



# THE ★ BLUE RIDGE ★ JOURNAL

49TH YMCA CONFERENCE ON NATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## AMBASSADORS BUILD STATE YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

MOLLY BRENNAN, WI ★ STAFF WRITER

As witnessed in the chant battle during meals, state pride is a significant part of the CONA experience. Delegation activities give delegates a sense of community. The Ambassador program, which started last year, allows delegates without a state delegation to participate in the conference.

Ambassador delegates come from states without established Youth and Government programs. Derek Summerville, the adviser for the ambassador delegations, said CONA staff work with interested YMCA State Alliances to send delegates to the conference. Delegates from Rhode Island, Alaska, Utah, Nevada, North Dakota and Nebraska attend CONA as Ambassadors, either because their state cannot provide a Youth and Government program or because they are using this experience to help establish the program in their state.

Blanca Saavedra, UT, joined Youth and Government because she enjoys using her leadership skills to make positive change. Within most Youth and Government programs, attending CONA is an honor reserved for the most experienced students. Both delegate Saavedra and fellow Utah Ambassador Cole McCubbins agree that entering the program with little experience was difficult because they struggled with unfamiliar procedures. Their adviser contends the conference is still a valuable



LEADERSHIP ★ AMBASSADORS COME TO CONA WITHOUT A STATE DELEGATION.

PHOTO BY JACK DENSMORE, TX

experience for these delegates. "For most of our students," Summerville said, "[CONA] is the culmination of all their hard work and improvement. For these students, it is a chance to see where they need to go and how they can get there." Delegate Saavedra's goal is to take the lessons she's learned and the experiences she's had to "enhance the program, make it bigger, allow more people to join, and see what it's all about."

Ambassador delegates face unique challenges during the conference since they lack a full state delegation, which many rely on for support. However, Delegate McCubbins says that several states stepped up and welcomed the Ambassadors. "Kentucky, Florida, the Carolinas, and a few others have been especially kind to us," McCubbins said, adding that, since many Ambassadors have little experience with Youth and Government, it's helpful when other delegates help them with procedural details. ★

## DIVERSITY IN RELIGION, BELIEFS FOUND AMONG DELEGATES

JACK DENSMORE, TX ★ STAFF WRITER

While the YMCA was founded as a Christian organization, it accommodates and welcomes a diversity of religions. YMCA Conference on National Affairs delegates include Jewish, Muslim, agnostic and atheist believers as well as those of many different Christian denominations. A few delegates this week observed Ramadan while on the mountain.

"I think that because there's so many people here who have very strongly held convictions from all over the country where we have so many different beliefs, it's really hard for a conference to accommodate everyone, and I think that CONA really does a great job," said Minnesota delegate AJ Yablonsky, who recited a Jewish prayer during the Monday evening devotional, and was met with great appreciation and applause. "It's great that, as a Jew, that I felt comfortable enough to go up and talk about my beliefs, and try to incorporate everyone. I think that no matter what, we all share the same values, and I think CONA does a really



SPEAKING OUT ★ AJ YABLONSKY PRAYS MONDAY.

PHOTO BY PETER BROTHERS, KY

great job of talking more about the values [rather] than the specific faith and beliefs."

"When I was walking off the stage and Bob [McGaughey] walked out onto the stage, I thought that everyone stood up and was clapping for him," Yablonsky said. "Afterwards though, everyone came up to me and told me how great it was, and that it really impacted them. So, that was really special for me, because I really put heart into what I said, and I really appreciate the support that I got from everyone." ★

## INTERVIEWING FIRST YEARS: EXPECTATION VS. REALITY

**SASKIA GHOSH, OK** ★ STAFF WRITER

For many delegates attending CONA, the conference is a completely new experience. From the aesthetic pictures of mountains while sitting on the front porch to hiking up to Eureka Hall for the fourth time, many experiences at CONA are a first. Goals, personalities, and ideas change constantly as one grows throughout the conference.

When asking first-year delegate Sebastian Montesinos from New Mexico about how his goals for CONA changed as the conference progressed, he replied that his goal

moved from writing a really outstanding proposal to meeting new people and making connections with other delegates. While his original goal was more personal, CONA morphed his goal into one of community.

Not only do goals change, but expectations of what CONA is like prove to be significantly different from reality. Quiwanaki Ramsey from the Florida delegation said that at first he expected the CONA atmosphere and proposal sharing to be strict and regulated; however, in reality, he found that CONA involved an unbelievably loving and respectful environment. ★

## DELEGATES CELEBRATE MIDWEEK SUCCESS WITH DANCING

**COLBIE COOK, IN** ★ STAFF WRITER

Unlike most years when the CONA dance was held on the last day of the conference, this year's exciting event was held earlier on and proved to be a tremendous success. Before the dance, delegations were getting each other pumped up, cheering and handing out glow sticks. Once everyone went inside, the dance was kicked off with some classic Rihanna and America's favorite line dance, "The Wobble." The hype continued as P.O Luke Davis taught each delegate how to dance, just like Kevin Bacon from Footloose with a step-by-step tutorial.

The night was filled with dance circle competitions, individual delegate competitions and a live slideshow showing everyone's best moves. To top it off, delegates



**FOOTLOOSE** ★ EVERYONE ENJOYED THE DANCING TUESDAY EVENING

PHOTO BY RYAN STRANZ, MA

went out of their way to dance with all those around the room, encouraging each other. Kennedy Agee, IN commented, "The dance helped relieve stress and [made] me realize that we are equal and that teens can join together."

Despite the heat that took over in the middle of the gym, the dance certainly was a night to remember. It didn't matter who came from which state, or how comfortable a dancer was with their moves, Ware Pavilion was certainly the place to be last night.

Want to see more pictures from this lively and fun-filled event? Check out: ★

[www.facebook.com/TheBlueRidgeJournal](http://www.facebook.com/TheBlueRidgeJournal)

## COMING FROM NORTH CAROLINA TO YOU

**LEAH O'NEILL, DE** ★ STAFF WRITER

Plenary Session is the last chance any delegate will have to debate at the 49th CONA with the top ten proposals!

Spread the word to family and friends that the session will be filmed as a livestream at:

<http://ymcacona.org/watch/plenary/>

## PRESIDING OFFICER OF THE DAY: GABRIELLE DONOHOE

1. She's from the Cranberry State of Massachusetts (Middleborough).
2. She played softball for 12 years.
3. She dissected a pigeon and a rabbit this year in her biology class. A lot of people were grossed out, but she thought it was so cool.
4. Her favorite place in the entire world is Seabrook Beach in New Hampshire. About 30 members of her family all go whenever they visit.
5. She's 5'9" but in most of her shoes she hits 6'0."
6. She rescued a boxer named T-Bone, and he's going to be 14 this year.



PHOTO BY NNEMKA AGBAFE, NC

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