

# SELF ADVOCATES NEWSLETTER

DON'T TALK ABOUT IT, BE ABOUT IT

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE CONTOS, CEO OF YAI

Interviewed by Janice McPhillips  
on September 25, 2018

### What is your educational background?

I was born and raised in Manhattan, so after graduating high school on the Upper West Side, I went to college at Tufts University, just outside of Boston, and then to law school at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C. Education and knowledge have always been very important to me and my entire family. I don't believe that there's such a thing as having too much education.

### What is your biggest triumph since you have become the CEO of YAI?

Three years ago, when I transitioned to CEO from Chairman of YAI's Board, YAI was operating under a Corporate Integrity Agreement (CIA) and was being monitored by an Independent Review Organization (IRO). Our reputation with government was at a low point and they were offering us very limited opportunities to grow. We were caught in a rut and experiencing a period of stagnation. Over the past three years,

I'm pleased to report that YAI has advanced to a much better and more stable place. Our reputation with government is stronger than ever, which is evidenced by the fact that our awards for new development and programs are bigger and arriving faster than at any time in the history of the organization.

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Janice McPhillips and George Contos at YAI's Central Office

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**DIVAS DO MORE THAN JUST WRESTLE**

**BY ALLAN FRASER**

Ronda Rousey.  
Stephanie McMahon.  
Alexa Bliss.

These are a few of the professional wrestling divas who are so great inside the ring. But did you know that these women also do great things outside the ring?

They help people with disabilities. They help them to look good and to be strong in advocating for themselves. Wrestling commentator Michael Cole recently showed a video on Monday Night Raw with some of the divas showing people how to get in shape, and how to fight against using the “R” word, and, in general, how to be a champion.

**They fight  
against  
using the  
“R” word**



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I am very proud of the fact that we were the first (and maybe still the only) I/DD agency in New York to expose every single one of our thousands of staff to a minimum one-day POMs/Person-Centered Thinking training. I am also very proud to have formed our DSP Counsel. This forum provides me with a direct, unfiltered line of communication with our front-line DSPs throughout the entire YAI Network and allows them to share their comments and any concerns with me in person, so I can listen and then do my best to make things happen.

The silos that once existed at YAI have crumbled and the glass ceiling that was in place when I got here has shattered. Countless promotions have taken place over the past three years in ways that address merit, equality, and diversity. It's important to me that every decision I make as CEO aligns with whatever is in the best interest of the people we support, our staff, and our families.

**What do you do outside of YAI?**

When I'm not working, I spend as much time as I can with Lauren, my 4-year old daughter, who is growing up way too fast, and with Jennifer, my partner. Lauren is applying to kindergarten for fall of 2019 so for the next few months I'll be spending a lot of my free time working on applications and going on school tours and interviews! I also read a lot (fiction and non-fiction), enjoy doing crossword puzzles, and play a lot of backgammon.

**YAI will be ready and able to successfully face and embrace mandatory managed care**

**What are your thoughts about the "R" word?**

I don't believe using the "R" word is acceptable under any circumstances, but I realize there are people out there who continue to use it. Some people use it unintentionally, without malice or disrespect, and I think it is the responsibility of everyone affiliated with the I/DD field – professionals, self advocates, families, and stakeholders alike – to do our best to educate these people about I/DD and proper terminology. As for people who use the "R" word to intentionally hurt and disrespect others – particularly if they are already aware that it's inappropriate – I have no interest in associating with them.

**What are your goals for YAI?**

Earlier this year, YAI unveiled our Strategic Plan (available on our [yai.org](http://yai.org) website) which introduced the seven goals that we want to achieve over the next three years. As CEO of YAI, my goal is to work closely with our entire organization to make the initiatives outlined in the Strategic Plan a reality. If we accomplish what we've set out to do with our Strategic Plan, YAI will be ready and able to successfully face and embrace mandatory managed care and value-based payments head on.

Another goal of mine is to help YAI minimize its overwhelming dependence on traditional Medicaid dollars.

We need to diversify our supports and services in ways that, programmatically and geographically, take us into areas that are funded through private pay and other payment streams. As OPWDD funding continues to constrict, more and more opportunities will present themselves for agencies like YAI that have the solid infrastructure, good governance, skilled management, and financial strength to grow both organically and through M&A activity.

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**What kind of funding does YAI get? Where is the money coming from?**

Currently, over 90% of YAI’s operating budget comes from Medicaid dollars. The rest comes from Medicare; various New York City agencies that YAI has contracts with; grants from corporate and private foundations; and gifts from individuals and families who want to help us succeed because they believe in YAI and our amazing mission.

