

From a history of drugs to a daughter and dedication

By Nicole Santa Cruz / *The Bulletin*

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Submitted photo

LaRocque, of Bend, with Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, in Washington, D.C., this week, was honored for her work with the Heart of Oregon AmeriCorps. She completed more than 900 hours of community service in the Bend area over nine months.



Pete Erickson / *The Bulletin*

Sarah LaRocque, 25, colors with her daughter, Jaeden, 19 months, in their Bend home Friday afternoon. She is one of six people nationwide — selected from 26,000 — to receive a “Corpsmember of the Year” award for her efforts with the Heart of Oregon AmeriCorps.

Sarah LaRocque’s alarm clock is the giggle of her 19-month-old toddler.

The 25-year-old and her daughter, Jaeden, start off the day with a morning cartoon. LaRocque, who said she’s working on teaching her daughter colors and shapes, cuts the child’s morning toast into stars, circles and squares.

LaRocque walks Jaeden to day care, sometimes via piggyback, and goes to work as a customer care specialist at BendBroadband.

But it hasn’t always been that way.

LaRocque, of Bend, dropped out of school by the seventh grade. She has a history of drug use and was in and out of jail more times than she can count. Her mother and brother died of drug-related incidents by the time she was 13.

But two weeks ago, LaRocque was the only individual from Oregon honored in Washington, D.C., for her efforts with the Heart of Oregon AmeriCorps, as a “Corpsmember of the Year.” She was selected out of 26,000 people for one of six awards.

While at the nation’s Capitol, she was able to meet Rep. Greg Walden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, and she told her story to crowds ranging in size from 300 to 500 people.

Just one year ago, LaRocque was waking up in various hotel rooms and selling drugs on the streets of Bend. When she found out she was pregnant in February 2007, she was determined to begin a new life for her and her daughter. LaRocque said she wanted to get her GED and also wanted to plan for her future.

“I didn’t think I could do it by myself,” she said.

In September 2007 she voluntarily signed up for the Heart of Oregon AmeriCorps program and completed more than 900 hours of community service in the Bend area over nine months. When her daughter was a month old, LaRocque was in the middle of the forest clearing brush or building homes for Habitat for Humanity. With the help of her family, she was able to care for her daughter while participating in the strenuous program, which is a combination of community service projects, and GED and college preparatory courses.

LaRocque, who has light reddish-brown hair and hazel-green eyes, said her work with the Heart of Oregon Corps not only gave her the support to turn her life around, but the confidence to do it.

“It’s the foundation of how I did what I did,” she said. “They made my dreams a reality because I could see them.”

LaRocque earned her GED through the program and said she wouldn’t have been able to get a job at BendBroadband without it. She also received assistance with her résumé and was awarded a \$2,000 college scholarship after graduation, which she plans to use someday.

The self-proclaimed “tom boy” talked fondly of her time in the forest and said on her breaks in the field, she’d take naps in the middle of the woods.

“I miss that still, being outdoors like that on a daily basis,” she said.

LaRocque was one of the only female members in her crew. She was also one of the first members who was actively raising a child to come through the program, said Forrest Hanna, a crew leader with the Heart of Oregon AmeriCorps.

“She really stood out in how driven she was to overcome the barriers that she had,” Hanna said.

“We’re really proud of her,” said Laura Handy, a program manager with the corps. “Witnessing her as a parent has been really inspiring.”

Handy recalled LaRocque sharing information from all of the parenting books she read while pregnant. She wanted to be as informed as possible and do everything right, Handy said.

“Being a first-time mom and everything, I was scared about it all,” LaRocque said. “I had to figure it all out, kind of all my own. I had to figure out how to approach it.”

She said that since she quit drugs and turned her life around, she hasn’t had a bad day.

“It’s hard to be upset when there’s a baby laughing and giggling with you who loves you,” she said.

LaRocque dreams of attending college and wants to make sure her daughter will as well.

“I want to start the college trend with her.”

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