

Gold seal of approval from "Duke of Ed" and Princess



(Photo by Grant Martin Photography)

By Brock Weir

As she approached the podium at Ottawa's Chateau Laurier Hotel last week, the one thing weighing on Aurora student Shannon Cumiskey's mind was the fear of forgetting what to say or, worse, tripping up the stairs in front of a packed house.

For someone who travelled to Kenya to help build a school and undertook two four-day dogsledding excursions in Northern Ontario, those might seem like relatively pedestrian fears, but last Monday, November 10, was no ordinary day for the Queen's University student.

Shannon, accompanied by her family, was in Ottawa to receive the Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award from The Princess Royal.

Before she and her fellow award recipients were brought into the hotel's ballroom with bagpipers, organizers were given a brief pep talk on what to expect on meeting and receiving their respective awards from the daughter of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. It was, however, a lot to take in.

"I was one of the last people to go up on stage and everyone had curtsied so gracefully and had lovely little chats with Princess Anne," Shannon recalls. "We were told before how to curtsy and how to bow, how to address her and all those guidelines, and I was so nervous that I would mess up, forget what I was going to say, or trip up the stairs in front of everybody."

For Shannon, what was about to happen was the culmination of a nearly seven year journey on the road to gold. She first started down this path as a high school student at Newmarket's Pickering College, encouraged by the enthusiasm for the program shared by her teachers.

The Duke of Edinburgh Awards were founded by Prince Philip in the 1950s to get youth out to experience the world around them, get far beyond their comfort zones and give back to the community. Last year, it celebrated its 50th anniversary in Canada.

To complete her Community Service component of the award, Shannon began volunteering as a timekeeper for the Ontario Minor Hockey Association and Newmarket Hockey League, before graduating to overseas work in Kenya and through Oxfam.

While the program encourages you to hone your skills in selected areas, Shannon focused on driving and cooking. It also

encourages one's adventurous side. Hence, the dogsledding treks up north. Physical recreation is also an integral component where Shannon built upon her swimming and skills in cross country running.

"I really got into it, and after a while it didn't really seem like I was working hard towards a specific goal," she says. "It became something I really wanted to do."

Each year, Pickering College takes a select group of students overseas to work on particular projects. Shannon's brother blazed the trail to Kenya the year before she had the opportunity to go. She describes her brother as a "quiet guy in high school" but came back a changed kid, who couldn't stop talking about the experience.

"He came back and just felt like a rock star from the whole thing and I wanted to experience that as well," she says. "I thought it was really cool that on my trip we were going back to the same village my brother worked at knowing he started one of the schools there and we got to finish it."

The dogsledding trips were also facilitated by Pickering College, but Shannon says she was initially hesitant to take the plunge. She enjoyed it so much that when a second opportunity to go presented itself she snapped it up.

"It was such an amazing experience," she says. "If you had asked me before if I ever wanted to go dogsledding, I don't think I would have said yes. I am not normally someone who really likes the cold, and it seemed like a pretty big step outside my comfort zone, but after going once it was one of the most fun things I have ever done."

One disappointment for her was she ran out of time to finish her gold Duke of Edinburgh Award while she was in high school, but she worked hard in her early days at university to finish it independently of her school. When she arrived in Ottawa to receive the accolade for all her hard work, a path shared with so many others in the room, it was a moving experience.

And to receive the award in person from Princess Anne just added to the lustre.

"When I got up there she was such a nice lady and she made me feel so calm," says Shannon. "She is very relatable from what I experienced and she was interested I finished the award as an independent participant. I thought she was going to be a bit stiff and not very chatty, but there were about 90 of us and she took time with each person and chatted about what they were doing with their lives. It would have been so easy for her just to shake our hand and send us off."

Shannon is currently studying concurrent education at Queen's University, presently in the high school education stream. Although she has her eye on teaching, she says she is not sure whether this will be her ultimate goal. Law and art therapy are a particular draw for her and avenues she intends to explore later in her education.

"The [Duke of Edinburgh Awards] instilled a lot of confidence in me," she says. "It helped me step out of my comfort zone. I learned I can set a really high goal for myself and I know with hard work I will achieve it."