



YOUTH EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE

Success Story



MRA summer program coordinators build physical literacy within NWT communities

ZOEY WALSH WAS LOOKING FOR A JOB change going into the summer of 2023. While the future elementary school teacher had experience running a summer camp, she was ready to embark on her next challenge.

That's why when a friend told her that the Mackenzie Recreation Association (MRA) was hiring a summer program coordinator, she wanted to apply.



MACKENZIE RECREATION
ASSOCIATION, NORTHWEST
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Abby teaching water smart skills to youth during a Summer Splash Camp in Whati



Zoey leading an energizer game with participants at the Mackenzie Youth Summer Games in Fort Simpson

“It just sounded like a really rewarding experience,” says Walsh, a third-year elementary education studies student at the University of Alberta. “I just really liked everything the MRA stood for. Physical literacy is something I also want to promote in the classroom when I become a teacher in the future.”

The MRA, which encompasses 20 Northwest Territories communities and supports and promotes recreation and sport within the MRA region communities, was able to hire two summer program coordinators thanks to funding from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association’s Youth Employment Experience (YEE) program. This program, funded by the Government of Canada, is designed to build skills and remove barriers to employment for youth. The program further builds capacity in the parks and recreation sector by providing mentorship support to each youth throughout their work experience.

As a Summer Program Coordinator, Walsh was responsible for promotional video editing and social media outreach, as well as planning recreational events like the organization’s Summer Games event.

“I learned a lot about how much actually goes into planning events,” she says, adding she also learned valuable communication skills. “I learned a lot about connecting with different recreational leaders in the community, and making connections in the community.”

Walsh also learned the importance of perseverance in the face of natural disasters. As a Hay River resident, she had to evacuate twice when wildfires spread across the territory over the course of the summer.

“The fires kind of jumbled things up, and we had to cancel the Dene Games. We had to make a lot of changes on short notice,” she says.

In addition to Walsh, Abby Shears was also hired as a Summer Program Coordinator and focused on water safety programs for communities.

“I applied for this job because I wanted to do something different. I wanted to work somewhere that would value my

effort, and appreciate my keen drive to upgrade my skills,” says Shears, a bachelor’s in physical education student.

In her role, Shears created, implemented, and ran Summer Splash Camps - as well as created budgets, and contacted communities to gauge interest in the camps.

Like Walsh, Shears learned important communication skills when connecting with small communities. She says she also learned how to adequately plan when delivering programs to different communities, and how to “operate on the fly.” Additionally, she even had the chance to earn her National Lifeguard instructor certification – making her one of only five trainers in the Northwest Territories, and enabling her to travel to any community with a pool and train people to be lifeguards.

Jessica VanOverbeek, Executive Director of the MRA, describes the experience as a “win-win” for both the community and the youth who were hired.

She says both employees grew tremendously over the summer.

“Since it was their first year with us, they were definitely a bit more timid and not as assertive when they started out,” she says. “By the end of the summer, these young women became really confident in themselves and that was really amazing to see.”

VanOverbeek adds that the jobs provided great support to the organization as it builds recreational opportunities within the communities it serves.

“In our communities, we’ve seen an increase in programming and services but also support,” she says. “With multiple staff, we’ve been able to do more one-on-one support to help communities with their individual needs. One person isn’t responsible for 20 communities – we’ve been able to break that down so someone has five or six communities under their role.”

VanOverbeek also says that the funding helped build the next generation of recreation leaders.

“I’m big on professional development, and sustainability and capacity building,” she says. “It’s important to invest in our youth and help them build up skills and confidence.” 🍁