Internship connects students to online organization

Tasia Walsh is no stranger to completing tasks remotely. Having finished most of her Recreation and Leisure Studies courses at Brock University online from her home in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, she has become adept at learning from a distance. This summer, she was able to put her skills to the test.

Walsh planned to travel to Ontario in May to complete her required fourth-year internship course in Therapeutic Recreation (1812.4102). The experiential learning opportunity would help her acquire the competencies she needed to become the first certified Recreation Therapist in the Northwest Territories. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and in-person learning meant Walsh and her classmates would need to complete their internships online.

Luckily, doors were opened for the course’s students to complete their internships with Ability Online, a virtual community comprised of children, youth and their parents/caregivers who share the challenges associated with disabilities and/or chronic illness.

Along with her classmates, Walsh embraced the virtual experiential learning opportunity, which allowed her to support a population who were more physically isolated than most this summer.

“The opportunity to see the influence and value of Ability Online and the impact it has on its clients was amazing,” she said. “After one event, we had everyone turn on their video camera to say hello. It was wonderful to see the smiles.”

Ability Online’s Executive Director Michelle McClure said the unexpected influx of summer interns was not only a benefit to the students, but to her organization as well, as it dealt with a 50 per cent increase in visits to their site.

“Students were able to complete their placements so they could graduate, and Ability Online benefited from some outstanding content development, mentorship, community outreach and incredible commitment from the heart,” said McClure. “The students went above and beyond the requirements, making personal connections with our members at a time when they needed it most. They gave up three evenings a week to run special virtual events and created some memorable activities and experiences that were so creative and yet responsive to the needs of our members.”

Walsh was grateful to take on tasks where she was able to flourish and feel like a member of the Ability Online team.

“I was doing community outreach and making comprehensive lists of people who would be interested in partnering with the organization,” she said. “I also created a lot of resources for parents or students who wanted to learn about mindfulness and well-being.”

While completing these tasks remotely from the beauty of several campsites in the Northwest Territories, Walsh said she enjoyed the unexpected twists and turns that came with the virtual internship while she simultaneously incorporated her family into her work.

“It was challenging but also beneficial,” she said. “Life is not always a neat little package. You need to think about what’s above and beyond. I was able to see videos for Ability Online with my daughter as a volunteer, and it was great to work together to help others.”

The course’s instructor, Associate Professor Colleen Whyte, said the online learning environment has given the students an advantage as they contemplate jobs in a world that is changing.

“Preparing them for what this new world of work and interaction looks like and giving them the skillset to do that is really important,” she said. “They have had to learn to rely less on body language and to rethink their lessons to achieve the same positive outcomes in a different manner.”

For Walsh, the experience offered a chance to develop new skills and reinforced her commitment to therapeutic recreation as a future career.

“It was so powerful to know that I was part of a positive in their lives,” she said. “That’s why I went back to school in the first place.”

To learn more about Therapeutic Recreation at Brock, visit the Recreation and Leisure Studies website.