

## **AU hosts 'Speak Out' conference for Allegany County youth**

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More than 175 high school students from 12 area schools and youth programs attended a daylong conference devoted to community leadership and service hosted by Alfred University on March 12. The event kicked off with an address by Jon Thomas (JT) Robertson of Cuba, a young teen recognized nationally by several organizations for his successful effort to get the cast of ABC's "Extreme Home Makeover" to make the Arcade-Attica train handicap-accessible. Attendees then answered the presidential call to service by participating in hour-long workshops devoted to community projects including building flower boxes for Habitat for Humanity, assembling meals for the Wellsville Christian Temple soup kitchen, creating decorative bricks for the Belfast Community Garden. Youth representing Andover, Belfast, Bolivar-Richburg, Canaseraga, Alfred-Almond, Friendship, Cuba-Rushford, Scio, Wellsville, and Whitesville attended along with several home-schooled students from Allegany County. Leslie Baunach, an intern with the Children and Youth Learning Initiative (CYLI) at AU, said "These kids are really committed to the spirit of service it's kind of surprising to see this level of enthusiasm among an age group that we normally only hear bad things about." Baunach, from Gresham, OR, is a second-year graduate student in the school psychology program at Alfred University. After lunch, provided by AU's dining services, the students took part in a community fair that brought a diverse group of local community service organizations together including Literacy West, formerly Literacy Volunteers of Allegany County. "This is a great opportunity for the kids to come together and do something positive for the community," said Lisa Lee, executive director of Literacy West. The event was presented as a cooperative venture between the Partners for Prevention in Allegany County, the ACCORD Corp., and AU's CYLI. Christopher Romanchock, the coordinator of CYLI said "this event is really incredible. It's great to see so many agencies and groups coming together to help Allegany County youth find their voice." CYLI is a grant-funded venture that provides after-school programming to students in Allegany and Western Steuben counties, free of charge. The program's goal is to encourage students to attend college after high school graduation.