

Allam thankful for years in Trail Co-founder of Cometeers heads east to teach

By James R. Johnson—November 28, 2015

MAYVILLE, ND - Whether it was fate or luck, Jacob Allam believes, “It’s truly a blessing that I ended up at Mayville State University.”

The school and the community feel just as thankful.

After three-and-a-half years with a dual major in elementary education and social science, Allam, who grew up on the West Coast in Renton, Wash., south of Seattle, will head east to a student teaching job in Courtland, Va.

Having traveled through 35 states, Allam admits, “I’m one of those people who would get in my car on a day I had nothing to do and drive and get lost just so I could find something I’d never seen before.”

That’s fitting considering that his first visit to Mayville was a 23-hour road trip from western Washington that he and a friend drove in one day.

“This was actually a culture shock coming here,” Allam says amid the laughter of a few friends at a service of



Photo by James R. Johnson | TRIBUNE

The volunteer work of Jacob Allam and Brady Eichelberger, cofounders of the Cometeers, included moving benches in Rainbow Garden in advance of 2013’s “Art in the Park.”

SERVICE cont'd.

a farewell dinner in mid-November. "In my mind, I was kind of laughing because I thought nobody is going to North Dakota."

A tour of the campus, a good night's sleep, and another walk around the campus filled his thoughts on the drive back. He was looking for a change of pace in his life. After working in sales, he'd made the decision to become a teacher.

"I hadn't spent much time in the Midwest, and I thought Mayville State sounds like a really good school," Allam said.

The Cometeers

He began his studies in August 2012, helping out annually with the university's STEM carnival for kids. He had done some volunteer work in Washington, but never to the level of commitment he was about to make after meeting fellow student Brady Eichelberger.

Allam recounted, "Brady was part of the Larson Leadership Program. While we were out to dinner, he tells me this idea of wanting to start a volunteer organization, and I said, 'This is an awesome idea.'"

After about 30 minutes, the duo had finished dinner and had a good basis to start the organization. After talks with interested students on campus as well as with people in the community seeking volunteer help, they put together a constitution for the group and submitted it to the Mayville State Student Senate.

That group is the Cometeers, whose members have turned in thousands of hours of community service since the summer of 2013 with campus clean-ups and events, benefits, highway clean-up, and recording audio books for the visually impaired.

"That's offered me many opportunities and I've gained so many intrinsic rewards from it," Allam says.

Eichelberger said, "I definitely could not have done a lot the work without him. I wasn't asking him to help me with it, but right away he hopped on. He really connected the community well."

A few examples of Cometeer service include Allam and Eichelberger helping Jo Ewen move things around in Rainbow Garden in advance of the two-day "Art in the Garden" festival in June 2013.

"He's been such a bright light here, the way he made his place in the community," Ewen said of Allam. "I think he'll be a wonderful teacher."

In the five months leading up to Thanksgiving that year, the Cometeers and MSU Student Education Association helped "Fill the Dome," collecting food donations for the Great Plains Food Bank. The goods were assembled in a Mayville State 'M' on the floor of the Fargodome. Students from more than 50 schools in North Dakota and Minnesota filled four semitrailers with about 183,000 pounds of food.

A few months later, Allam, Eichelberger and three other Cometeers spent their eight-day spring break on the road with "Students Today, Leaders Forever," a volunteer organization that sends out buses of students every spring break to do service projects. The Cometeers helped:

- Clean a middle school and pick up litter at two parks in Iowa;
- Clean out and organize a basement at a St. Louis animal shelter;
- Organize floors and shelving at a Habitat For Humanity store in Tennessee;
- Restore a neighborhood in tornado-ravaged Tuscaloosa, Ala.;
- Clear the woods of Memorial Park in Houston, Texas.

All told, 960 hours of volunteer community service.

SERVICE cont'd.

Mayville State President Gary Hagen said Jacob and Brady “helped to bring a renewed emphasis on personal service to Mayville State through the Cometeers. With Brady and Jacob as the leaders, the Cometeers have gone above and beyond to help people not only on the campus, but also in the community, and beyond. Their work with the Common Time program at May-Port CG Middle School has made a difference for many young people.”

Allam said, “I will always volunteer for the rest of my life.”

Being a man of many hats during his education, Allam also did some research work for Dist. 20 Rep. Gail Mooney before the recent session of the North Dakota Legislature. He’s also been putting in weekends serving at Tommy’s.

Sweating in the winter

Allam grew up in a family who loved camping. He loves the outdoors but confessed to being a little worried about North Dakota winters.

“The second one, I think they said 85% of the winter was below zero,” he recalled, “but one day, I’d bundled up. I was ready for negative 20 and I get outside and I started sweating! I had to shed a layer, then I looked at my phone and it said it was 16 degrees (above zero). My friends did not believe that I had to shed a layer at 16 degrees. But summers are beautiful here. Summers are amazing.”

Allam’s great-grandparents came from Lebanon, so cuisine has not been too much of a culture shock to him, though he had trouble getting the word “lefse” out. “I have not tried lutefisk,” he said, “but I do want to try it before I leave.”

Another brave soul.

He’s in Lutheran country, so he’s learned to love all blends of hot dish.

“I think my favorite is Reuben hot dish. I love sauerkraut,” he says with a smile. “Tater-tot hot dish is comforting.”

Where he’s moving to is a palate of scenery and culture.

“It’s an hour south of Richmond, a few hours from Washington, D.C., near the Blue Ridge Mountains and waterfalls, just beautiful country,” Allam said.

Not to mention he’ll be an hour from the beach and the Atlantic Ocean, and almost every Virginia town has a community arts center.

He also loves sports, though he’d rather forget the ending to last season’s Super Bowl, when his beloved Seattle Seahawks ended up a yard short (and an ill-advised pass) of winning.

“It’s the greatest Super Bowl ever played, but I can’t bear to watch the replay.”

Lessons learned

“One thing Mayville State does really well is get you into classrooms,” Allam said. “I had teaching and observation experiences at May-Port CG, Peter Boe Jr. Elementary, Hatton Eielson, Pelican Rapids, and Tate Top in Devils Lake, to name a few.”

Will Melbye, a Mayville State graduate, is principal at Riverdale Elementary School in Courtland, where Jacob will be teaching. Allam said he’ll work on his master’s degree and possibly seek a principalship.

“I did imagine myself teaching here, possibly coaching. There were different businesses that I thought about opening,” Allam said.

The hard part is saying goodbye.

SERVICE cont'd.

"I'm so happy that I made it here," Allam says. "There's so many people who have touched my life."

Eichelberger said, "He and several others have been mentors in my life. These last few years have been a lot of fun. I know he's going to do good things in Virginia and wherever else he goes."

Hagen added, "Jacob has provided valuable leadership and mentoring experiences for the other students on campus. We're very proud of him and we wish him nothing but the best in the future."

"The culture here is like no other," Allam says. "Where I come from, it's a mind-your-own-business-type attitude. You wouldn't know your next-door neighbors, but out here you know everybody and everybody knows who you are. Everyone's always willing to lend a helping hand. Whatever resource they have, they're willing to offer you. It's something that I'll definitely take with me no matter where I go. I'll always love Mayville."