

Leaving a legacy - Acadia student Allie Berry on her 'Rec Buddies' program

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“I love it,” says Berry of community involvement

By John DeCoste '77

Fifth-year Acadia student-athlete Allie Berry ('18) loves being involved in the community. Since spending the summer between her first and second years with the Valley African Nova Scotia Development Association (VANSDA), Berry's summer employment has mostly all been community-driven.

In the summer of 2016, she worked at the Portal youth drop-in centre in Kentville. “They work with youth aged 16-24, but myself and two others were asked to work with youth aged 12-15.”

They focused on youth who “were considered 'at risk' to some extent. There's always the chance to fall into some kind of trouble. It's important to have a positive influence.”

Berry identified a lack of programs for youth of that particular age. “The town was doing some things, but not a whole lot and I found that there's a better response if an older influence is there.”

She developed a mentorship program called Rec Buddies, a partnership between the Portal and the Town of Kentville. Youth aged 12-15 “are matched up one-on-one (or two-to-one) with university students.”

The youth and their 'partners' “hang out once a week, on their own time, for one or two hours. It can be anywhere – the arena, swimming, sometimes even our varsity games, which is always a big hit.” 'Open gym' drop-in events Friday evenings at the KCA gym are open to the public as well.

The Rec Buddies program “started with four youth, all of whom I'd worked with that summer. The response has been great. Now we have 18 – two in Wolfville and the rest in Kentville.”

For now, the mentors are all Acadia students – some student-athletes, and even some of Berry's basketball Axewomen teammates. She added, “that's open to others in the community, too.”

She pointed out, “there's a need for more positive role models” for 'at-risk' youth aged 12-15 - “to accompany them to events and activities, show them some of the things that are available to them.” As a rule, “they feel a lot more comfortable not doing it alone.”

Rec Buddies is “participant-driven.” Volunteers and youth “get together and plan what they want to do. They let me know, and if they need help or support of any kind, that's where I come in.”

To Berry, it's “an awesome program. It's really taken off. I'm very pleased with it.” Moreover, “it's been a great learning experience for me. It's the first time I've developed a program and I've learned so much.” She is encouraged that she “saw a need, and did something about it.”

When Berry first arrived at Acadia in 2013, she was enrolled in a business program. She has since switched to Community Development, and has absolutely no regrets.

“It's helped me identify the need for things like this,” she said. “I've always loved sport and recreation. I wasn't originally looking at this type of field, but I've grown into it. My professors, especially Mary Sweatman, have been a great help to me, both with this initiative and overall.”

She acknowledged, “I couldn't have seen myself doing something like this when I first came here. I've learned from the opportunities I've had as an Acadia student and as a varsity athlete. I've learned to touch individual lives. It's really impacted my life, and made me want to give back.”

Berry will graduate from Acadia this spring. Her future with the program “depends on where I end up post-grad. If I'm not here, they'll hire someone else to keep it going” - and if advice is needed, she will be only a phone call or email away.

“It's a complicated process to begin with,” she said, “but it gets easier as you get into it. I'm excited about seeing (Rec Buddies) continue, either with me involved or someone else.”

Berry was involved with the Acadia S.M.I.L.E. program “for my first four years here. I wasn't able to do it this year because of Rec Buddies” and the Acadia Youth Connection, another mentorship program she is involved with and helped develop.

The Acadia Youth Connection, which is “different but similar” to Rec Buddies, was developed by Berry's core term group. Based in Windsor, it works with Grade 9-12 students at Avon View.

“It's just getting started,” she said. “I run the program. Sometimes I'm visible at the school myself, but mostly it's done by volunteers our group has chosen.”

Berry is unsure what she will end up choosing as a career, and whether or not she will move on to post-graduate studies. She is interested, though, in “continuing to do things like this in the future, time and place permitting.”

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