**How often do the self advocates get to go to Albany for the conference?**

I fully support the opportunity for all self advocates to go to Albany as often as possible to meet with New York’s lawmakers. Whether formally, for conferences or rallies, or informally, without an agenda, just to be seen and heard by decision-makers, you gotta be in it to win it!

**Do you have enough money in the budget for the self advocates to go to Albany?**

YAI will always be able to find money in our budget to assist self advocates to go to Albany! It’s very important that all self advocates have the opportunity to travel, share, and express their voices and opinions on disability rights and other critical issues that affect them and the I/DD field.

## LORENZ DANCE STUDIO’S 14TH ANNIVERSARY! ANOTHER CHALLENGE TRIUMPHANT

BY ISMAEL NUNEZ

Astoria Manor was the place: the event “Lorenz Dance Studio’s 14th Anniversary Show,” which featured performances from all four Lorenz Dance Studios.

That day everything went well! For this reporter, with a Learning Disability, it was challenging. The dance routine was a Three-dance combination of: Merengue, Bachata and Salsa! Wow! One had to be quick, be relaxed, and confident.

Three reasons why everything went so well!

**One** - The Food, The Service, everything as (The Welfare Poets say) it was so cool! The buffet, the bar, the service the right place.

**Two** - Every dance group from every studio performed fine with style! Costumes, performances perfect 10!

**Three** - Good Friends everywhere! Received a free ride back and forth, received encouragement and support from everyone from my dance partner and staff, and from the other performers at Lorenz. The Dance Instructors who participated in their teams were so helpful!

Now the question is “Will this reporter perform again? Hmm, let’s wait after the Christmas Show of 2018.



# MY EXPERIENCE AT THE 2018 YAI BENEFIT

BY CAR'MELO GRAU-PUIG



Last August of 2018 I was getting excited to hear the news that YAI would be adding a new twist of the Benefit. To give back on what has the agency done for me I donated money to benefiting the programs for people with disabilities because everybody deserves to have a successful life and leading to the right path.

On September 12th, 2018 this was the rebirth of YAI Benefit (formerly Gala) which it took place at the Tribeca Rooftop. It also marked the 1st time in years of not going to an YAI event but it did finally happen, and it made me feel happy to be part of this incredible event. I had such an amazing time and after I put together an outfit that defined my personality in having a white blazer and that was the talk of the evening that night and I received many compliments of my whole outfit and I feel blessed to be surrounded with incredible people that's very supportive and bust their tails in putting such an amazing event. And believe it or not the agency has raised a lot of money in benefiting the YAI programs and defined these words: living, loving, working, and learning.

Then, I saw everybody on hand like the Board of Trustees, George Contos, Jeff Mordos and the rest of the team spoke the event and explained that this agency has been around over 60 years and still going strong. And that's why I continue to remain loyal to this agency that meant so much to me and feeling incredible is a blessing and yes, supporting one another and I'm thankful for taking part of it. Also, I was in for a surprise and guess who comes out on stage? It turned to be the Four Tops and my goodness they sounded great and they performed their classic hits, and everybody was jumping up and dance the night of way.

In my voice I humbly want to take time out in thanking of all YAI staff for putting together such an amazing event and they've worked tirelessly and believe me, I wouldn't step in their shoes but you know what it was well worth it. I'm so glad that the agency here at YAI continuously goes from disability to ability and breaking barriers so 2019, don't talk about it, be about it and that's all that matters!!

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## MAKING FRIENDS ON THE BUS

BY JANICE MCPHILLIPS

This past Sunday, I was coming back from City Island. When I got to Woodlawn to catch the 20 bus, this man on the train saw me and said the light from my blouse helped him. He was visually impaired. He thanked me. I start to talk to him about how I am a New York City Advocate. The bus was crowded because it was late. I helped him get on the bus so he could get a seat. He was grateful and he told me I was an angel in heaven. He was an inspiration to me.



## ALL MY FRIENDS

BY JEN NAFTLOWITZ



Sandy celebrated his birthday at a nice restaurant in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn with his brother and wife, plus his closest friends like me. He is the nicest person that I know. I met him through Sheldon. I am glad that I got to meet part of his family. At the dinner, we had a lot of family style food and cake for dessert. His wife created a great birthday for her husband.

I have known my best friend Staci since I was 17 years old. We met at this social club that we both went to in Marine Park, Brooklyn. Staci and I are always going to be best friends because we have a lot in common. We hang out at each other's houses since we live so close to each other.

