

A Moment to Shine

Why Special Olympics is worth fighting for **By Sherry Posnick-Goodwin**



IT WAS A glorious day in March at Peninsula High School on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. More than 50 students with special needs — joined by 30 other high school students — participated in a Special Olympics track meet, where everybody was a winner.

“For students with special needs, it was a moment to shine,” recalls Patrick Daley, a PE teacher and member of the Palos Verdes Faculty Association (PVFA), who coordinated the event with special education teacher Betsy Fujinaga and adapted physical education teacher Melissa DeCasas, also PVFA members. “It was a beautiful day of bear hugs and smiles. It was fun not only for the kids, but for parents and family members in the crowd. I loved seeing how proud parents were of their children.”

But the celebration, which included students from Peninsula High and Palos Verdes High School, was bitter-sweet. The day before, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos had proposed eliminating all funding for Special Olympics, insisting it should be paid for through donations. DeVos faced scathing criticism by members of Congress at a hearing that drew widespread attention, eliciting strong support for Special Olympics nationwide.

Eventually President Trump said he had “overridden” his own people and would continue the funding, and DeVos backpedaled.

Daley was furious that the education secretary sought to remove funding from a population so deserving.

“It was surreal to have this proposed the day before our Special Olympics event,” he shares. “When I heard what she proposed, I didn’t want to cuss, but I was appalled, sad and disgusted. A House member asked DeVos how many students would be affected, and she said she had no numbers. It was very disheartening.”

The next day, he decided to shake it off and focus on the competitions and the athletes. Things went amazingly smoothly.

“It brought the entire school community together,” says Daley. “Turnout included school board members, administrators, students and teachers. The associate principal said it was one of the best days she’d had on campus in the six years she’d worked here. Many teared up during the event. There was such a sense of pride to be working at a school where something like this happens.”

Cheerleaders from both high schools rooted for the athletes. The marching band from Peninsula High played; the choir sang the national anthem. Students in the PLUS (Peer Leaders Uniting Students) group Daley advises were stationed in booths and relay sections. Students pushed fellow students in wheelchairs down the track. Firefighters handed out awards.

Also assisting were student body officers and the school’s Link Crew — a group of student leaders who guide freshmen during the transition to high school and help facilitate ninth-grade success.



“An event like this allows our students with special needs to be celebrated — and allows general education students to get over any fear they may have of those who are different.”

—Patrick Daley,
Palos Verdes Faculty Association

Peninsula High is a Special Olympics Unified Champion School because it promotes social inclusion through planned activities. The prestigious title was earned by educators collaborating with Melissa DeCasas.

For Daley, supporting athletic events for students with special needs is something that’s in his blood. His grandfather founded the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association in Highland Park, Illinois, in 1969, and his father was a special education teacher in Compton for 20 years.

“The Special Olympics is about recognizing the abilities of a population that often isn’t seen. Students with special needs need advocates fighting for them to be seen, heard and accepted. An event like this allows our students with special needs to be celebrated — and allows general education students to get over any fear they may have of those who are different. From an event like this, they understand that we are all human. Everyone benefits from participating.”

He urges other educators to consider becoming involved.

“Find out when the Special Olympics is coming to your town and school. Volunteer and be a part of this. See what joy it brings to people’s lives. It will definitely change your own life.” ■

Left to right: Al Rabanera, Myra Deister, Armandina Turner, Joan Ke and Aimee Nelson.



CULTIVATING TEACHER LEADERS

The Fullerton Secondary Teachers Organization was recently awarded a two-year \$500,000 grant from NEA’s Great Public Schools (GPS) fund. FSTO will use the funds to continue the Cultivating Teacher Leaders project, which helps grow and diversify the profession in California.

The project began in 2016 with participants from CTA’s Instructional Leadership Corps, including FSTO member and grant writer Al Rabanera, Myra Deister and Armandina Turner. The team also includes FSTO member Joan Ke and Aimee Nelson, Institute for Higher Education partner from CSU Fullerton. That year FSTO received a \$250,000 GPS grant to launch and support the project.

Specifically, the program recruits aspiring educators from historically diverse populations; strengthens partnerships among K-12 districts, higher education institutions, and CTA members and affiliates; mentors educators from high school through university to accreditation and beyond; and provides early-career educators with professional development.

In addition to diversifying the existing workforce, it takes “significant steps toward retaining teachers of color in our education system, a proven means of effectively narrowing student achievement gaps,” says FSTO President John Marvin.