**‘MY MOST FULFILLING VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE’: THE IMPACT ON APEX ALUMNI’**

**Anna M. Beneteau1, Chad A. Sutherland1, Sara Scharoun Benson1, Micheline Senia1, Sean Horton1**

1University of Windsor

**Objective:** This research explores the dynamic outcomes experienced by volunteers engaging with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in a community-based exercise program. The Adapted Physical Exercise (APEX) program provides an inclusive, barrier-free exercise experience through one-on-one training provided by student volunteers. Exercise sessions take place twice a week, each lasting 90 minutes, and consist of cardiovascular training, weight training, and sports/games. APEX participants are paired with the same volunteer for the duration of the program. This deliberate pairing strategy aims to enhance the continuity and effectiveness of the engagement between volunteers and the program’s participants. The primary objective of the study is to illuminate how a student volunteer’s APEX experience contributed to their perceptions of individuals with IDD, and to what extent, if any, it influenced their educational and/or career trajectory.

**Methods:** Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research employed interviews to capture the experiences of APEX alumni volunteers. An alumni volunteer includes any student who completed a fitness trainer volunteer position with the APEX program since 2012. The semi-structured nature of interviews provided flexibility and depth in exploring the quality and impact of the volunteering experience. Example questions included: *“How would you describe your experience with APEX?”* and “*To what extent has your experience volunteering with APEX had an impact on your life outside of the program?*”. Twenty individuals (4 males and 16 females, age = 25.8 ± 3.5) who volunteered with APEX between 2012 and 2023, were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings to ensure an accurate representation of the spoken content. Following transcription, a proofreading process involving a thorough examination of the text while concurrently listening to the audio was undertaken. The data was systematically coded and preliminary themes identified; a collaborative effort developed in consultation with co-authors. This coding process adheres to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Data analysis is ongoing.

**Results:** Preliminary findings showcase the multifaceted impact of the APEX program on alumni volunteers. The identified patterns illustrate how APEX experiences influenced participants' evolving perceptions of disability, fostering a more inclusive mindset. Character development emerged as an important theme, demonstrating how this volunteer experience contributed to the personal growth and resilience of volunteers. Additionally, participants revealed how the program significantly influenced subsequent occupational decisions and career choices.

**Discussion/Conclusion**Top of Form**:** By attempting to understand the volunteer experience, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the effectiveness of programs like APEX in facilitating the evolution of perceptions of disability, fostering personal development, and shaping occupational trajectories. The APEX program serves not only as a catalyst for individual growth but as a vehicle for promoting inclusivity more broadly.

**Correspondence:**

**Anna M Beneteau, BHK**

**University of Windsor**

**chadwica@uwindsor.ca**