

When Rick told me I was awarded Youth of the Year my immediate reaction was, “Does that mean I have to give a speech?” What could I possibly say to entertain the parents of North Andover? Well, I can assure all of you that I have rewritten this speech at least ten times by now so I promise it is worth staying awake. I would like to start by clearing up what I believe to be a common misconception in town. Many in North Andover, when they hear the name Rick Gorman think of a strict, scary man who runs the North Andover Youth Center. I laugh to myself when I hear this stereotype because it is simply not true. Sure, Rick loves to give everyone a hard time, but deep down he is more than just a boss. Rick manages to establish a deep connection with each of his staff members, all while running a tight ship over at the youth center.

I could go on and on about how the youth center has impacted me but tonight I would rather tell you about how the youth center has allowed me to impact others. Up until last year, my routine consisted of attending school, going to dance, and doing homework. This is how my freshman and sophomore years went by; I worked diligently and school was my primary focus. Although I was happy, I felt as though something was missing inside of me. I got my answer the summer after my sophomore year when I was hired as a summer fun counselor.

At Summer Fun I challenged myself to look for the children who sat alone at snack time or who were extremely shy, just like myself at that age. Most of the time, all these kids want is for someone to pay attention to them. Making a difference in their lives is difficult but extremely rewarding. This past summer I spent some time sitting with a particular little boy. He loved to tell me everyday how excited he was to go to his grandma’s pool after Summer Fun. Towards the end of the summer, at the end of snack time one day, he turned to me and said, “Alexis, thank you for sitting with me everyday. I get embarrassed sitting alone and it is nice to have someone to talk to once in awhile. I’ll miss you a whole lot when I move up to Drummond next year.” Let me tell you, this melted my heart. It took everything in my power to not cry right there in front of him.

Another quick story that shows the meaningful connections I made at Summer Fun involves a little girl who not only sat alone, but, cried when she got out of her parents’ car, did not interact with any other kids, and refused to talk to anyone. As a counselor, this presented me with a challenge I could not ignore. I sat with this girl for one snack everyday but she refused to talk to me. So we either sat in awkward silence or I would talk to myself. She followed me around every single day, still refusing to talk to me, however, I felt as though I was making some sort of progress. This continued for the first week of Summer Fun, and by the end of the second week she began to contribute to my monologue during snack time with a few nods and shakes of the head. By week three, I finally heard her voice. Week four, I strolled over to our special snack time spot and did not see this girl sitting there waiting for me. I scanned the playground and stood in shock as I saw her sitting with another shy little girl chatting about their favorite stations. Underneath my red staff shirt, my heart was glowing with delight. On the very last day of Summer Fun, through my own teary eyes, I watched this girl eagerly wave goodbye to me as tears streamed down her little cheeks. It was then that I knew I had helped this girl reach a new milestone in her life. I was also rewarded as her milestone became mine. I discovered that a major piece of my heart is devoted to helping others. Summer Fun helped me to fulfill this inherent need of mine. Helping those around me has been in my

nature ever since I started tying my twin brother's shoelaces, along with my own, before preschool every morning.

After having the time of my life at Summer Fun, I decided to become more involved with the youth center. I applied to work in the building during the school year and I also joined two volunteer groups, Youth Council and Senior Youth Council. Recently, I went with Senior Youth Council to Cor Unum, a meal center in Lawrence. It was truly eye-opening to see these people who could not afford to put a meal on the table for their family. A group of teenage boys walked in and I could immediately tell they felt awkward being served by kids their own age. They actually made a few comments to some of us about how we must hate volunteering there because we were from a rich town. This could not have been further from the truth. Volunteering there made me realize how fortunate I am.

My job during the school year at the youth center involves interacting with middle schoolers. Think of yourselves in middle school, not all pleasant memories right? We are fortunate to have the North Andover Youth Center which eases the tougher days for many kids. These kids treasure the part time staff and take full advantage of our advice on how to survive middle school because we were in their shoes not long ago.

These experiences have brought everything full circle for me. Thanks to the youth center, I realized that lending my help to others is my destiny. The youth center not only strives to build relationships in the community but also within the building. The real reason I praise the youth center is for the relationships built amongst the staff, relationships that will last a lifetime. Now, I would like to take the time to thank Rick, Demi, Diana, Justin, and Mike for their work in fostering a community in which the youth of North Andover has the opportunity to establish worthwhile relationships. Rick ignites a fire under each one of his staff members to push us past our comfort zones. I have been thrown into uncomfortable situations that have forced me to climb out of my shell. Whether it be something serious like giving a speech in front of you all gathered here tonight, or something silly like performing a High School Musical dance in front of the kids at Summer Fun, working for Rick has strengthened and developed some life skills that will help me to succeed in the future. Demi and I have a special bond, one formed over our work ethic and empathetic nature. From college advice, to career advice, to life advice, to friend drama, Demi always knows exactly what to say. Diana, Justin, and Mike, thank you each for bringing your own unique touch to the youth center while maintaining the high standards set before you.

I would like to finish by thanking a few more people here tonight that have helped shape me into who I am today. Mom and Dad, thank you for raising me the way you did. Our relationship is special, something I will treasure for the rest of my life and one that I will miss dearly next year as I venture off to college. Next, to my brothers, Ryan and Thomas, I crown you both Kings of knowing exactly how to make me laugh. Thank you for never failing to put a smile on my face after a bad day. Last, I want to be clear that I am not accepting this award alone. Accepting the Youth of the Year award along with me, are all of the individuals whose lives I have been able to touch who in return have enriched my life. Thank you again Rick for honoring me tonight as Youth of the Year and thank you all for listening to what the youth center means to me.