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**Shawna-Leigh Balon talks to her fellow Youth in Government members and officers during a practice legislative session at Waialua High School. Balon, a junior at Waialua, was elected to serve as the group's governor in this year's conference for the YMCA of Honolulu program, which was revived last year.**

## Youth in Government program unites kids, expands their horizons

By Sarah Zoellick  
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Shawna-Leigh Balon was a seventh-grader sharing a room with her sister, her sister's boyfriend, their baby and her mother.

The uncomfortable situation led Balon to stay away from home and try things. That's when she got in trouble with school officials along with a friend who brought alcohol to school.

"I was in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people," said Balon, now a junior at Waialua High School. "I needed to get out; like, I couldn't handle being home, in the home situation, so I found every reason to get out."

Balon enrolled in a teen outreach program through the YMCA of Honolulu and quickly learned to not let her living conditions affect her life.

"That alcohol prevention program just made me realize I didn't want to do that kind of stuff," she said.

Balon has since participated in a Hiroshima exchange program through the YMCA, summer and personal development programs, and was speaker of the House for last year's revived Youth in Government program.

This year her peers elected her governor of the group.

"This program is all about leadership, all about getting our voices heard, and I know what it is like when people don't listen to you because you're just a student," she said.

Youth in Government took a two-year hiatus because of a drop in participation, but was reinstated in August.

Sixth- through 12th-graders draft bills and reso-

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**Noa Hussey**  
*Branch executive,  
Kaimuki-Waialae YMCA*

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lutions in preparation for a conference, hold committee meetings and participate in mock debate at the state Capitol. Students also have the option to instead participate as journalists in the Capitol Corps, which provides media coverage for the session.

This year's conference is set for March 22 to 25 to get the program back on track.

Noa Hussey, branch executive of the Kaimuki-Waialae YMCA, said it has been inspirational to watch Balon grow from a troubled seventh-grader into a mature leader.

"She's still growing, but Shawna is what you hope will happen (to) people that come through this program," Hussey said. "Shawna has learned to be a leader without being loud, without being boisterous, without being someone who has to always be at the front. Shawna's learned to be a leader by being an encourager."

Hussey, who has been in-

olved with Youth in Government for 14 years, said the program is a great way to bring kids together from all walks of life and introduce them to the unique concerns that other communities face.

"It doesn't matter what school you're from; it doesn't matter what background you're from. Whether it be the kid from Punahou or the kid from Farrington: Everybody needs you," he said.

Michael Broderick, CEO of the YMCA of Honolulu, said he handled more than 10,000 cases as a Family Court judge before becoming head of the organization in 2010, and that he wishes more kids like Balon could be saved before entering the system.

Broderick said the YMCA offers "help that stresses character development and has a focus on servant leadership."

"By the time that kids got to me in Family Court, it was really hard to help them, it was almost too late," he said.

The registration deadline for this year's 62nd annual Youth in Government session is Monday. Information can be found at [www.ymca-honolulu.org](http://www.ymca-honolulu.org) or any local YMCA branch.

The cost of the three-night, four-day session is \$175, which includes meals, hotel accommodations and transportation. Financial assistance is available through the YMCA's Strong Communities Annual Support Campaign and the Waipahu Community Foundation, for students living in Waipahu.

Residents interested in receiving financial assistance can email Cassidy Inamasu at [cinamasu@ymcahonolulu.org](mailto:cinamasu@ymcahonolulu.org) or call 275-4630.