



STRICTLY BUSINESS

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FACES OF OUR FUTURE



Giving Back

By Justine Parkinson



Ashley Cousens

At 29 Ashley Cousens has accomplished more professionally than some people do throughout their career. Originally from the North Country's East Coast cousin—New Hampshire—she moved west to study at SUNY Plattsburgh. In 2006 Ashley graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and went to work at the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) as an administrative assistant.

Ashleys' success has been carved out of opportunities she created. At the WIB she worked on the Solid Foundations Project, a program for at risk youth where she began to find her stride. She advanced from administrative assistant to Director of Special Projects. When Clinton Community College was looking for a Coordinator for the Center of Community and Workforce Development, the position seemed made for Ashley.



It's not just her relentless dedication to her career that's impressive, but the passion for growth that Ashley has about all aspects of her life. Growing up her parents encouraged her to give back to the community by volunteering. Both parents worked to provide a comfortable life for the family and she knew that what they enjoyed was a result of hard work and good fortune. She never took anything for granted. Ashley remembers volunteering

in places as far away as Nicaragua. During her *SB* interview, she was grinning from ear to ear as she reminisced about it all. And it is the value of giving back to one's community that Ashley puts into practice in her life every day.

Like most North Country residents Ashley enjoys the quality of life unique to the area. Some things she enjoys are hiking the Adirondacks and kayaking Lake Champlain. Her passion for being active motivated her to earn a Zumba instructor certification. But simply coaching Zumba in addition to her blossoming career would be too tame; Ashley wanted to do more. Earlier this month she and her coaching partner, Autumn Love, hosted the second annual Tiki Torch Zumbathon at the Plattsburgh City Beach to benefit the Max Moore Tree House Project. It was the third recreation-based fundraiser she has coordinated.

The Treehouse is a project founded by Dr. Heidi Moore, a local pediatrician and Max's mom. Max was born with some challenges that cause him to be wheelchair bound and Heidi needed to dream a little differently for her son. One of the special times that she cherished as a child, and wanted to share with her son, was sitting perched in a tree overlooking the world beneath the leaves. Given Max's wheelchair, she needed to find a way to make that happen for him. Heidi thought of a tree house that would be fully wheelchair accessible and from that idea came the Max Moore Tree House Project.

Sadly, two years later Max passed away. Those committed to the effort were heartbroken and work on the project slowed. They were down, but not out. Heidi's story had resonated within the community, especially

Plattsburgh Recreation Department's Superintendent Steve Peters. When Ashley and Autumn were looking for a charity to benefit from their first Zumbathon, Peter's pointed them to the Tree House Project.

Ashley found the idea so inspirational that she began networking within the community to take it from a mother's dream to a community reality. She has worked with the Sunrise Rotary Club to recruit volunteers and with the United Way to act as a financial conduit which makes for ease of fundraising.

Ashley's energy and enthusiasm distinguish her, but she is quick to give credit to those who work with her. According to her Autumn is the "imagination power" of the team while her strengths lie in coordinating logistics.

Fund raising for the Tree House Project is progressing well and the hope is that the group can move into the design phase before the end of this year. "Once we have design plans we can go about the business of soliciting tradesmen and suppliers and then things will really start happening," she explained. "I'd love to see this built by next year." The plan is to construct the tree house along the Saranac River Trail just off Pine Street.

Any single one of Ashley Cousens' achievements would be impressive on its own. The fact that she has accomplished so much in such a short time is awesome. When someone prioritizes their community and giving back, that's inspiring. When someone achieves professional success and continues to set the bar higher for themselves, that's impressive. Thankfully Ashley shows no sign of slowing down. **sb**