

Special Olympics of Wisconsin – Be a Part of it!

By Denise Schultz



*“People look at you.
They stare. They all stare.
They point at you.
They shout things.
They make you feel different....*

It’s FANTASTIC!”

What? Fantastic? The feelings portrayed by the message in this Special Olympics public service announcement instantly turn from sadness to triumph as the cognitively disabled young man is shown celebrating victory. This inspiring message touched my heart and soul in a matter of seconds. The young man speaking the words above wipes a tear as he delivers this strong testimonial, and if you have a chance to see it, you may do the same. His story speaks volumes about how one organization can make an enormous impact on individual lives.

The powerful line of text which appears on the closing screen of this “twist of fate” message says simply: “Be a part of it.”

How can you become a part of the amazing organization which provides year-round Olympic-type sports training and athletic competition to more than 1.7 million adults and children with intellectual disabilities in more than 150 countries?

Like any international outreach of this type – it begins right here at home. The Southeastern Area 7 office in Racine serves the counties of Jefferson, Kenosha, Racine, Rock and Walworth, where many of our readers reside. It is one of seven offices throughout the state. Special Olympics Wisconsin provides year round sports training and competition for nearly 10,000 athletes in nearly 220 communities and 18 different sports. Sports offered include Alpine skiing, aquatics, track and field athletics, basketball, bocce, bowling, cross-country skiing, cycling, golf, gymnastics, powerlifting, snowboarding, snowshoeing, soccer, softball and tee ball, speedskating, tennis and volleyball. Some of these activities are part of the Unified Sports® program, which combines athletes with and without cognitive disabilities on teams.

The athletes served by the program are at least eight years old and are identified as having a cognitive disability. Special Olympics athletes are always assigned divisions with those of equal skill level so they are always competing fairly and given every opportunity to succeed.

Within Area 7 there are 23 agencies run entirely by volunteers, supported by two very dedicated staff members in the Racine office - Kim White, Area Director and Jenny Taylor, Sports Coordinator.

Walworth County has a community-based adult agency for those over 21 and a site-based program at Lakeland School. Throughout my research I heard accolades for the hard work of Betty Aguirre, Walworth County Agency Manager. Betty's son Jamie will be one of two local Special Olympics athletes representing our area in the upcoming National Games in Ames, Iowa. "This is the first time Special Olympics is having a national event in the U.S. and it's very exciting for us," Jenny Taylor told me enthusiastically. "It's the first opportunity for so many more athletes to participate at this level of competition." (Prior to this event, agencies had to come up with significant funds to send athletes to other countries for the World Games, significantly limiting the number of opportunities.)

Volunteers are obviously an integral part of Special Olympics. Without the generosity of those who share their time and talents, none of these programs would be possible. In Wisconsin alone, it requires approximately 19,000 volunteers to support the needs of the programs each year. Many local volunteers have recently assisted with bowling tournaments in Janesville and Racine, basketball events in Racine and Lake Geneva, and more.

Volunteers are currently being sought for an athletics tournament at Case High School in Racine on Saturday, May 6. A number of volunteers are needed to help with the Bocce and Tennis Tournament at Phoenix School in Delavan on Saturday, July 15. "It's important for people to realize that we don't need them to be athletes, or even know all the rules of these sports," Jenny told me. "We need help at every level. We are happy to provide any amount of support and training needed."

After the summer events, volunteers will be sought to assist with the annual wreath sale, from September to November. Volunteers throughout southeastern Wisconsin are always needed for ongoing coaching, committee and management assistance. Training is provided and there is sure to be something to fit in to every schedule. Whether your areas of expertise are best utilized in fund raising, hands on coaching, or something in between - every volunteer helps to make a difference in the lives of program participants. Whether you have a few hours or more time to commit, log on to the web site or contact Kim or Jenny at (800) 924-4320 or email: kwhite@specialolympicswisconsin.org for specific information on how you may be able to help.

Fund raising is an ongoing challenge for any not-for-profit organization, and Special Olympics is no exception. The programs available are entirely due to the generosity of the communities served. Special Olympics relies on individual volunteers, donors and corporate partners. A number of fundraisers are available for which you may contribute or participate. Take one example - the annual "Polar Plunge" at Lake Andrea in nearby Pleasant Prairie (one of nine in the state this year.) This February 280 plungers were "freezin' for a reason" at the winter carnival atmosphere at Lake Andrea to raise funds pledged by friends, family members and co-workers. Jumping into frigid Wisconsin water may sound a little extreme, but since the program's inception six years ago, over 24,000 plungers have raised nearly \$4 million. That's nothing to sneeze at. (Although some of the plungers probably do a bit of sneezing, sniveling and coughing following the event!) Shopko, Kwik Trip and Charter were recognized for their corporate sponsorship support.

Speaking of "freezin'", there is also the annual Shopko Rooftop Challenge when one lucky law enforcement officer spends an entire December weekend atop the local Shopko roof while other volunteers collect donations on the ground to "get the cop off the roof." Dedication like this draws attention, which in turn generates funds for this worthy cause.

The rooftop challenge is just one of a series of events which lead up to the final "Law Enforcement Torch Run" which ends at the State Games (in Stevens Point this June.) "Law

enforcement officers from throughout the state actually run carrying a torch and passing it from one community to the other,” said Jenny. “They begin at the state line in Kenosha, then run to Racine, then that group runs to Elkhorn, then to Whitewater, and so on. It’s amazing to see the involvement by local law enforcement officials and their families,” she added warmly. “The Walworth County Sheriffs Department is especially generous go Special Olympics,” she added. “It’s wonderful to see so many of these officers march in the opening ceremony at the State Games!” This year marks the 20th anniversary of Wisconsin law enforcement officers “keeping the flame burning.”

Donors may contribute to Special Olympics at any time by using secure credit card forms online, mailing a check, donating by telephone or sponsoring participants in any of the fundraising activities. Local contributions are utilized for local programs. Expenses include training, travel and other special needs. If you have any questions about your donation or use of funds, contact Kim White at (800) 924-4320 or email: kwhite@specialolympicswisconsin.org.

Corporate sponsors are always appreciated, and Kim and Jenny are happy to answer any questions about how you may align your company with this very worthwhile cause. Be creative and help more athletes achieve their dreams. For example, Quad Graphics recently presented the first-ever World’s Largest Truck Convoy for Special Olympics, in which 50 law enforcement officers and 400 truckers and spectators raised over \$38,000. You may have something smaller in mind, but every dollar counts and the athletes who get to feel “Fantastic!” due to your generosity will warm your heart.

Want to feel fantastic yourself, for becoming a part of something special? Log on to: www.specialolympicswisconsin.org or call (800) 924-4320 to make the first step today.

The Area 7 office of Special Olympics Southeastern Wisconsin is located at: 6011 Durand Avenue, Suite 400, Racine, WI 53406. The local telephone number is (262) 598-9507 and the toll-free number is (800) 924-4320.