

Experience North 2023 Blog Post – Abigail Ollila - Kapuskasing



One fateful day in Career Studies class at Timmins High, I opened Google and typed “Northern Ontario think tank.” If there was such a thing, I thought, maybe I could work there some day. Sure enough, there was. Years later, I found myself in an M.A. program that required the completion of an internship related to my research interests and career goals... and I knew just the place to start.

So, did Northern Policy Institute (NPI) live up to the hype? Let me walk you through my summer as a Research Analyst.

Experience North allowed me to rediscover the places I thought I knew. Before this summer, the name “Kapuskasing” generated a simple image in my mind. Population? 8,000. Major employer? The paper mill. Francophones? Beaucoup. Distinctive feature? A roundabout. Notable former residents? Three-time Academy Award-winning director James Cameron (yes, really). After four months of life there, however, a tapestry of experiences and observations gradually replaced that list of facts.

When I think about Kapuskasing now, scenes of the river come to mind first: a constant sound of rushing water, wildflowers growing along the banks, and the mill’s red

smokestacks looming on the horizon. I savour the memories of iced coffee at Back to the Grind, Québec-style poutine from Nicky's Chip Stand, and cream puffs from La Boulangerie. These culinary adventures were often shared with Aurora—the best roommate and fellow intern I could have asked for. Recalling our commute brings fond memories of friendly greetings from passers-by (and their dogs!) en route to the office. Finally, I remember conversations with my neighbours, whose stories about local working-class life will stay with me forever. As I write, only a week has passed since my time in Kap ended—but I miss both town and townsfolk already. Living there gave me a sense of the community that would be impossible to recreate behind a screen.

In terms of professional experience, *Experience North* equipped me to evaluate the challenges and opportunities of my home region in much greater detail. Among my first tasks, for example, was to create a database of all the doctors in Ontario. Through that project, I began to understand the healthcare gaps specific to Northern Ontario—as well as the strengths and positive aspects of our regional healthcare systems. While working on *Community Accounts*, I learned to see the north in numbers: filtering census data to extract information about the demographics and socioeconomic contours of northern communities. Those assignments also introduced me to R, a programming language that will no doubt prove useful across future research projects in my academic and professional life alike.



Traveling to Terrace Bay to conduct on-the-ground community research was a particularly rewarding chapter of my time at NPI. About halfway through the summer, I joined a project assessing the supply and demand of childcare services in the Terrace Bay and Schreiber area. After several weeks of planning, scheduling, and developing our data collection tools, my supervisor Bryanne and I headed west for a week-long excursion. The natural beauty of the Superior North Shore took me by surprise. I had not traveled to northwestern Ontario in many years and recalled endless flat fields near the Manitoba border. This time, eyes glued to the car window, I watched as the landscape unfolded in every imaginable shade of blue and green: layers upon layers of spruce-blanketed hills plunging down steep cliffs into the vast waters of the Great Lake.

Terrace Bay welcomed us with remarkable hospitality. In a place where everyone knows everyone, visitors are guests of the whole community. What's more, it soon became clear that the residents were wholeheartedly invested in our research. They seemed to have nearly as many questions for us as we did for them, and in time I learned to have concise answers on hand to the most common inquiries about NPI and the project. Community members shared their local knowledge generously, pointing us towards important puzzle pieces that we would not likely have uncovered by ourselves.

Open houses, interviews, and focus groups packed our schedule each day. Many who participated in the research offered decades of observations from the community, and those who had arrived in Terrace Bay or Schreiber more recently provided insight into what finding childcare was like for newcomers. Several residents shared sobering accounts of the struggles and challenges they had faced without access to formal childcare services—but their resilience and willingness to help each other was equally encouraging. I felt honoured to listen to their stories and envision possible solutions together. When the time came to return home, I knew that everything Bryanne and I had seen and heard would remain in my memory for a long time.

Experience North helped me grow as a researcher, a communicator, and a northern community member. NPI staff represent a treasure trove of diverse backgrounds and expertise, and each colleague I worked alongside taught me something new that I can carry into the future. Whether the summer program took me to Kapuskasing, Kirkland Lake, or Terrace Bay, I was empowered to deepen my understanding of northern issues every day. To conclude—and to answer the question that opened this blog post—*Experience North* surpassed every expectation I had and inspired me to set higher expectations for myself.

While a “Northern Ontario think tank” sounded like a pretty cool idea to my adolescent imagination, I am pleased to confirm that it is much cooler in person.