

STUDENT ROUNDS

Conquering the Downhill Battle

AS AN ADAPTIVE SKI INSTRUCTOR, DAN DENOBLE HELPS THOSE WITH INTELLECTUAL AND PHYSICAL DISABILITIES OVERCOME OBSTACLES AND FIND JOY ON THE SLOPES.

For more than 25 years, the Arise and Ski program in Syracuse has made skiing accessible for people with physical and developmental challenges, pairing experienced ski volunteers with those needing assistance.

Fourth-year medical student Dan DeNoble '24 has volunteered with the program for more than a decade, beginning when he was just a freshman in high school. "It's all about fostering as much independence as possible," he says, "supporting people when they may feel vulnerable and sharing the joy of skiing."

DeNoble grew up with an aunt who was developmentally disabled and nonverbal. His mother was her primary caregiver. "Because I lived with her from an early age, I was comfortable communicating with someone with a disability," he says.

When a pamphlet for the Arise and Ski program showed up in the mail, DeNoble's mother decided it would be a good volunteer activity for him. "I was nervous about it," he recalls.

Ski sessions are held on winter weekends, with volunteers typically paired with the same individual for a four-session season. In his first year, DeNoble was partnered with a skier with autism spectrum disorder. "He was actually a great skier, he just needed social support—a buddy to ski with him and support him with his interactions with other skiers," he says.

In his second year, DeNoble was paired with an older skier with Down Syndrome. Working in tandem with another volunteer, they employed bamboo poles to help the man with steering and balance.

"Watching his joy when we got him up to the big hill at Toggenburg for the first time, that's what really got me hooked," he says.

Through the years, DeNoble has worked with skiers of all ages and impairments, often helping young people who need assistance with the tow rope and chair lift and who may require tethers or the support of other adaptive equipment. "Each experience has been a new humbling opportunity to witness individuals overcome obstacles and discover independence that many people thought impossible," he says.

DeNoble has developed many relationships through the years, both with fellow volunteers who have become good friends, and with the skiers he's worked with.

One of those is a young man he taught to ski with a frame made out of PVC piping. His mother was so impressed by the way DeNoble was able to communicate with her son, she asked DeNoble if he'd be willing to work with him outside the program.

A student at LeMoyne College at the time, DeNoble became the young man's mentor through Advocates Inc., a local agency that works to advance inclusion. It's a relationship that continues today. "We do things as simple as make lunch and watch a movie to helping him overcome obstacles and fears out in the community," he says.

DeNoble has supported his mentee in activities ranging from the Front Row Players, an acting group for individuals with disabilities, to a summer music camp at Subcat Studios, and the Syracuse Challengers Baseball program. "I've built a really close bond with him and his family over the years," he says.



Medical student Dan DeNoble with his mentee through Advocates Inc., on the way to the young man's high school prom.



DeNoble with one of his young ski pupils through the Arise and Ski program.

Growing up, DeNoble had a passion for cars and thought he'd pursue a career in engineering with a goal of working in the automobile industry. But his ninth-grade biology course steered him in a new direction. "I absolutely loved human anatomy and physiology," he says. "The human body is this perfectly designed machine, so medicine feeds the same interest I have in mechanics while providing the ability to help people."

His participation in the Arise and Ski program has only reinforced that interest.

"I've gotten a lot of fulfillment from serving other people. Being able to help people accomplish their goals, particularly when their fears may be at their highest, is very rewarding," he says. "It's a great program that is always looking for new volunteers."

DeNoble plans to pursue surgery, another outgrowth of his interest in mechanics. "When I was 16, I bought an old BMW. I couldn't afford to take it to a dealer, so I learned to fix everything myself," he says. "I just love being able to

diagnose problems and use my hands to fix things. When I got in the operating room, I had the same feeling."

DeNoble's volunteer experiences have impacted his medical education in more tangible ways as well. "Medical education on treating individuals with disabilities is extremely limited," he says. "Because of my experiences with my aunt and the individuals at Arise, I have a comfort level that I realized many of my peers do not have," he says.

DeNoble designed a class session for first-year students to increase comfort and competency, which included a PowerPoint presentation and quiz on implicit bias and modules to teach tangible skills that aren't part of the regular curriculum. He also brought his mentee and another young man with an intellectual disability for students to talk with, and another individual who uses a wheelchair joined via Zoom. "We did a mock history and physical and the guests shared their experiences, good and bad, navigating the health care system," DeNoble says.

Feedback was so positive that the class session has continued, also incorporating guests with physical disabilities. "I'm hoping that this experience translates into medical practice and makes good care more accessible for this population of patients," says DeNoble, who has received four scholarships from the Upstate Medical Alumni Foundation, including the Student Citizen Award.

But his real joy comes through the achievements of the individuals he works with. "Witnessing their adaptability, resilience, and patience in achieving their goals—these are all attributes that not only will help me in medicine, but just in general to build good relationships with people and help them get where they want to go."