



Fostering physical literacy and building capacity for recreation and sport in rural and remote communities

THE MACKENZIE RECREATION ASSOCIATION (MRA), based in Yellowknife, serves 20 communities throughout the Mackenzie Region of the Northwest Territories, most of which are small, rural or remote Indigenous communities.

The organization's mission is to enhance quality of life for the region's residents through physical literacy and active for life opportunities, while supporting communities to develop their own capacity to deliver sports and recreational programming.

"We work with each community to meet their unique needs," says Jessica VanOverbeek, Executive Director of MRA. "If they have no local recreational staff, we come in and run programs. If they have some staff, we offer a recreational-leader training camp to help them build skills in program design and delivery."



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Throughout the summer, MRA travels to communities to deliver outreach programs, including its Multi-Sport Camps, which introduce various sports in a fun, safe, and organized environment and help participants develop a sense of passion for sports and active living. The organization also organizes larger events that bring communities together, including the Mackenzie Youth Dene Games and the Mackenzie Summer Games.

A key goal is to instill “physical literacy” among the region’s children and youth – helping them to develop fundamental movement and sport skills and boost their motivation and confidence to participate in a range of physical activities and sport situations throughout their lives.

“By stressing physical literacy, we showcase the importance of recreation and how it supports people’s health and wellness and helps communities flourish,” Jessica says.

Typically, MRA hires one Summer Program Coordinator to bring programs to the communities. For the summer of 2021, MRA was able to hire a second coordinator with funding received from the CPRA Youth Employment Experience program, a program funded by the Government of Canada. The program is designed to create jobs that help young people gain experience skills in the parks and recreation.

That position was filled by Stephanie Elanik, age 23, who grew up in Yellowknife and whose education was aligned with MRA’s mission. Stephanie was entering her final term at Mount Royal University in Calgary, on her way to acquiring a Bachelor of Health & Physical Education degree, with a major in physical literacy.

“It was great to take what I have learned about physical literacy through my studies and bring that knowledge into the field and help inspire a younger generation,” Stephanie says.

Smaller communities often don’t have that many children available to organize physical activities, she says. “When you have only 10 or 12 kids around, they can quickly run out of games and ideas. It was great to see how excited residents were to experience something new.”

Among the experiences that stand out for Stephanie: introducing spike ball to youngsters in Lutselk’e, a community of 300. Spike ball, growing in popularity in many places, follows some of the rules of volleyball but uses different equipment. “We taught them the sport and donated the equipment, and it caught on; they’re continuing to play it there,” she says.

Another highlight for Stephanie was taking a lead role in organizing the 2021 Mackenzie Youth Dene Games, held in July in Behchokò. She enjoyed learning about traditional Dene games from the Aboriginal Sport Circle and was glad organizers were able to introduce a new game for 2021,



Stephanie assisting at a multi-sport camp in Fort Liard, NT. Having the opportunity to run and assist different camps provided a great opportunity for her to learn from other leaders and challenge herself.

Caribou Skipping. Requiring at least three players, Caribou Skipping uses a center-weighted rope. The goal is to jump over the rope as many times as possible, while it swings in a timed sequence that gets increasingly faster with each jump.

Throughout the summer, Stephanie and the other coordinator, Akesha Hardisty-Norwegian, travelled together to communities, with one taking the lead and the other providing valuable support during the sports camps and activities.

“Being able to have two program coordinators had a positive impact on the quality of recreation and sport programming we could deliver this year,” says Jessica.

Jessica also says the support CPRA provided in connection with the program funding was excellent. She highlights the quality of the mentorship package, which helped her guide skills development for Stephanie, as well as the support that came from CPRA member association, the NWT Recreation & Parks Association.

Stephanie says she greatly appreciates the leadership and facilitation skills she gained throughout the summer and her first-time exposure to remote communities in the region.

“I plan to do graduate studies and then return to the NWT to work as a physiotherapist, no doubt travelling to these communities again. The connections and knowledge I’ve gained have been so valuable.” 🍁