

Youth Summit urges students to ‘stand as an ideal’



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Keynote speaker Josh Drea, standing back center, interacts with students in the audience during the Southeastern Regional Action Council's 11th annual Youth Forum, held at Waterford High School on Tuesday, April 10, 2018. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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Waterford — On one hand, being a mascot is a bit creepy.

"I'm Josh in a cat suit," joked Josh Drea, the motivational speaker, beatboxer and former **Cosmo the Cougar** (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/10/brigham-young-universitys-mascot-cosmo-the-cougar-is-a-better-dancer-than-you/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.365309dc5a2e) for Brigham Young University, speaking before dozens of area students at Tuesday's Youth Summit at Waterford High School. "On the other hand ... I stand as an ideal for people to rally behind. Everything they love about their school should be embodied in who I am. I get to be an example."

Organized by the **Southeastern Regional Action Council** (<http://www.sectrac.org/>) in collaboration with the **Adolescent Learning and Leadership Institute** (http://www.sectrac.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/ALLI_Info_sheet_generic_for_website.pdf), the 11th annual forum drew middle and high school students from almost every town in the region.

Drean (<http://www.joshdrean.com/>) and fellow keynote speaker Kate McDonald, a professor at Mitchell College and Southern Connecticut State University, urged students to lead by example in their schools and communities. The speakers and students shared personal stories and brainstormed ways to remain positive despite an environment packed with prejudice, stereotypes and the nagging negativity of social media.

Drean pushed students to empathize with one another to help prevent classmates from falling into depression, substance abuse or violence.



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Norwich Free Academy students laugh while they shoot video of keynote speaker Josh Drean doing his barnyard beatbox during the Southeastern Regional Action Council's 11th annual Youth Forum, held at Waterford High School on Tuesday, April 10, 2018. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

"You may have had a mom or dad who taught you right from wrong," he said. "A lot of kids don't have this. You know who's raising those kids? YouTube."

Student workgroups discussed ways to combat bullying, drunken driving, drug abuse and vaping. ALLI students from Montville and East Lyme high schools presented student-produced public service announcements on problem gambling and finding a natural high through sports and fun activities.

Jenniely Bonilla, a Norwich Free Academy senior, said students need to acknowledge they're often quick to judge based on appearance.

"Our **cafeteria is segregated** (<https://www.theday.com/local/20161106/nfa-student-surveys-classmates-about-cafeteria-being-segregated>), even if we don't notice it," she said in an interview. "There's a white side, a black side, a Puerto Rican side."



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Keynote speaker Josh Drean, standing right, interacts with students in the audience while talking about his beatboxing during the Southeastern Regional Action Council's 11th annual Youth Forum, held at Waterford High School on Tuesday, April 10, 2018. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

Bonilla said the school has partnered with the **Rotary Club** (<http://norwichrotary.org/>) of Norwich to create an Interact Club, in which students reach out, "sit in different groups we're not used to and just talk. It just opens doors. We have more in common than you think."

Bailey Buchan, an NFA junior, said her workgroup would bring ideas back to the school, including ways to speak out against bullying and perhaps establishing student-run support groups.

"A guidance counselor could be there for help but we want adults to realize we know how to help each other," she said.

McDonald, a New London High School graduate, asked students to think about their real and imaginary role models — the admirable qualities they share and how perceptions about them change over time.



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Keynote speaker Josh Drean, second from right, and his student volunteers, Gigi Rodriguez, left, a senior at Montville High School, Jordan Gincastro, second from left, a sophomore at Stonington High School and Jack Kramer, right, an eighth-grader at Cutler Middle School in Groton, cheer after he gives them instructions on how to be a team mascot during the Southeastern Regional Action Council's 11th annual Youth Forum, held at Waterford High School on Tuesday, April 10, 2018. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

She said her role models as a child were a mix of pop and sports stars, including the 1986 New York Mets. But "our perspective always shifts," McDonald said, noting "the bulk of that baseball team **was using cocaine** (<http://www.espn.com/30for30/film?page=DocandDarryl>)."

McDonald challenged students to think about when a person they look up to — whether a celebrity or someone they know — makes a mistake.

"Sometimes I'm a hot mess. Sometimes you're a hot mess," she said. "But that doesn't mean I'm not a role model. It means I'm human."

Drean, now a Harvard University student, honed his beatboxing skills in Boston — mimicking drums and other instruments as a street performer at Faneuil Hall and underground T stops. Now he incorporates his hobby into entertaining but poignant messages for students, who he urged to be mascots in their own right.

Drean said a mascot has one job: to represent. He told students he almost lost his Cosmo the Cougar gig after a **stunt on national television** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSc7DepCwQc>)— hopping onto the set without permission from ESPN producers.

"I was being selfish," he admitted. "But the minute you put on that suit, it's not about you anymore. When you come to this conference, it's not about you anymore. We represent something that's bigger than just us."

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