



## Youth recreation leaders step up for their communities during pandemic lockdowns

**T**HE MISSION OF THE RECREATION AND PARKS Association of Nunavut (RPAN) is to enhance the health and wellness of all Nunavummiut (Nunavut’s residents) by promoting physical activity, sport and recreation opportunities.

Serving several small and remote communities spread across a vast area of land, RPAN focuses on developing young recreation leaders in each town or hamlet and connecting them through joint training initiatives and communications – so they can learn from each other and share ideas for programming.



RECREATION AND PARKS  
ASSOCIATION OF NUNAVUT,  
NUNAVUT



Fort making day.



Igloo building, Winter 2022

In 2021–2022, RPAN’s local recreational resources were greatly bolstered with the support of the CPRA Youth Employment Experience program. The program is designed to provide young people with employment experience to develop their skills in sport and recreation, while allowing the organizations that employ them to build capacity.

Through this CPRA funding, RPAN was able to hire an additional eight young people to develop and deliver winter recreational programs in their communities.

It turned out that their experience was not “business as usual,” and they were called upon to apply their creative skills in unprecedented ways to overcome challenges.

In typical winters, RPAN supports delivery of in-person sport and recreation programs after school and on weekends, as well as week-long winter camps. In the winter of 2021 into 2022, COVID-19 resurged with the Omicron wave and prompted lockdowns in many of Nunavut’s communities.

“Because of the changes that happened in Nunavut, we had to change everything about how we delivered our youth programs,” says Dawn Currie, Executive Director of RPAN. “For a while we couldn’t hold indoors activities and team sports were cancelled. In a challenging time, these young leaders did an amazing job.”

Joanne Weedmark is the Recreation Coordinator for the Municipality of Kinngait and supervises and provides mentorship to a team of youth workers, including Youth Supervisors Kathy Harvey and Mary Ashevak. Joanne’s accomplishments in recreation in her community have brought her recognition as the 2022 CPRA Emerging Leader of the Year.

“With all the restrictions on indoor gatherings, we wanted to find ways to keep youth active even though they were staying at home,” says Joanne.

She and her team found ways to engage local children and to give them a stake in common activities, even though they were isolated from each other. They went door-to-door, dropping off colouring sheets and gift bags with tee shirts, hats, water bottles and more to youngsters interested in taking part in a Valentine’s Day colouring contest that ran from February 4 to 11, 2022. “The youth really loved it, and we had more than 200 submissions,” Joanne says.

Another popular activity in Kinngait was online scavenger hunts on weekends, she adds. “We provided information on a Facebook page for the hamlet, and a lot of parents were very supportive and helped their children with the activities. We gave the children a list of items they could find at home and encouraged them to take and submit photos of their discoveries.” The children kept clamouring for more, and by early March 2022, the team had held five of these weekend scavenger hunts.

With the support of RPAN, the Kinngait recreation team received additional funding to hold special events for elders when restrictions on indoor gatherings started to ease. These included a dinner and an elders pool tournament, complete with food hampers as prizes and music to entertain the attendees.

In Cambridge Bay, Recreation Coordinator Tracy Ohkina and Youth Supervisor River Harvey also rose to the challenge of the pandemic – finding ways to get children and their parents involved in activities to counteract the isolation. It seemed like a difficult task at first, Tracy says.

“Initially, it was tough trying to figure out what we could do to get them engaged, to give them something else to do besides staring at a screen wishing they could go outside!” she says. “We came up with the idea of preparing arts and crafts packages to deliver to people’s homes, and we ended up making 50 deliveries.

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Dawn Currie, Executive Director of RPAN

“We heard good feedback, and we knew it was having an impact as many of the kids shared pictures of their work with River, for posting online.”

River also organized online scavenger hunts for children in Cambridge Bay, Tracy says. Restrictions did ease at one point, so the community could also hold a winter camp featuring outdoor activities. At just 18 years old, River made strong contributions to the recreational programming, Tracy says, and the hope is to keep River on staff into next year.

Morgan Evaglok worked as a Youth Supervisor in her community of Kugluktuk and her experience in adapting programs to the pandemic environment was very valuable, she says. Her success is translating to a job as the community’s Youth Centre Coordinator.

“I’ve very excited to be continuing as a recreation leader with a full-time position. I’ve been able to learn how to be a leader and mentor to our youth and to work well with their parents,” she says. “We’ve had good results with at-home activities including scavenger hunts, and I’m hoping that when things open up, we’ll be able to take the kids snowboarding as a wrap-up to the season.”

In the community of Sanikiluaq, Recreation Coordinator Quentin Sala and Youth Supervisor Elijah Oqaituk were able to run a winter camp for 2022. Quentin and Elijah are the most experienced young leaders in the RPAN family, and each is a prior CPRA Emerging Leader of the Year award recipient (Quentin in 2020 and Elijah in 2021).

“Elijah and I believe it is really important to find creative ways to get children and youth involved with recreational programs, and during the pandemic, our creative juices had to really flow,” Quentin says. The winter camp that ran from February 8 to 12, 2022, featured a variety of outdoor games and engaged a lot of youngsters in the community, he adds.

The camp included building animal sculptures from snow, sledding and Arctic sports competitions. A group of elders taught igloo-building techniques to some of the children as well. The Sanikiluaq youth leaders organized an Olympics theme day on February 18, in honour of the Beijing Olympics being held at that time. Participants were organized into three competing teams, and games included frisbee curling, street hockey, ski races and luge with sleds.

### **Bringing together the recreational community across the territory**

Typically, RPAN brings all its youth recreation leaders together for in-person training before the winter and summer seasons. For the winter of 2022, that wasn’t possible, so the initial training was virtual. Dawn says every effort was made to connect the community leaders throughout the season so they could inspire each other and share program ideas.

“We have online meetings every two weeks with the leaders from all the communities, and everyone shares photos and program ideas through our Facebook group,” Dawn says.

During the winter months, RPAN provided the communities with money for arts and craft supplies, swag for contest prizes and to show appreciation to volunteers, and pedometers for communities who engaged families in walking challenges.

“The first three months of 2022 were the most challenging in terms of shutdowns since COVID-19 began two years earlier,” she says. “These young leaders did their best to provide good programs for the children in their communities. They have done an amazing job – going with the flow and never giving up. I am really proud of them.”

RPAN hoped that all would be on track to bring the youth leaders together in person for training in June to prepare for summer day camp in their communities and then again in October, to train for winter programs.

“I am also so appreciative of our partner organizations who help us support our communities,” Dawn adds. “Recreation is often the first item to be left off budgets when local finances are tight. Through grants like the one we received from CPRA, we have been able to provide youth leaders with the resources to really deliver. All our communities have benefited in great ways.” 🍁