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Adaptive Skiing: A Culture of Its Own

Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Ski & Snowboard Program provides me challenges and a life-long impact. Every winter for the past five years I have been volunteering for this organization and every year I learn something new about myself and others. By reflecting upon my experiences, I am expanding more about the importance of volunteering, leadership and global citizenship.

People with disabilities are a culture and within the culture, many social norms exist and various ways of communication methods. Some students may use American Sign Language, some have an iPad device, some speak English, some use their eyes, some use sounds, and some are purely silent; regardless, within in this culture, it is about getting to know the individual and how to utilize their communication method.

Before volunteering, I would unknowingly act improperly to do when working with this culture. For example, I spoke louder when I could not understand someone, which does not help one understand. One of my largest judgements before volunteering for this organization was opening the door when I saw someone using a piece of equipment, like a wheelchair, but in reality some people want to be independent and do not want a special privilege or help.

Many of the people at Courage are told about all the barriers that they face, being handicapped, disabled, and/or having a low self-worth. Sport is a unique place in which people can challenged themselves, and others. Skiing can provide people with disabilities an escape

from their lives to come out and ski – a sport that most people would not believe is possible unless they have seen the equipment. It is the mentality that, “just because I am disabled, doesn’t mean that I can’t do anything. I can do anything you can do, just a bit different.” Adaptive skiing is a subculture within the culture of people with disabilities.

My student was unable to ski one day; therefore, we spent the day inside talking. He was very surprised when I told him that I have a couple friends that are around my age that are in wheelchairs. One of his initial questions were if they have the same condition as he does and etcetera. This made me think of how when I was on the vacation and I met a family with a child that was born with the same birth defect as myself. One is usually curious of how other cope with a similar situation. From having this discussion, I often wonder what we can do to educate people with disabilities. We see images like a handicap parking spot, or think of someone in a wheelchair as unintelligent. These images come from all over of and create xenophobia – fear or being reluctant of the unknown. This is one of the core reasons of why while skiing that when I see children or adults, curious as volunteers we explain how adaptive skiing works. The culture of disability is a curiosity; people do not know how to ask or address someone with the fear of being rude. By wanting to learn more, one can try to put themselves in someone else’s shoes.

During training, I was the lightest volunteer, so I was asked to be in the bi ski (an adaptive ski equipment that enables people to sit and ski). From sitting on the chair to assisting someone in the chair, I know how high the individual sits on the chairlift, to how each turn feels, to how gentle one needs to be while tethering. I immersed myself into a student’s position; I noticed how other skiers look at you how much you want someone to “get on your level” when speaking to you, and how much you want to be independent.

From this experiencing this culture first hand, independence, equality, and communication (whether verbal or nonverbal) is key. Asking questions is okay as long as done appropriately, I often wondered what type of school or education many of the students attend. By having a simple conversation with the individual it is possible, one thing I never expected is how much they would in turn ask about my school. Comparing and contrasting is within human nature, but how we perceive some things can make the world a difference. It is not a special classroom, my student is not a special skier, he is a skier and a person.

Expanding my cultural awareness has helped me grow as a leader and develop my leadership style. I lead through positivity with a goal in sight for all and tend to focus on building a strong relationship. A leader enables others to their full potential and beyond. This has significantly changed from when I was younger as I always thought that the leader was the smartest, best, and most authoritarian person in the room. Now, it is essential to enable others. This ties into personal and professional growth. Personally, I live a more relaxed lifestyle focusing more on the positives in life, rather than the negatives. Professionally, I have grown into someone that people take seriously (I still joke around, but all in the proper context).

Working with people with disabilities can be very challenging depending on the severity. Everyone is different and even people with the same disability may have completely different abilities. Similarly, to leadership, we all have different styles. I have grown so much leadership experience from volunteering. I have grown into being a lead instructor in which I make decisions of chair lift loading, can effectively lead a lesson independently, and all the tethering abilities within in my discipline. I must fully be comfortable with this. Although, sometimes I must be pushed out of my comfort zone.

I must be a leader for those who are significantly older and younger than myself. I must be a leader to the young male that I assist to the older, middle aged adult. I can often be placed in a challenging situation in which I lead people who are thirty years older than me and struggle gaining their respect. I have learned many techniques like focusing on how they can give me life advice or so to speak and talk about when they were age. The knowledge I have gained is priceless.

I am also a leader by example. Every ski run, I work to improve myself and the skier's technique. Often children look at our equipment and wonder what we are doing, how we are doing it? Kids often look at people with disabilities as being weird and outcasts, this is a chance to show a child that anyone can do anything – just differently.

Lastly, I am a leader to other volunteers as they are leaders to me. A few of my ski coaches are actually volunteers as well and they have taught me so much more than any of the trainers ever could. Their drive to fully enable their skier is powerful and the level of the technique is extremely high. We lead and work together, we as volunteers, caregivers, other skiers, or people must work together to accomplish a goal – to make everyone feel worth something and that they have a place. Our group philosophy is “We are guided by our vision that one day all people will live, work, learn and play in a community based on abilities, not disabilities” (Courage Kenny Ski & Snowboard Manual). We work individually, but come together to enable others and each other to our full potential.

Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Institute Ski & Snowboard Program has and will always hold a place in my heart. I am more knowledgeable about people with disabilities, myself as a leader, and have a growing desire to continuing to volunteer and change how other cultures view

people with disabilities. We all need a little courage in our lives to push ourselves into a situation that makes us feel uncomfortable and remain there until we are comfortable.

*Please note that the individual that I commonly ski with or other adaptive skiers I refer to them typically as students. In addition, I normally ski with a male child and the assistant instructor is his father. Due to privacy laws, I am unable to state names or other specific details.