Rene is the best treasurer ever. He and I are both in the Self Advocacy group. He is in the Special Olympics basketball and bowling group. Plus, he has such a great heart. Rene is my best friend and my favorite karate teacher. He helps a lot of people. Rene works at AHRC on Varick and Houston Street. He is such a great guy, that is why everyone loves him.

## CHAT WITH CAR'MELO

### INTERVIEW WITH JANICE MCPHILLIPS - PRESIDENT OF YAI SELF ADVOCACY

**1. What has brought you to the group as the President of Self Advocacy?**

I have been in the other groups in YAI and I decided that I wanted to be the President of the Self Advocate Group.

**2. How do you feel when you defied the odds by not letting your disability ruining your goals?**

I know that I can be myself with people that won't put me down about my disability.

**3. What was your greatest moment and accomplishment you've succeed?**

By holding a job and held on to it for many years.

**4. What do you want to see happening in the future of YAI Self Advocacy?**

To be successful and to advocate outside in the community and advocate for themselves.

**5. With the Erase the R Word campaign do you see any changes in having everybody's attention?**

People need to learn that the R word is disrespectful and it's discriminating the disability community just like the N word and the S word towards people of color.

**6. What advice could you give a person with a disability on what do they want accomplish?**

To get advice from others and to speak for everybody's rights on what do they want to work on.



Car'Melo (second from left) with Janice (second from right) with other self advocates at the Central Park Challenge

## TRAVELING TO THE FAMILY BBQ

### BY KENNETH YOUNGBLOOD

We went to a family barbeque at my grandmother's house in Warrenton, North Carolina on Saturday, August 17th to Monday, August 20th. I learned how to travel on my own through travel training. Travel training helps people with disabilities. We took the bus in Chinatown to North Carolina. My mother and sister picked me and my young niece up at McDonalds on that Friday morning. My youngest cousin dropped us off at Amtrak on that Monday. We took the Amtrak to New York City then back to Brooklyn. We were visiting my cousins, grandma, uncles, and aunts for a family reunion. We had a good time.



## ADVOCATES AT THE MOVIES

Advocates give their reviews about the best movies of the season.



Movie: TAG

**Overall Verdict:** See the movie, but be careful of the bad words.

**Derrick:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the movie and suggests everyone should see it.

**Carlo:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the movie, but not the language. Would not recommend the movie.

**Valentine:** Thumbs up. Liked the movie and enjoyed the racing scene. Unsure of a recommendation.

**Lee:** Thumbs up. Thought it was hilarious nonstop and would recommend it to anyone who needs a laugh.

**Kenny:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the movie and would recommend it to everyone.

**Paul:** Thumbs up. Liked the movie (including the golf and wedding scenes), but not the swearing.

**Donald:** Thumbs up. Loved it, and enjoyed the jokes besides the bad words. Would recommend to friends.

**Donald:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the scary movie and jokes, but not the shooting. Thinks it's not for everyone.

**Valentine:** Thumbs down. Did not enjoy the movie due to the killing and would not recommend.

**Kenneth:** Thumbs up. Liked the entire movie, and would recommend.

**Larry:** Thumbs up. Loved the action, but not the bloody parts. Larry also believes it's not for everyone.



Movie: EQ2

**Overall Verdict:** If you like violence, see the movie.

Advocates at the Movies, continued from page 8



**Movie:** Mama Mia! Here we go again

**Overall:** Thumbs up! See the movie.

**Kenneth:** Thumbs up. Loves both the Broadway Show and the movies, and would recommend it.

**Paul:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the music and would recommend it.

**Lee:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the singing, scenery and actors. Would recommend it to fans of musicals.

**Derrick:** Thumbs up. Thought the entire show was funny and liked the singing. Would recommend.

**Kenneth:** Thumbs up. Enjoyed the entire movie.

**Paul:** Thumbs up. Liked everything about the movie. I liked everything about this movie a lot of excitement, and recommend to everyone.

**Derrick:** Thumbs Up and liked Mission Impossible. Would recommend.

**Lee:** Thumbs up. Thinks the movie is a 10 and would recommend it to everyone.

**Donald:** Thumbs up. Thinks the movie was very funny.



**Movie:** Mission Impossible. Fallout  
**Final Verdict:** Unanimous thumbs up! Go see it!

## WEST INDIAN DAY PARADE

BY KENNETH YOUNGBLOOD

I go to the West Indian Day Parade every year. This year, I went to the Grand Army Plaza to see the Carnival Parade. I was listening to the sound of Caribbean music like “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” and “Celebration.”

