

Dear Class of '78,

I would like to begin by saying thank you for your generosity, if it had not been for the support and funding of your class this summer would not have been possible.

Nothing ever goes as planned, and I knew going into my summer that there would be bumps along the road. However, I did not expect them to all start so soon. Upon arriving home I discovered that John La liberte (who was set to help me coach this summer) would be unable to. Thus I went about finding a new canoe coach and after many phone calls I located one, or so I thought. However, two days before the camp was set to begin I received a phone call from my new canoe coach who informed me that he had recently received a job in Alberta and was set to move. With no other option left to me I took it upon myself to coach canoeing as well as rowing. Luckily I had spent many summer vacations paddling so I felt confident in my abilities. While it might mean a bit more work and some changing of plans there was no use crying over spilt milk so off I went.

The camp ran over four days with kids from the reserve and the city staying in cabins at the reserve. This set up was ideal as it forced the white youth from the city and the native youth to not only row with each other but live with each other to. As one of my goals was to create friendships between the youth this was perfect. While the children did become close friends there was one slight problem with the cabins, there was no power as I had been promised. Luckily I had come prepared with flashlights so this was overcome.

The actual rowing and canoeing went surprisingly well. None of the kids had ever rowed before so they were rather excited by the chance to be on the water in the row boats. While they were sometimes frustrated by the boats after a couple of times on the water they soon began to get the hang of things and were quickly skimming along. What came as a great surprise to me was the love they developed for the ergs. Erg is the fancy name for an indoor rowing machine and I will gladly attest that they are very little fun, designed to let one train while off the water it incorporates all of the sweat and pain of rowing with none of the finesse or beauty from being out on the water. However, they serve as a useful tool to teach the basic body mechanics before one goes out on the lake and as such are rather useful. There is also the option of setting up races between ergs as they possess a small computer that simulates the distance one has travelled while rowing on them. Upon discovering this function the kids quickly set about racing each other to see who could go the fastest. Not only did this allow them to learn how to pull hard, it also tired them out which was great for me as the kids had lots of energy.

At the end of four days the kids were ready to go back home but not to leave rowing for good. Many approached me and asked if the camp would happen again. This was perfect for I had planned to continue coaching and youth who wanted to. Thus I talked with one of the children's grandmothers and we planned a carpool schedule that brought the children into the city 3 times a week to continue training.

The camp out at Sturgeon Lake was not the only program I was involved in though. While I was home I met a woman who worked at a local youth center who sought to rehabilitate drug addicted youth who had been in trouble with the law. The center was only three blocks away from the boat house so I told the woman that if she wanted the kids were welcome to come on over and I would teach them how to row. She quickly said yes and I soon found myself teaching another group of youth all about the beauty of rowing.

Working with this group of kids was particularly rewarding. The age of the children ranged between 13 to 18 and their stories were heartbreaking, addicted to drugs or alcohol from ages as young as 11 they had already lived harder lives than any one deserves to suffer. However, despite the pain and trauma they had seen they brought an energy and enthusiasm to the water that was remarkable. While sometimes they became frustrated or angry I allowed them to vent and once they were through we were able to talk about how they could improve their stroke and soon they were again smiling. I will never forget one day when Todd and Angela rowed together in a double. It was their first time in a partnered boat and they soon became frustrated as they kept hitting oars. After perhaps the 14 time this happened Todd decided he no longer wanted to row. While this option is not a good idea on a lake as the boat wont move itself back to the dock it is an even worse one on a river for the longer you wait the further the current carries you downstream. Todd's solution to this problem was to demand I tow the boat in (I was driving a motor boat while coaching). When I told Todd this would not happen he yelled at me. I patiently explained that while he might be angry that the only thing he was doing was setting more work up for himself and the sooner he rowed the quicker he could be off the water and thus the faster he could leave the boat that he so hated. Todd agreed with this logic and I have never seen someone so determined to get home as quickly as possible. Once the boat reached the dock I went to talk to Todd to make sure there were no hard feelings. Instead of a bitter 14 year old I instead found an apologetic one who said sorry for yelling at me and asked if we were still friends.

While this is only a brief summary of the events that happened over the summer I wanted to share some photos with you. The ones attached are of the youth from the rehabilitation program. As you will see from their smiles they are enjoying themselves immensely and for that I must thank you. If it had not been for the kindness and generosity your class had shown me this would never have happened. Thank you for your support and I wish you all the best.

Cheers,

Francis Grehan





