



News Release

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Service Learning Builds Communication Skills for Century College Orthotics Students

Dan Ross, 27, of Andover graduated from the University of Minnesota with a biology degree in 2004 and will graduate this spring from the Century College Orthotics and Prosthetics program.

After all that time in the classroom and the laboratory, he said the experience of meeting physically-challenged individuals at Courage Center in Golden Valley, and helping them participate in archery as part of his program's service learning requirement was very valuable.

"Learning how to interact and communicate with people who may have problems speaking is really important," said Ross, who will be an orthotic resident at a health care company in Rochester after graduation. "It takes experience and patience to understand what a person is trying to tell you."

Century's Orthotics and Prosthetics Program prepares students to care for patients with disabling conditions. Students are trained to become orthotists, orthotic technicians, prosthetists and prosthetic technicians. Century is one of the few institutions in the country to offer both the orthotic and prosthetic training.

Student John Griffin said helping partially paralyzed patients do yoga has been an insightful experience. “These people are trying to gain more of a connection to their body,” said Griffin. “Reinforcing this mind-body connection gets them more in tune with their health.”

In a recent Courage Center yoga class that Griffin attended, the instructor’s soothing voice instructed participants in the quiet studio to “soften the skin on your forehead, soften the corners of your eyes and the corners of your mouth. Soften the skin behind your ears and the base of your skull. Feel the skin between your shoulder blades. Feel the weight of your heels on the floor.”

Griffin helped participants adjust their positions with pillows, blankets, mats and straps. “These patients have such an appreciation for what they are doing,” said Griffin. “It is an adjustment to live with paralysis or the loss of a limb.”

Other students in Prof. Katie Voss’ orthotic practitioner class shared similar experiences recently as they talked with Lisa Gacek, a Courage Center volunteer coordinator.

“I gained an appreciation for how much work it is to do things like go to a movie, an art gallery or a department store,” said student Laura Nigon, who helped patients with spinal cord and brain injuries. “It all takes a lot of planning and time when you are physically challenged.”

“Simple gains are a really big deal,” said student Kelli Boeke, who helped with the skiing program at Trollhaugen. “Many of the people look forward to the Sunday ski outing all week long. They said they never dreamed they would be on a ski hill. Most never skied before their injury.”

The intensity of competitive wheelchair basketball was a revelation to student Coltan Johnson. “Their arms are so developed, it’s amazing,” said Johnson. “Those wheelchairs are whipping down the court and you can smell the burning rubber.”

Helping geriatric patients in a nursing home builds your listening skills, said student Nathan Green. “I worked with some really lonely guys and helped make their day better,” said Green. “Women do a little better in those settings than the men, who seem to withdraw more.”

“It’s important for you to keep the encouragement going,” Gacek told the students. “It’s also important for you to sense where people’s limits are.”



Photo: Century College student Dan Ross helps improve participants’ archery skills at Courage Center as part of the Orthotics and Prosthetics program’s service learning component.