YOU KNOW, EUNICE, THE WORLD WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AFTER THIS

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Over the past few decades Special Olympics has been criticized within the academic community for failing to provide inclusive recreational services, reinforcing negative stereotypes, misusing volunteers, and lacking research demonstrating positive impacts for individuals with intellectual disabilities and the larger community (Hourcadde, 1989; Storey 2004, 2008). Following the recent passing of Eunice Kennedy Shriver on August 11, 2009 and her husband, R. Sargent Shriver on January 18, 2011, it seems timely to respond to these critics in defense of Special Olympics and the tremendous accomplishments of the Shrivers. This article presents a brief history of the Special Olympics (SO) movement; summarizes the concerns presented in the literature about the organization; highlights the mission and offerings; and presents counter points in defense of its programs. Within the article we advocate that the impact of Special Olympics on the lives of individuals with significant developmental disabilities far surpasses that of any other organization in the world, and SO's potential for future success is certain should the mission and goals remain so strongly focused. As former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley eloquently stated on the opening day of the first International Special Olympic Games in 1968 You know, Eunice, the world will never be the same after this.

Special Olympics is an international organization dedicated to providing year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968, Special Olympics was grounded in her belief that people with developmental disabilities were far more capable than most people assumed, and deserved equal opportunities to demonstrate these capabilities. Today the organization provides programming for 3.3 million children and adults with intellectual disabilities in 30 Olympic-type sports, hosting 32,000 competitions around the world each year (Special Olympics, 2010a).

Over the past few decades Special Olympics has been criticized within the academic community for failing to provide inclusive recreational services, reinforcing negative stereotypes, misusing volunteers, and lacking research demonstrating positive impacts for individuals with intellectual disabilities and the larger community (Hourcadde, 1989; Storey 2004, 2008). Following the recent passing of Eunice Kennedy Shriver August 11, 2009 and her husband, R. Sargent Shriver on January 18, 2011, it seems timely to respond to these critics in defense of Special Olympics and the tremendous accomplishments of the Shrivers. This article presents a brief history of the Special Olympics (SO) movement; summarizes the concerns presented in the literature about the program; highlights the mission and program offerings; and presents counter points in defense of their programs. As former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley eloquently stated on the opening day of the first International Special Olympic Games in 1968 *You know, Eunice, the world will never be the same after this*.

A Brief History Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Special Olympics

The Special Olympics movement originally began as a day camp for individuals with disabilities started by Eunice Kennedy Shriver at her home in Rockville, Maryland in 1962. The inaugural camp included 35 children exploring a variety of sports and physical activities. Kennedy Shriver understood from the

outset that the young people she invited to her home had many capabilities that were not being recognized and celebrated. Camp Shriver became an annual event and between 1963 and 1968 expanded to more than 300 similar camps across the United States.

In response to outreach from the Chicago Park District to identify ways to increase services for people with intellectual disabilities, Eunice Kennedy Shriver harnessed the power of the Kennedy Foundation to plan and fund the first international Special Olympics Games in Chicago's Soldier Field, on July 20, 1968. Over 1000 athletes participated in track, floor hockey, and aquatics sports at the first Games. In her Opening Ceremonies address Mrs. Kennedy Shriver emphasized *…the fact that exceptional children….can be exceptional athletes, the fact that through sports they can realize their potential for growth* (Special Olympics, 2010b, para. 8).

In 1977 Special Olympics expanded to include Winter Games with events in skiing and skating at Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Later Kennedy Shriver, with the help of her husband R. Sargent Shriver, gained approval and endorsement from the U.S. and International Olympic Committees for full recognition of Special Olympics and the authorization to use the name *Olympics*. Over the next few decades Special Olympics established programs in the Far East, Middle East and the countries of the former Soviet Union with R. Sargent Shriver serving as President beginning in 1984 and Chairman of the International Board of Directors beginning in 1990. Internationally, there are now over 226 Special Olympics programs involving 3.3 million athletes (Special Olympics, 2010a).

On August 11, 2009, Mrs. Kennedy Shriver passed away and a statement from the Shriver family to her Special Olympics *family* in part reads:

> *…it was her unconditional love for the athletes of Special Olympics that so fulfilled her life. As Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and social activist reminded us:* the beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image, lest we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

Her love for the athletes of Special Olympics was always just like that. She never hoped that people with intellectual disabilities should be somehow changed into something they were not. Rather, she fought throughout her life to ensure that they would be allowed to reach their full potential so that we might in turn be changed by them, forced to recognize our own false assumptions and their inherent gifts.

She fought the good fight, she kept the faith, and though she knew the race for equality was not finished, she knew that the army of supporters she had hoped for long ago had become a reality that would carry and someday complete her vision…. (Shriver, 2010, para. 9-11).

Fully recognizing that society still holds tremendous misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with intellectual disability, Eunice Kennedy Shriver and her husband R. Sargent Shriver established a legacy in a movement that will continue to change lives and attitudes for years to come.

Criticisms of Special Olympics

A number of scholars have suggested that rather than increasing the quality of life of its athletes, Special Olympics has limited their potential because of the segregated focus of programs and offerings (Hourcadde, 1989; Storey 2004, 2008). Storey argues *You can participate only if you have a disability, and as such, you have the major problem facing the progra*m (2008, p.135). Storey, in fact, directly advocates for the discontinuation of Special Olympics in favor of developing more inclusive recreational programs. The scholarly literature on integrated recreational services suggests that these programs should offer opportunities for individuals with cognitive disabilities that include regular interactions with individuals without disabilities (Will, 1984), and these services should be designed such that persons with disabilities might enjoy them to the same degree as persons without disabilities (Mank & Buckely, 1989).

