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If you build it...

Santa Clara's Megan Anders gives back to the community in the Dominican Republic

By Leilana McKindra

As a sophomore, Santa Clara women's volleyball student-athlete Megan Anders traveled to the Dominican Republic as part of a spring break service trip. In one short week spent working on the foundation of a house, she fell in love with the people and culture of the small farming town of Constanza.

Anders vowed she'd return, and this past summer, the senior made good on that promise. This time around, she shared her love of volleyball by building a sand volleyball court at El Arca, a local school and orphanage in the rural community.
"I'm very happy with the way it turned out. It looks really cool," Anders said.

Previously, the school was using two posts anchored in concrete poured into tires and a net that sagged in the middle and hung to within a foot of the ground.

"To go from that net and a court that was super pot-holey, where you could easily roll your ankle, to flat sand and a straight net was a completely different story," she said.

Though Anders had the project in mind since her initial visit to the island nation, she needed a way to fund the effort. Then a friend mentioned the Jean Donovan Summer Fellowship, a grant through the university designed to fund service projects either in the United States or a foreign country.

Following up on the tip, Anders discovered she had a mere two days to submit her proposal in order to meet the deadline date.

"I just sat down and did the whole application. I knew exactly where I wanted to go, and I'd already had goals to help them build a volleyball court, so it was a perfect opportunity," she said. "It all just kind of lined up."

With the assistance of the $2,000 Donovan Fellowship, which is designed to cover expenses such as travel, lodging and project costs, Anders was well on her way to turning her vision into reality.

Before leaving, she organized a sports equipment drive on campus, and Santa Clara athletics teams generously contributed used gear for El Arca's students. She also emailed USA Volleyball, which promptly donated 15 volleyballs and a net to the effort.

Accompanied by her cousin and loaded down with everything from balls to cleats to helmets, Anders embarked on the ambitious three- and-a-half-week project to construct the sand volleyball court.

Though the duo arrived with a set of building plans, they immediately threw them out based on guidance from the owners of the land where the court would be built.

"When we told them our idea, they told us you need a fence here, you need to build a wall here, you need to dig a three-foot hole here, you need to pull up all that crabgrass here," Anders recalled.

"They told us how my vision would happen with the way their land works. They had the experience, and I felt comforted knowing I didn't have to plan all of that."

Anders and her cousin did the majority of the construction on their own, but did hire help in instances where they didn't have the expertise.

Displaying the grit, determination and dedication that made her a first-team All-West Coast Conference selection at middle blocker for the Broncos in 2012, Anders and her cousin spent two weeks digging up crabgrass on the site of the court. With the proper machines, she estimates the same job would have taken about 20 minutes. And while she'd done some manual labor, nothing prepared her for what she faced in Constanza.

"It was me and my cousin, two pickaxes and two shovels digging for eight hours a day in the sun. It was hot and sticky, and there were bugs," Anders said. "It taught me how to appreciate any kind of manual labor. I had no idea how tough that could be, especially day-in and day-out."

Along the way, Anders admits she also learned
MORE THAN JUST A STUDENT-ATHLETE

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to be flexible. For instance, a hurricane warning and tropical storm sidelined progress for three
days, and on another day, a local worker they'd
hired failed to show.

"It was learning to adjust to anything from
weather to the fact that our cement guy didn't show
up, so I guess we're going to be making cement
tomorrow," she said.

But the trip wasn't all work and no play for
Anders. Throughout the nearly month-long stay,
she immersed herself in the community and the cul-
ture in a way she hadn't during her first visit, when
she was traveling and lodging with a group of 18
English-speaking students. Each day, after wrapping
up work on the court, she and her cousin would
shoulder their backpacks and make the four-to-five
mile loop through town, stopping at shops, patron-
izing local vendors and interacting with residents.

"By the end of the month, we knew the shops we
always went to, and it was really cool to feel like I
was part of the community."

Once the court was finished and ready for action,
Anders was prepared to spend some time tutoring
the children in the basics of volleyball. Then she
made a discovery that quickly changed that plan.
The children had never seen sand.

"Some were tasting it, they were throwing it at
each other, and they were running and diving in it.
This looked painful to me, but they would get up
and laugh," she said. "It was the best, giant, most
awesome sandbox to them, and it was entertaining
to see."

Anders credits her coaches and, more broadly,
the Santa Clara athletics and university administra-
tions, for fully supporting the project in Constanza,
as well as other outreach activities in which she's
participated.

"I like to travel and do fun things, and they've
always been supportive, never restrictive," she said.
"That comes from the whole athletics department,
not just the coaches. It's cool to have a school that
really supports me, not only academically, but
through the Donovan Fellowship, as well as the ath-
etics department."

Broncos head women's volleyball coach Jon
Wallace is proud of his standout senior and believes
the experience in Constanza was a great oppor-
tunity for her personal growth.

"We want our kids to reach out, to experience
new things and feel they have the support of the
coaching staff," Wallace said. "So when we do ask
them to do something in the gym, the meaning is
much more for them. On both sides of that kind of
relationship, it's a win-win for both of us."

It's definitely been a win for the Broncos where
Anders is concerned. Last season, Wallace recalled,
Anders led more by doing. A year later, she still
leads by example, but also serves as the team's vocal
emotional leader.

Beyond what she does on the court for Santa
Clara, Anders does just as much or maybe more
away from it.

"For us, she does a lot of extracurricular activi-
ties, which has made her a face of our university and
a leader on campus," Wallace said. "Megan repres-
tsents student-athletes to the highest degree. She
takes her classwork as well as her athletics work seri-
ously. She's very motivated and is a great example of
a true student-athlete."

Anders is on track to earn a bachelor's degree in
bioengineering this spring, but she's not quite ready
to exit the court. Her immediate postgraduation
plans involve pursuing a professional volleyball
career overseas.

Leilana McKendra has worked as a writer in the sports
and agriculture industries for a decade. In addition to
her deep love for the written word, she also pursues her
passion for strength sports by training and competing in
powerlifting.