

Out of the Clinic, Out of the Box

UNH interns gain occupational therapy skills on the slopes

Tuesday, February 17, 2015

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As part of her training to become a practicing occupational therapist, Risa LaPera '14,'15G talks to her client Dan, a retiree with vision loss due to glaucoma, through a radio headset. "You still got me? Want me to go faster? A little ice ahead, coming to a crest."

If LaPera's banter sounds decidedly un-clinical, it's because both she and her client are on skis, racing down the expert Upper Walking Boss trail at Loon Mountain. As she dispenses critical information through the headsets they both wear in their helmets, he follows her blaze orange vest.

"I was a little nervous, I'm not going to lie," says the Bedford, N.H., resident of shouldering responsibility for Dan's safety. "But you see how much fun he's having and all your fears just go away."



ATOP NORTH PEAK AT LOON MOUNTAIN READY TO SKI DOWN WALKING BOSS. (LEFT TO RIGHT- RISA LAPERA , DAN, BARBARA PRUDHOMME WHITE, LINDSAY ST. CYR, RINA DRAKE)

Le Pera and four classmates in UNH's [occupational therapy](#), or OT, program — Kailee Collins, Andrea Blodgett, Lindsay St. Cyr and Caitlin Hubbard — are the inaugural class of interns fulfilling one of their 12-week fieldwork requirements not in a hospital or school but at [New England Disabled Sports](#) in New Hampshire's White Mountains, an organization that provides winter sports opportunities to people with disabilities. It's the first fieldwork placement of its type for OT students anywhere, organizers say.

Occupational therapy helps people with any sort of disability learn or relearn skills to live a full life. "OTs think of everything from daily living to what's meaningful to you," says associate professor of OT Barbara Prudhomme White, who drew upon her own experience as a NEDS volunteer to orchestrate the fieldwork placement with Rina Drake '88, 16P. For many, that means self-care, contributing to family life or reengaging in the workforce. And for some people, living life to the fullest involves participating in a leisure activity like skiing.



LINDSAY ST. CYR GUIDES DAN DOWN UPPER WALKING BOSS.

“I’ve always thought that occupational therapy is inherent in what we do here,” adds longtime NEDS volunteer Drake, an OT in Nashua. “We are helping people return to their lives, using occupational performance and adaptive sport as a tool towards that end.” One of the largest adaptive snowsports programs in the region, NEDS teaches students with both cognitive and physical disabilities to ski or snowboard using a wide range of adaptive equipment, from sit-skis tethered from behind to hula-hoops that aid balance.

To launch the fieldwork placement, Drake and White, along with NEDS executive director Ralph Nelson and sports programming director Ryan Latham, found housing near Loon for the five interns and convinced two other volunteers who are licensed OTs in New Hampshire to join them in supervising the students. Susan Merrill, academic fieldwork coordinator for the OT department, helped shape the program to ensure it gave students both the hands-on and critical thinking skills they’d need as professional OTs.

For the interns, who teach almost every day, the unique setting brings power to their OT practice. “This is out of the box, not quite as clinical as I would get in a hospital or a school,” says Collins, of Cumberland, R.I., who like the other interns is in the first year of her master’s in UNH’s combined bachelor’s degree/master’s degree OT program. “But we’re still evaluating, treating, using so many different pieces of adaptive equipment. It’s drawing all my clinical experience and all my school experience into one.”



CAITLIN HUBBARD TETHERS WYATT IN HIS SIT-SKI DOWN SARSAPARILLA.

“I’ve been exposed to so many different diagnoses, from spinal cord injuries to kids on the autism spectrum. You wouldn’t get to see such a wide variety in other settings,” adds Blodgett, from Scarborough, Maine. The environment — cold but far from clinical — flexes the interns’ creativity, as well, as they problem-solve their students’ challenges on a chairlift or at the top of a ski slope.

The students’ enthusiasm is matched by the NEDS organization, where the interns are filling a critical need for mid-week instructors (most volunteers hold full-time jobs and teach skiing only on weekends) and taking on additional responsibilities like fundraising.

“They’re enthusiastic, they’re intelligent, they all have a really nice way with our students,” says Nelson, joking that he plans to file paperwork to adopt all five. “They’ve surpassed all of our expectations easily.”

White, who is also executive director of undergraduate academic programs at UNH, concurs. “They’re going from zero to 60 in every skill set we ask them to embrace,” she says. “It’s been a joy for all of us.”



THE INAUGURAL CLASS OF NEDS INTERNS. (LEFT TO RIGHT) RISA LAPERA, KAILEE COLLINS, ANDREA BLODGETT, LINDSAY ST. CYR AND CAITLIN HUBBARD. PHOTO COURTESY OF NEDS

Including the interns, they say. Long days in the cold followed by evenings of writing evaluations or supervisor meetings notwithstanding, each intern is grateful for the opportunity to advance her professional skills sharing an activity she loves. And the impact on their students, the interns say, goes far beyond learning to slide down a mountain, embracing the “meaningful occupation” White and Drake describe.

“To be able to work with a student whose family didn’t think they’d ever be able to ski with them again, that’s been awesome,” says Hubbard, of Lyman, N.H.

For Dan, the 70-something expert with vision loss, skiing with NEDS and the UNH interns has facilitated a return to a rich social life at Loon. “Skiing has been his life. He would be lost without skiing,” says St. Cyr, of Barrington, N.H. “It’s really exciting to watch him in action, to help him do what he loves.”

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