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JEN CRONEBERGER ROLLS UP HER SLEEVES TO CHANGE CULTURE IN HOCKEY

By Heather Rule, 08/10/20, 11:15AM MDT

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Croneberger was appointed in June as director of culture change for the Atlantic Amateur Hockey Association

Jen Croneberger grew up playing sports. Her tall frame made her stand out, though she didn't always want to be the one everybody was looking at while pitching in a softball game.

"I didn't have any coaches in that space that made me feel comfortable enough to be myself and show up as myself," Croneberger said. "I didn't feel like I could bring my whole self to the team."

"And I don't want anybody else to feel like that. So, I take it seriously."

This summer, Croneberger, 46, was named the director of culture change for the Atlantic Amateur Hockey Association. Overall, her role is to help lead diversity and inclusion efforts.

Croneberger's background includes being a softball coach and earning a master's degree in sports and performance psychology. She also owned an athletic training center where athletes were trained with a three-pronged approach: physical, skill and mental. Realizing that the mental piece of a game centers back to people, she became a speaker on this topic for various organizations.

She was initially brought in as a consultant and following a talk she gave about culture to AAHA coaches and leadership, Glenn Hefferan, the AAHA president, reached out after to say, "You know what? You're exactly what we need," Croneberger relayed.

The purpose of her work with AAHA is to start having conversations that haven't necessarily happened yet in hockey. These are difficult conversations people can be afraid of, but are crucial to help open up opportunities to foster cultures of belonging.

Her work will initially start with coaches in the AAHA as well as the organization's leadership team. The eventual next step will be to create the same ideas and approaches, but targeted for players to use.

The exercises for coaches will focus on using more inclusive language in approaching various scenarios.

Part of her task is to also get coaches and players away from mindsets like "boys will be boys" when it comes to certain language like racial slurs. She's looking at how to help young people understand that certain behavior and language is not OK and it can be changed.



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So, what exactly does inclusion in hockey mean? There are the obvious points, like gender, LGBTQ+ and race. But Croneberger believes there's more to it than that. There's this mentality that hockey is a tough sport, and therefore hockey players need to have that tough persona, too.

Croneberger has already had conversations with people in the hockey world about raising strong human beings through the sport, without having to be bullies.

"And I think that's really the underlying tone of being a great athlete on and off the ice," Croneberger said. "Being a better human being."

It's about understanding more than anything. In general, we're all guilty of microaggressions, little comments and assumptions, that we don't even realize, Croneberger said. The task then becomes creating environments where every person in a rink can feel like he or she belongs. Right now, there's a feeling that maybe not everybody feels that way, which is not a problem isolated to hockey, according to Croneberger.

She uses a story called, "Come Touch My Side of the Elephant." Three blind men stand around an elephant, touching different parts of the animal, like the trunk or leg. They're standing at the same thing, but they're in their own spaces, so it's different than what the other might experience.

The lesson here, according to Croneberger, is to focus on empathy. We need to be able to stand in someone else's shoes to see things from his or her point of view.

"We're not really taught how to do that," Croneberger said. "We don't take a class in school on that."

What she's really looking for is to move the needle toward people understanding the idea of what it means to have a culture of belonging.

Moving toward any of these goals will be a process and not something that happens overnight, Croneberger said. It will be about having conversations and using assessment tools to get on a fundamental path moving forward.

"It's not like we're going to be able to turn around and say, 'OK, that looks completely different in this short period of time,'" Croneberger said.

Step one will require everyone coming to the table with, "an open mind and an open heart," Croneberger said. From there, they can all start working toward the goal of having every athlete stepping on the ice feeling like he or she belongs there.

Croneberger's experience as a coach has also shown her that part of the process is helping youth athletes become great human beings. For coaches and parents, it becomes a question of how they're modeling inclusive behaviors to help make this happen and make players feel like they belong.

"Yeah, sometimes that feels like a tall task," Croneberger said. "But my sleeves are rolled up. I'm ready."

Story from Red Line Editorial, Inc.

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