Esther Wellman

Outstanding Student Award Finalist 2020

One of the contributing factors that brought me to Monmouth University was the opportunity to play soccer at the highest level. As a four-year, NCAA scholarship athlete I was quickly engulfed in a program that sought excellence in every area. Coach Turner and Coach Flynn pushed us to be our best every single day both on the field, in the classroom and in the community. As a team we engaged in several community outreach events. One of the most impactful experiences was meeting Emily, our Team Impact player who was in remission from brain cancer just a few years prior. I was inspired by her relentless positivity and inevitably she became family. My soccer experience has helped to build character traits of determination, resilience, leadership, and compassion. We were successful on the field but that would not have been possible without building relationships off the field. Coach continually harped on the idea of “a leader in every locker”. As a freshman I did not understand the importance of this or how it would apply to my time at MU. Nonetheless, over the course of four years athletics had empowered me to be a leader in all areas at MU.

I received one of eight prestigious Summer Scholars scholarships from the university and collaborated with Provost Rekha Datta to analyze sustainable development efforts and the engagement of local youth in accordance with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Asbury Park. I conducted in-depth interviews with Councilwoman Eileen Chapman and Director of Recreation Leesha Floyd and found rapid gentrification and city efforts to attain fiscal sustainability impacted local youth public programs over the last decade. I volunteered with Women's and Girls Education (WAGE) International, to mentor and educate 60 children participating in the local public school’s summer program. However, the most important thing I provided these kids was my time and attention and to show them that I was there to listen and care. When the summer program ended, the teachers and students we had worked with were willing and excited to try to work out an afterschool program to further build the relationship between Monmouth and Asbury Park grade school students. Finally, I was selected to present my research at the International Studies Associations (ISA) Northeast Conference in November 2019.

On January 16th, 2020 I returned from Mumbai, India after two weeks on a US State Department grant training at risk youth in the skills of policy debate. Our project started three “youth debate teams.” Taking a leadership role as part of a nine-member team of experienced debaters, we trained teachers and over 75 students in debate workshops at the school Chatrapati Shikshan Mandal and two NGOs, SNEHA and Shakti Girls Education Trust. A study previously conducted in Asbury Park school systems, found a positive relationship between students who are involved in academic competitions and success in school. This trip was not just about showing up, teaching the kids something new and leaving, but about bonding and forming friendships and memories. One of the students, Sakshi, and I hit it off from the very beginning, and by the end of our time at her school we exchanged contact information to keep in touch. She and I continue to message back and forth and I constantly encourage her to work hard in school for high marks with the hope that she could come to Monmouth to continue her education in the future. She is a very bright student, and not only would she excel at MU, but the opportunity would change her life.

With graduation around the corner, during my time at Monmouth, I have learned that community service is about building relationships and memories that outlast a few hours or an event. Through these experiences I have come to understand that everyone has the ability to be a leader in their own way. A few of the ways I have shown leadership was by consistently leading by example, caring about others, and working for the betterment of those around me. As I have engaged with students of all ages and they have noticed my leadership, regardless of title, and my hope is they can continue to develop into leaders at MU in all areas.