



CPRA ACPL

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE

Success Story



Ryleigh Lake & Participants, Accessible Prom, Kentville Fire Hall

Bringing the values of accessibility and inclusion to life with an ‘Accessible Prom’ for all

KENTVILLE IS THE LARGEST TOWN IN

Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley, and also the location of most of the professional, financial, government and health services that meet the needs of the close to 30,000 people living across the Valley.

In this region, Kentville is the hub for sports and recreation. It features high-quality parks and trail systems, as well as facilities that include a baseball diamond, arena, racquet courts and a recently opened skate park.

“Our community is vocal and passionate about their parks and play spaces,” says Rachel Bedingfield, Director of Parks & Recreation for the Town of Kentville. “And as a department, we are focused on creating a more equitable and inclusive recreation and sport environment.”



TOWN OF KENTVILLE,
NOVA SCOTIA

Canada

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The drive to expand access to sports and recreational services is linked to a larger municipal initiative called the Accessibility Action Plan, which seeks to make “universal accessibility improvements” to welcome and include people of all abilities in all facets of community life.

Kentville Recreation’s mission to make its programs and services more accessible to all was given a boost by the creativity and commitment of 16-year-old Ryleigh Lake, hired as Junior Summer Recreation Intern for the 2022 season.

Boosting engagement after pandemic restrictions

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the department wanted to re-energize the community to return to recreational activities, particularly young people and people with disabilities. The Kentville recreation department hires a senior intern every summer to support the recreation managers; in 2022, it decided to also hire a junior intern.

“We wanted someone who could bring a more youthful perspective to programs and who would be encouraged to put their own spin on how they contributed,” says Rachel. “The spin that Ryleigh took was to focus on youth engagement and accessibility, especially for persons with disabilities, and that became the cornerstone of her internship.”

The recreation department received funding to hire Ryleigh from CPRA’s Youth Employment Experience program, which is designed to help young people gain work experience and acquire skills in parks and recreation and to give organizations more resources to serve their communities.

“Creating the position and hiring Ryleigh wouldn’t have been possible without the CPRA funding,” Rachel explains. “With Ryleigh on our team, we have been able to better serve our community including folks who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to access our services.”

Creating a new opportunity after seeing an injustice

Ryleigh got the idea for an innovative accessibility-focused event through her experience as a volunteer at a local special care home that includes residents who are children and youth – ranging in age from five to their mid-twenties.

She had been helping a high-schooler excitedly plan for attending her school’s annual prom.

“Your school prom is such a milestone event,” she says. “Getting all dressed up and hanging out with your friends creates memories that last a lifetime. It turned out that the girl couldn’t attend the dance because transportation couldn’t be arranged. I knew that wasn’t right.”

Ryleigh considered how she could give the girl a special memory to replace that lost opportunity – and then she started thinking bigger. Why not put on a semi-formal dance that would be open to people of all ages and all levels of ability? The idea of the “Accessible Prom” was born.

The Accessible Prom was billed as “an unforgettable prom experience to those who haven’t had the opportunity to participate

fully in organized prom events” – open to people of all ages from all regions “living with or experiencing disabilities (both visible and invisible).”

Kentville Recreation recognized that partnerships with community stakeholders could help maximize the impact of the event.

“We reached out to other special care homes and Autism Nova Scotia, and the business community really stepped up as well,” says Ryleigh. “Together, the municipality and businesses sponsored the prom, and we were able to get transportation for everyone who needed it.”

The Kentville Fire Hall provided space, and the prom was held in the evening of August 30, 2022. Attendees came from across the Valley and included children as young as five up to individuals in their sixties.

Ryleigh also reached out to Judi Kennedy of Centreville, who runs a charity called Your Fairy Godmother, which has for years provided new and gently used gowns to less fortunate students attending their school proms. Judi agreed to do the same for the Accessible Prom, and a hairdresser was on hand on prom day for attendees who wanted to get their hair styled.

Putting on this special inclusive event was definitely the highlight of her work term, Ryleigh says.

“Honestly, it was probably one of the best nights of my life. Seeing everyone so happy and enjoying themselves, and hearing all the positive comments from family members really warmed my heart.”

Ryleigh expresses gratitude for the mentorship she received from Rachel and from Senior Intern Grayson Titcomb, age 23, whose role including bringing more equity, diversity and inclusion to Kentville’s recreational programming.

Grayson himself had been supported by CPRA’s Youth Employment Experience in 2021 in the position of Equitable Program Intern for West Hants Regional Municipality in Nova Scotia and several partner organizations.

“Because of the partnerships, I had four mentors at West Hants, and that experience definitely helped me provide guidance to Ryleigh,” Grayson says. “In particular, I learned a lot about the importance of communication with your mentor.”

“It was amazing to watch Ryleigh plan and bring the prom to life, to see someone so young dedicated to accessibility and making Kentville a welcoming and inclusive community,” he says. “The prom was incredibly successful, and we all think it would be a beautiful event to continue to have in Kentville.”

Although she’s still in high school, Ryleigh has a clear plan for her future career. “I have found a passion for working with people with disabilities, and I plan to become a pediatrician specializing in children with physical and cognitive developmental delays. I know that having this recreational experience and knowledge will definitely help me as a pediatrician.” 🍁