Some sights I saw were different costumes, costume designing, flying eagles, big trucks playing music, and Afro hair. They had all different types of soul food. Jerk chicken, curry chicken, corn, mac and cheese, shrimp, and fish fry. I saw all types of flags, including Haiti, Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua, Bahamas, Belize, Aruba, Grenada, Trinidad, and so much more.



The West Indian Day Parade was between Flatbush Avenue and Utica Avenue in Brooklyn. I had a good time this Labor Day.

## ARRIBA! THE YAI LATINO CONFERENCE! ADELANTE Y PALANTE!

BY ISMAEL NUNEZ



It took place at the Center for the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies of the City University of New York’s Graduate Center. For the 12th year,

YAI hosted their annual conference on Latin Americans with disabilities at the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies.

This year’s message was: “What Direction are We Going?” The one-day conference was conducted all in Spanish. Workshops held at the conference dealt with autism, guardianship, and person-centered planning.

The main highlight of the conference was keynote speaker, Erika Ruiz, International Speaker and the Founder/Facilitator of Laughter Yoga. While addressing the audience she got them to ask questions and make comments lasted close to 1 hour.

One parent stated, “I come here cause I know here I will get answers.” Another parent stated, “I want to be around people who speak my language and I feel comfortable with which is why I feel so relieved in speaking here and coming here.”

Lopez proudly stated, “You all here are in the right place/right house.” One can be sure Lucky 13 will be back next year! YAI’s commitment to the Latin American community lives on!

Editor's note: *This article has been corrected to reflect that the Latino conference is offered only in Spanish; no English translation is offered*

## MEDICARE FOR ALL

BY MICHAEL HOWARD



This is a plan that will save the government money at \$32 trillion or \$36 trillion starting in 2022. If this plan starts, it's better than being on just Medicaid or social security or Medicare.

So, Bernie Sanders came up with this

plan ever since I first heard of it. Right now, some progressive democrats are winning, and some are losing. I feel good about 70% of Americans fighting for this plan, but if 80% or 90% voted I would feel great. I understand we all have two weeks to vote for the right people to represent us.

The one person I'm proud of is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. I went to three of her rallies, one in the Bronx, and two in Brooklyn. I endorsed her with a couple of dollars. I feel bad people make fun of her because of her popularity and knowledge.

I want to make sure Medicare for all is legit. I'm afraid I might lose the plans I have right now, ever since [some politicians] keep talking about cutting services like food stamps for me. They all talk but no action.

## PROUD SELF ADVOCATE

BY JANICE PHILLIPS

My name is Janice and I am the President of the Self Advocacy group of YAI. My role is to make the agenda for the group and make sure that everybody advocates for themselves in different ways. This also includes making sure everyone speaks up about their rights and says what they want to their Care Coordinators.

We also discuss our newsletter and the In My Shoes group. For the newsletter, we write anything on anyone who has a disability. In the To My Shoes group, we get to do presentations in front of people who are caregivers who take care of people with disabilities.

Being that I am the President of the Self Advocacy group, I got the chance to introduce the head of YAI, George Contos, in front of 300 people. I did a great job. I like to inspire people to go out there and advocate themselves. I do that all the time and I inspire other people to do the same.



Janice (left) and other members of the Self Advocates Newsletter Committee

Former YAI Self Advocates President Greta Horn recently passed away. Longtime YAI staffer Tom Ott wrote, “Greta had a unique and wonderful way of letting you know what she thought, what she liked and was happy with, and what she didn’t like and wanted changed. As she said about herself, she became more and more confident in speaking up and in supporting her friends, apartment mates, and the broader group of YAI self advocates. I enjoyed my part in working with and supporting her, especially when she was the President of the YAI NYC SA Group. She kept me on my “support” toes!”

Below is a piece Greta had previously written for the Newsletter.

## THE STORY OF MY LIFE



### BY GRETA HORN

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When I was little, I had no friends.

The other kids would pick on me a lot, so my parents put me in a private school.

When I got older, I moved into a residence and I learned to speak up for myself. As the years went on, I graduated to a supported apartment in Queens, and then I moved to Brooklyn. My mother was scared for me to move because she thought something bad would happen to me.

But I kept thinking to myself.....

### ”YOU CAN DO IT!”

I decided to go to the Self Advocacy Meetings and then I became President. I speak up for myself and I help other people to speak up for their rights.