

# GVSU student leads efforts to give back to nonprofits that once helped her family

## Michele Coffill

### Grand Valley State University

Clodfelder (RPC) Student Society, the service-focused student organization for GVSU's Physician Assistant Studies program that volunteers with Traverse City nonprofit organizations.

For RPC, LaPan works with fellow student leaders to coordinate and participate in volunteer efforts, including serving meals at the Central United Methodist Church community breakfast and volunteering at the Great Lakes Children's Museum.

Before beginning her graduate studies in GVSU's Physician Assistant Studies program, LaPan was president of the Pre-Physician Assistant Society at Northwestern Michigan College, where she led student volunteer efforts with local nonprofits such as the Father Fred Foundation and the Goodwill Inn, two organizations that had once supported her family during difficult times.

A native of Traverse City, LaPan said her family experienced periods of poverty and homelessness when she was younger. "There were times when we stayed at the Goodwill Inn and relied on food pantries and community clinics," LaPan said. "Those local resources made a huge difference for my family and they inspired my goal of becoming a PA who serves this same community."

Kristen LaPan serves as the vice president of the Richard Paul

The opportunity to give back to her hometown community in Traverse City has been one of LaPan's favorite parts of studying at Grand Valley's Traverse City campus. She values the close-knit connections and local service opportunities that both NMC and GVSU have provided.

It was her drive to help people that led LaPan to begin working at Munson Healthcare as a nurse assistant when she was 18. "I just fell in love with health care and the careers that were available," she said.

LaPan enrolled at Northwestern Michigan College and took classes as she could afford them. In 2023, she earned a bachelor's degree in allied health sciences from GVSU. She continues to work at Munson, now as an emergency department technician.

"My advisors at NMC and GVSU were all very supportive of me enrolling in classes as I could afford them, yet keeping me on track to graduate," she said. "When I decided on physician assistant studies at Grand Valley, my NMC advisor knew exactly what classes I would need."



Kristen LaPan

In August, Physician Assistant Studies and all other GVSU academic programs moved to NMC's Front Street Campus, operating from the Beckett Building, which was updated to feature classrooms with state-of-the-art technology, labs and collaborative spaces. GVSU is among five universities that offer classes in partnership with Northwestern Michigan College. All five had operated from NMC's University Center, near Boardman Lake.

Shannon Owen, director of the Northern Michigan region, said being in the new location naturally provides more space for collaboration and innovation, strengthening opportunities for students and the broader community.

Grand Valley opened its satellite PAS program in Traverse City in 2015 to educate students who would receive training at Northern Michigan hospitals and health care organizations and then want to work in the area after graduating.

LaPan is among the more than 70% of students who plan to stay in the region. "We've learned a lot about rural health care. And I want to give back to the area that has helped me so much," she said.

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