term goals are to continue attending Hamline University and continue my leadership role as a co-chair of Thundercats. My long-term goals include finishing college with a degree in astrophysics and working to help people with FASD.

Adult Partner

My name is Marissa Lang, and I am the Special Projects Manager of youth and young adult programs at Minnesota Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (MOFAS). I was pleased to get involved in YouthACT to support youth in developing their leadership and self-advocacy skills and become part of an exciting national network of youth leaders. My short-term goals include coordination of logistics for monthly Thundercats meetings, planning team building and advocacy activities for the youth, and completing reporting requirements. My long-term goals include expanding the Thundercats to include youth with FASD on a national level and continuing to empower youth.

Supporting Organization Contact

My name is Ruth Richardson, and I am Director of Programs and National Strategic Initiatives for MOFAS. Prior to joining MOFAS, I was the Deputy Director of the City of Saint Paul's Department of Human Rights and Equal Economic Opportunity. I have my JD from William Mitchell College of Law, am a community faculty member at Metropolitan State University, and serve as the current Chairperson of the Minnesota Board of Social Work. At MOFAS, I am part of the senior management team, and I provide oversight and leadership over all MOFAS programs. This includes our Family Engagement Department, which has a Transition-Age Youth Division. I have extensive experience supporting transition-age youth, especially youth

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with disabilities, both professionally and personally. MOFAS is very committed to YouthACT, and it has strengthened our youth work and programming.

Supporting Organization

The Minnesota Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (MOFAS) has a dual mission. We are focused on prevention of prenatal alcohol exposure that leads to disability and ensuring that people living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) are identified, supported, and valued. Being involved in YouthACT speaks to the very core of our youth work. Our aim is to support a network of youth and young adults on the spectrum to develop leadership and self-advocacy skills. The concept of our network is that it is youth-led and adult-supported. Our purpose is to give a voice to participants within the network, raise awareness, and inform systems that youth encounter on their transition to adulthood. YouthACT has been a starting point for continuing a larger youth network project that will continue in future years. This project will continue to increase civic participation and develop social connections and chances to participate for youth who often experience isolation due to their disability. Our goal is to create change because everyone deserves a bright future.

Activities

We played a very important role in the 2015 FASD Day at the Capital in St. Paul, MN. We assisted with registration, handed out t-shirts, and, most importantly, introduced our legislators and speakers (which was nerve-racking!). This was a challenging activity but ended up being a huge success. Gary presented a paper he wrote about educational accommodations and received a standing ovation. It was definitely an “all hands on deck” activity, and we exceeded the expectations of the 100+ attendees. The outcome of this event was creating a visual presence at our state capital, raising awareness about FASD, and allowing legislators to put a face and voice to FASD.

Another activity that our team was extremely proud to host was a community meeting in St. Paul, MN, which was powerful and impactful. The meeting was open to the community to raise awareness about FASD and hear first-hand from us about what it is like to live with an FASD. The audience was very receptive, and three Minnesota legislators were in attendance. The leadership skills, self-advocacy tools, and confidence that the youth have developed through YouthACT were utilized and observed throughout this event. Both for MOFAS and for the audience, using youth-led and adult-supported activities helps shift perspectives and ensures that youth are the focus of the meeting and work.

Our team has also been able to duplicate the Disability History Timeline activity that was presented at the YouthACT training, which you can learn more about at <http://www.ncld-youth.info/index.php?id=61>. We have learned to lead presentations of our own by following the YouthACT staff's example. We gained confidence and perspective from the training that has enabled us to try and use NCWD/Youth publications and activities in efforts to expand our networks.

Lastly, we volunteered to pack food through a program called Feed My Starving Children. It felt great to get out into the community, have fun, and make a positive difference in the world.

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Peer Network

Our peer network currently has 12 consistent members. The size of the group works really well for us logistically. Youth range in age from 14-22 and all live in the Twin Cities metro area. The majority of the peer network members attend high school or transition programs, though one youth is a full-time college student and two youth have completed high school and are working full-time. Two participants in the Thundercats peer network do not have a FASD but are allies. The majority of the youth in the peer network are also involved in some type of MOFAS programming, such as support groups, the young adult panel of speakers, and social and recreational activities. All youth in the peer network participate in activities listed in our action plan, such as speaking engagements and participation in advocacy related activities.

Tips

We really have embraced the YouthACT philosophy, “Nothing about us, without us.” MOFAS, our organization, has benefited in numerous ways by involving youth in planning, implementation of advocacy activities, and feedback regarding “what’s working.” For example, we recently facilitated a discussion with youth to gather their feedback on our youth work by asking the following questions.

- What do you like about Thundercats and MOFAS youth activities?
- What do you like least about Thundercats and MOFAS youth activities?
- What would you change about Thundercats and MOFAS youth activities?
- What have you learned from Thundercats and MOFAS youth activities?

We encourage other organizations to ask their youth similar questions.

For youth interested in developing a peer network, we have a few tips.

TIPS FOR YOUTH

- **As a group, create your network’s core values to ensure that it is a positive, safe, and supportive environment.**
- **Have food, snacks, and beverages at meetings and events.**
- **Decide your network’s goals and roles of team members based on individual strengths.**
- **Incorporate fun activities (volunteering, recreational, etc.) in addition to core advocacy and self-advocacy work.**
- **Identify other disability groups with similar philosophies and create partnerships.**

It is critical that youth and adults work in partnership to create the best outcomes. It can be difficult for the adult partners not to “take charge,” but in order to foster effective relationships and a sense of responsibility for youth, each youth must have a valued role in facilitation, implementation of activities, and decision-making.

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It is also our advice to utilize the knowledge and experience of YouthACT staff or other organization staff with whom you may work. We have found that ongoing technical assistance is important, as is access to materials. There is no need to re-create the wheel when there are fantastic materials already created.

Reflection

Opportunities for involvement in programs such as YouthACT are incredibly important to support and empower youth in our community. We have all improved our skills to work as a team and become more active listeners. As an organization, we have shifted from planning activities *for* youth, to planning activities *with* youth. We think that the change can be observed through each department at our organization. For example, youth are more involved in facilitating FASD trainings, public policy work, and our public awareness activities.

As the adult partner, Marissa has helped promote youth voice by helping Alex, Gary, and other youth in their peer network take on leadership roles. She has learned to step back to give them more opportunities to direct projects and meetings. This was challenging because Marissa is accustomed to leading projects and steering goals professionally. Stepping aside to adequately promote youth voice was a learning curve that ultimately saw great reward. Marissa learned to have a more supportive management style and saw the youth grow from her attempts to encourage them to step up as she stepped back.

Looking Forward

We will continue practicing leadership by increasing our advocacy skills, confidence, and testimony through our legislative agenda that we put together to help young people learn to advocate and testify at a state and local level. Youth in the Thundercats team are often socially isolated. They build peer support and relationships by attending meetings and trainings and working as a team. The Thundercats have recognized how much their skillsets have grown since joining YouthACT, and Adult Partner Marissa has taught them to get out of their comfort zones and learn how to grow and thrive. We are excited about the sustainability of our Thundercats team.

When our time with YouthACT comes to an end, we will continue to meet as Thundercats with support from MOFAS. This group has been so valuable that we have secured additional funding to continue the momentum of our group. The Thundercats received an additional grant from a local family foundation for \$20,000 to continue the efforts of YouthACT. We will continue to be actively involved in disability advocacy and ensure that our youth network remains committed to our goals and outcomes. MOFAS plans to continue promoting youth voice by continuing to receive feedback from the Thundercats through focus groups and having youth volunteer and give their perspectives at organizational events.