Tell us a bit about your position at Algonquin College, and how long you've been in this role.

I am the Harm Reduction Consultant from Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services that is helping to create and build the AC Umbrella Project, which began in April 2015. I have worked as a substance use/addiction counsellor for almost 15 years and bring a lot of knowledge and experience to this project. The AC Umbrella Project believes that using a harm reduction approach with alcohol and other drugs helps everyone stay safer.

Is the work you do now related to your post-secondary education?

My Child and Youth Worker diploma gave me the hands-on skills that I use every day and my Bachelor of Social Work gave me the broader understanding of the bigger picture. Combined, they allow me to help individuals and communities be as healthy as they can be.

What is the most common misconception that people have about harm reduction?

That if you talk about how to use alcohol and other drugs in a way that reduces risk you are encouraging students to use. We want students who are already using to stay as safe and healthy as possible. Harm reduction information opens up the conversation and provides realistic strategies students can use, which allows them the opportunity to take care of themselves in the best way possible.

What is the one thing you want your colleagues to know about the Umbrella Project?

We believe that Algonquin staff and faculty make a huge difference in students’ lives so there are two days of FREE training provided on campus. The first day of training provides a deeper understanding of substance use and harm reduction on campus and the second day is practical training using Motivational Interviewing. The next dates these sessions are offered are November 8 and 28 – check out MyAC for more info.

You deal first-hand with students talking about harm reduction strategies, issues, and concerns. What has surprised you most about speaking to students about this topic?

Just how open they are to share their experiences and to learn how to stay safer and where to get support if they need it. The student response has been overwhelmingly positive. It shouldn't be all that surprising, as that's what the research shows, but it’s pretty amazing.

How would you describe your approach to dealing with students?

Non-judgmental, compassionate, and informative in a respectful manner. It is very important to acknowledge the challenges and realities that students live with.

What is one challenge about your job?

Trying to create long-term and sustainable campus culture shift in just two years, with funding that ends March 30, 2017.

What’s the best part about your job?

Working with Polly Leonard, the project manager for the AC Umbrella Project. Her passion for harm reduction and ability to keep the project moving forward is incredible. It is amazing to be a part of such a dynamic team!

What has been your biggest success at Algonquin so far?

It’s impossible to name just one – it has been an amazing 18 months! Here are a few initiatives I’m most proud of:

- The RainyDaze online game
- Harm reduction consultation for students on site through Counselling, Centre for Accessible Learning, Mamidosewin Centre, and Residence
- Algonquin College participation in the National College Health Assessment
- Providing E-CHUG/E-TOKE, personalized safer-use guides on our website
- Students-only SMART Recovery meeting on campus every Tuesday from 12:15pm to 1:30pm in T106
- The support from President Jensen and the Algonquin College community

National Addictions Awareness Week takes place November 13 to 16. What is the Umbrella Project working on to commemorate this month?

On Monday, November 14, we will be a part of Algonquin College’s “Choose Your Ride” event. And we are so excited this year to have three Child and Youth Care students from the Mamidosewin Centre, Health Services, and Residence all working on other great events throughout the week in Student Commons and Residence. Look for the AC Umbrella!

What’s one piece of advice you try to live by?

“I was born to make mistakes, not fake perfection.”- Drake

I’ve learned that when I am kind towards myself and reassure myself that I am a fallible human being, I am able to be even more kind and understanding to the human-beingsness of others.