

## **Fall of 2019:**

### **Unexpected Friendship**

*Easton*

My giving story is about an unexpected friendship I made while volunteering with Bridge For Community Life. Last year, during my sophomore year of high school, I was looking for opportunities to serve in my community. As a multi-sport athlete, I was hoping to find a way to give back doing something I loved- playing sports. When I saw a Bridge flyer advertising an adapted floor hockey program it seemed like a perfect fit. After speaking with the program director, they agreed to let me volunteer as an assistant coach. This was my first experience working with people with special needs and I really enjoyed my time there, but I had no idea what was about to unfold.

While working with floor hockey team I met a friend, Ian, who shared my love for the game of hockey. Every week I looked forward to seeing him and he seemed equally happy to see me. A few weeks into the adapted floor hockey season I had an accident at my high school track meet and broke my collarbone which required surgery. For as long as I can remember I have been active in sports. Hockey has always been my favorite, but I've also explored football, track, and lacrosse. Therefore, I am used to competing pretty much year-round. My injury brought my sports training to a screeching halt. This meant I was going to have a lot of down time over the summer.

I decided to use that time as an opportunity to volunteer at Bridge each week as well as work one-on-one with my new friend, Ian. While working at Bridge I accompanied youth and adults with disabilities to the YMCA, read with them at the library, helped them tend to their community garden, played games, etc... I also got to spend one-on-one time with my new friend, Ian. With our passion for hockey it was always easy for us to find something to do! Together we practiced hockey in all forms – street hockey, knee hockey & ice hockey. I was grateful to have someone to practice with and Ian was happy to have a skating partner, too!

As a result of the hours and hours we spent practicing together, Ian has become an even better skater and is now the first player with Down Syndrome to play for Hudson Hockey! I was also able to arrange for Ian to be a flag bearer for one of the high school varsity hockey games, and he'll be the first skater with Down Syndrome to do this important tradition. I can't wait to watch my friend play and represent the school this season, I know he'll be fantastic.

I also got to introduce Ian to my friends, who welcomed him into our group. We spent our non-hockey time playing soccer and basketball. Many nights we'd all go for bowling and pizza afterwards! We even surprised Ian by showing up to cheer him on at one of his soccer games. Getting to bring Ian into my friend group was one of my favorite parts of the summer and makes me very grateful for the opportunity Bridge provided me by bringing me on as a regular volunteer.

After spending the summer working with Ian, I decided I wanted to try and help bring the type of friendship I have with Ian to more kids in our community. My goal was to create something where players of all abilities could have a chance to learn to skate and play ice hockey, and hopefully come to love it as much as I do! I'm happy to say my proposal to start an adapted program was approved by Hudson Hockey Association, and MN Special Hockey accepted my request to provide equipment for the players. The former varsity head coach of the high school boys' varsity team will be leading the adapted ice hockey sessions, and my hockey teammates and I will work one-on-one with the participants. I'm very grateful that others within our community see the opportunity for this integrated hockey program, and I can't wait to kick off the season!

All of this is because Bridge For Community Life provided a space not only for people with special needs, but also for me. Working within the special needs community has helped open my mind to people of all abilities. My broken collarbone seemed like a hard circumstance at the time, but my perspective changed after a summer of working at Bridge and developing a friendship with Ian. He, and all the clients at Bridge, have personally inspired me to work hard for things, never give up, and always look for the good even in hard times. Thank you for allowing me to share my giving story and to help raise awareness about the work Bridge is doing to promote inclusion in our community.