

San Francisco Chronicle

JEFFERSON AWARD

Presented to Brittany Murlas

A love of hoops drives passion to help others

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As a scholar and athlete, Brittany Murlas is passionate about two things: basketball and community service.

Murlas began playing basketball at age 7 and joined the basketball team at Berkeley High School at 15, when she and her family moved from Chicago to the Bay Area. Now 21, Murlas is a senior at UC Berkeley majoring in economics and interdisciplinary studies.

She still loves basketball, but instead of competing on a team she's dedicated the past two years to coaching. As an assistant wheelchair basketball coach with the Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program, she empowers children with disabilities.

The Berkeley nonprofit works to improve the health, independence and social integration of people with physical disabilities through sports, fitness and recreation programs.

"In my sophomore year, I wanted to start volunteering in the community, and (I want to) feel that connection again and fill that gap between myself as a Berkeley student and as a Berkeley resident," Murlas said.

She went to work at Team-Up for Youth's Coaching Corps, a nonprofit that works to expand and improve sports programs in low-income neighborhoods.

Through Coaching Corps, Murlas helped recruit, train and place college students as youth coaches. It was there that she learned about the Bay Area Outreach and recreation program, where she coaches wheelchair basketball on the prep level (ages 6-13) and the varsity and junior varsity level (14 to 18).

The Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program voted Murlas coach of the year in 2006. Murlas said her goal is to be a friend and peer to the children in the program

and to make sure that they are having fun. Another goal is to use basketball as a way to teach life lessons.

"I walked into the gym on their opening day and fell in love with (the job) in the first five minutes and I've been addicted ever since," Murlas said. "I don't see myself leaving anytime soon.

"It's very rare that kids who are in wheelchairs get a chance to be in an environment where it's competitive and to learn the lessons that competitive sports teach - like teamwork and sportsmanship or what it means to fall down and pick yourself back up," Murlas said. "It's a chance for the kids to be in a place where a disability doesn't count anymore."

Murlas said she is amazed by how her players are able to move beyond their disabilities. Some children are in wheelchairs because of an illness - cancer, cerebral palsy, spina bifida - while others have had accidents or been victims of violence. One boy was shot in the spinal cord and became paralyzed from the waist down.

"Everybody really does have different ability levels. Not everybody can move their hands the same way or their waist the same way," she said. "I've grown so much in the process of being a coach, and those kids have made me a better person and have given me more than I can ever give back to them. I hope to give as much as I've received from the program."

Recently, Murlas won a Donald A. Strauss Scholarship, which provides \$10,000 to college juniors who plan to pursue a self-initiated public service project during their senior year. With the scholarship fund, Murlas began the Residential Service Community (a division of Cal Corps) program on campus.

The goal of the program is to connect UC Berkeley residence halls to the community, she said.

"This semester I'm teaching 12 freshmen, all living in the same dormitory, about Berkeley community issues such as homelessness, environmental justice and educational inequalities. The course topics correspond to service projects that we've organized: a barbecue for a youth homeless shelter, a College Shadow Day for Berkeley High students, a community garden project, and a food drive in the residence halls. Next year, this program will be institutionalized as a themed floor."

Murlas said she is considering the field of teaching after graduation. Inspired by a five-month trip to Ghana last fall, she would also like to develop curriculum for schools abroad.

"I would love to work with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) one day, or I'd love to come back to UC Berkeley and become the chancellor of undergraduate education," Murlas said.

For information on the Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program visit www.borp.org.

Each week, The Chronicle features a Bay Area resident who has won a Jefferson Award for making a difference in his or her community. The awards are administered by the American Institute for Public Service, a national foundation that honors community service. Bay Area residents profiled in The Chronicle are also featured on CBS 5-TV and KCBS-AM, which are Jefferson Award media partners, along with The Chronicle.

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