

YOUTH LEADERSHIP LINCOLN

THE ORGANIZATION THAT DEVELOPS STRONG LEADERS FOR A STRONGER LINCOLN

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In 1986, community leaders gathered to discuss how they can improve the future of the city Lincoln, Nebraska. There, they collectively decided that it was a necessity to have a group of individuals who believed in their community, wanted everyone in the community to succeed in it and were willing and ready to serve.

The nonprofit organization Leadership Lincoln was born and now works to find these people.



The YLL team from left to right: Program Director Laura Uridil, Executive Director Brendon Evans, Program Coordinator Lily Sughroue

Today, nearly 3,500 people have graduated from the year-long program and have benefitted Lincoln with an estimated \$3.5 million worth of volunteer work.

Youth Leadership Lincoln (YLL) is the portion that scopes out young leaders to get Lincoln's citizens involved in civic engagement earlier on in life. According to the YLL website, the group was originally partly funded by a man who loved giving back to his community, Larry Arth. He did this because he "believed that the key to keeping young people in the city of Lincoln was to give them a voice and teach them at an early age they can make a difference."

As a high school student at Lincoln High in 1996, Laura Uridil applied to be a part of the first ever YLL cohort. After deciding to attend college out of state, Uridil arrived there expecting to receive many opportunities to volunteer and learn about the city she was getting an education from. However, as she looked for things to get involved in, she was disappointed to realize that many people there didn't expect that and weren't as interested in getting to know the town they were involved in as she was.

"It kind of made it concrete for me that I had experienced something in school that made my view of the world a little bit different than other people," Uridil said. "It wasn't until I went to college, that I realized I had some unique opportunities and I did some unique things that give me a perspective

and an expectation of how I exist in the world that not everybody else has."

After college, Uridil was still uncertain about what she wanted to do in life, and had made her way back to Lincoln for a short period. During her stay, she attended a wedding where she reconciled with former YLL cohort members of Uridil's time, as well as her former Program Coordinator, Dean Finnegan, who had then moved on to be the President of the organization. Uridil and Finnegan discussed her uncertainty about her future, and that was when Finnegan offered her a temporary job as her assistant. From there, the job became a little less temporary and Uridil slowly began to work her way up, meanwhile realizing that Lincoln really was her town and this was the career path she wanted to do.

A couple years later, Lincoln Southeast High School (LSE) graduate Lily Sughroue was a manager at the local coffee shop, The Mill, where she would often chat with the former Executive Director of YLL, Mick Hale. The two formed a friendship off of his timely visits to the one of few locations Sughroue worked at. It was there where Sughroue made it apparent her love for helping children and nonprofit work. They discussed her past experience, including working as a paraeducator at LSE, participating in unified sports and working as a counselor at a summer camp in Easter Seals, Nebraska. A year later, Hale contacted Sughroue to inform her that they had an opening, and she officially became the YLL Program Coordinator.

These encounters are what led to the team that Sughroue and Uridil make today, along with their current Executive Director, Brendon Evans.

YLL brings students from all different schools and backgrounds together to conjoin different perspectives about where people

are coming from, and to also build networks between different schools and students.



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"So you know that if you want to go out and do something big you have connections all over the city of Lincoln," Sughroue said.

Sughroue also believes that an important part of YLL is to gain a better understanding of the community that one lives in.

"We do that and have to learn about all sorts of different systems that work together to make the community great, but also understand what still needs to be improved so that you know it works for everyone," she said.

YLL is a year-long program that is open to incoming sophomores, and selects its members based off of applications that are sent in before a certain due date [this year the applications for the YLL 25' cohort were due May 3, 2021]. The organization is aware that most of the leaders wanting to be involved in the group are also very busy people, so the schedule is created to be a small time commitment. The full year typically consists of a day long seminar, once a month, that takes place over the course of a school day.

The year is kicked off with a retreat mainly for the purpose of bonding the members



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YLL Alumni Sara Al-Rishawi speaks up at the LPS Bond issue in early 2020



together. Aside from this year, everyone typically spends the night at the campsite.

"My favorite thing is always the opening retreat because every year you get to start to meet 40 new people who are excited about living in Lincoln, and they want to meet each other and build relationships," Uridil said. "So it's always a lot of high energy and just excitement and potential every year as we start the new class."

Youth Leadership Lincoln (YLL) is in its 24th year and Lincoln Southeast students among its membership say the experience is worthwhile.

This year's group is wrapping up a successful year despite a few adjustments due to the pandemic. Among the experiences, students met with city government leaders, visited the Johnny Carson Center for Emerging Media Arts at UNL, and took part in many volunteer opportunities such as Gifts of Love [an organization that provides gifts for those in need of].

YLL 24 cohort member and sophomore at LSE Liem Wills thinks they did well at adapting to the difficulties of the year.

38 "They did a great job keep-

ing everything COVID safe, while still being engaging," Wills said. "We had to go on Zoom for a while, but even then, there wasn't much change from when it was in-person. They also made sure it was always inclusive of everyone, whether people were joining the seminars virtually or in-person."

Senior Sara Al-Rishawi was a member of the YLL 22 cohort and had a particularly enjoyable experience. She says that her time spent there has helped her get to where she is now.

"YLL gave me opportunities to network with a lot of amazing people that opened doors for me to grow professionally," Al-Rishawi said.

Wills also found YLL as a useful tool in giving her a headstart in her future goals.

"I met a lot of new people in the community who can help me in the future," Wills said. "For example, during one of our seminars we got a tour of Brian Health, and now I'm going to be able to use the people we talked to as a resource for job shadowing or whatever when I want to start looking at possible careers in the medical field."

Al-Rishawi gives credit to YLL for her success in speaking about the Lincoln Public Schools bond issue with BCOM solutions earlier in 2020.

"YLL has helped me grow out of my shell and allowed for me to push myself to go after opportunities that come my way," she said. "The bond issue was a cool event to be able to participate in and just show myself to the community. It was also the first time that I had to speak to a group of people to get them to do something [which was vote for the bond] and it was a nice experience to have for a 16 year old."

Al-Rishawi would like to recommend incoming sopho-

mores apply to YLL and leave an important message on how to approach it.

"Take it seriously," Al-Rishawi said. "It is one of few opportunities you have that young where you are treated like an adult and are expected to act mature."

Additionally, Wills said that YLL assisted her in growing tolerance and cooperation when working with others.

"My biggest challenge in YLL was probably learning that people have different opinions than me and that's okay," Wills said. "It helped me realize that you can still work successfully with people who don't always agree with you."

Sughrue especially loves the youth portion of this organization because of all the things teenagers have to offer.

"I just love building relationships with all people, but especially with this age group," Sughrue said. "You all have so much potential, and I just want to help foster that."

Don't have the time or missed the registration deadline for YLL 25 but still want to be involved in your community? Try joining one of Leadership Lincoln's curriculum committees, or just reach out directly to Sughrue, Uridil or Evans to ask about ways that you can stay connected. You can still make a difference no matter your situation.



YLL 24 participates in a team building activity during their first seminar