An additional criticism of Special Olympics is that it reinforces the negative stereotypes commonly held toward people with significant learning difficulties. Evidence for this argument is illustrated in media accounts of Special Olympic events wherein athletes are often referred to as mentally retarded, handicapped, or *suffering* from a disability. Adding insult to this inappropriate terminology are the comments of famous and highly regarded individuals who, perhaps unintentionally, deride the program with off-the-cuff remarks. One prominent example is the recent comment by President Barak Obama

(March 19, 2009) on the Jay Leno show in which he described his bowling skills as … *like the Special Olympics or something*. A number of scholars have explored the nature of language as it is used to describe undervalued groups. In general, these descriptive labels serve to demean individuals with disabilities, distance them from the larger society, disregard individual differences, and focus attention only on a single aspect or trait of an individual from this group (Eayrs, Ellis, & Junes, 1993; Smart, 2001; Wolfensberger, 1995).

Closely aligned with this criticism is the concern that Special Olympics often host competitions in which children and adults participate at the same event. Storey (2008) suggests that this results in a loss of dignity when adults are denied their age-appropriate status. Storey further emphasizes this issue with examples from the media in which adult athletes are described as children or *kids*, and descriptions of recreational areas at competitions that include juvenile activities *such as clown toss, ring toss, and* golf *with plastic clubs and balls* (2008, p. 136). In effect, theses criticisms suggest that Special Olympics promote demeaning perspectives of the broader society toward individuals with severe disabilities.

Special Olympics has also been criticized for the way that it utilizes volunteers, and the missed opportunities for developing quality relationships between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. Much has been made of the use of *huggers* at competitive events. Volunteers, who participate in Special Olympics on a cursory level, only on the day of a competition, are often assigned the role of cheering on athletes, congratulating them following an event, and awarding medals. These activities fall within the *hugger* level of involvement with Special Olympics. The literature suggests that individuals with intellectual disabilities often display inappropriate social behaviors including violating social space, touching, etc. (Carter & Hughes, 2007). Storey (2008) chastises Special Olympics not only for reinforcing the infantilization of adults through hugging, but for directly interfering with their social skills development by requesting volunteers model inappropriate touching of strangers.

Volunteers who have more direct and sustained interactions with Special Olympic athletes such as coaches, event organizers, and board members are criticized for establishing subservient, paternalistic relationships. Storey (2008) cites the dominant role inherent in the coach and player relationship, and lack of leadership roles for individuals with developmental disabilities within the organization. Advocates for the development of lasting relationships between adults with and without disabilities suggest that interactions should be frequent, have a high probability of future exposure, and be of equal status (Chadsely, 2007). According to this definition, Special Olympics volunteers are unlikely to form lasting relationships with program athletes.

Other criticisms of Special Olympics including the functional value of certain events and the financial dealings of the organization have been adequately addressed elsewhere (Hughes & McDonald, 2008; MacLean, 2008), leaving one final concern regarding research on the impact of Special Olympic on the lives of athletes and the larger community. Storey (2008) presents several studies that suggest that Special Olympics, at best is as effective as integrated recreational programs in improving the quality of life of individuals with disabilities, and at worst promotes even more negative attitudes in the larger community. In effect, the concern is that there is no evidence of the effectiveness of Special Olympics.

The Nature and Scope of Special Olympics

In order to respond to criticisms against Special Olympics it is first helpful to understand the nature and scope of the movement as defined by its mission, goals, and programs. As articulated in the official SO website, the mission of Special Olympics is to

> provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community (Special Olympics, 2010c).

The philosophy of Special Olympics is:

> that people with intellectual disabilities can, with proper instruction and encouragement, learn, enjoy and benefit from participation in individual and team sports. Special Olympics believes that consistent training is essential to the development of sports skills, and that competition among those of equal abilities is the most appropriate means of testing these skills, measuring progress and providing incentives for personal growth. Special Olympics believes that through

> sports training and competition, people with intellectual disabilities benefit physically, mentally, socially and spiritually; families are strengthened; and the community at large, both through participation and observation, is united in understanding people with intellectual disabilities in an environment of equality, respect and acceptance (Special Olympics, 2010d).

Special Olympics outlines 11 guiding principles the first of which is:

> to help bring all persons with intellectual disabilities into the larger society under conditions whereby they are accepted, respected and given a chance to become productive citizens (Special Olympics, 2010d).

In addition to providing specific sport training and competition, Special Olympics offers a number of other programs focused on integrating sports, developing leadership skills among athletes, promoting the health and well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities, and improving the perceptions of larger society about the capabilities of this population.

Integrated Sports Programs

The Unified Sports program developed over 20 years ago was designed to include equal numbers of athletes with and without intellectual disabilities on sports teams. This effort has grown to include 150,000 participants in basketball, track and field, soccer, and golf (MacLean, 2008).

Leadership Programs

The Athlete Leadership and Global Messenger programs are designed to help athletes explore new opportunities as coaches, officials, public speakers, and board members. These programs assist athletes to become advocates for themselves and their peers and develop skills that lead to more independent living. As a result, there are more athletes serving in leadership roles within the organization (Special Olympics, 2010e).

Health Promotion Programs

Special Olympics has become the largest world health organization serving individuals with intellectual disabilities. Under the auspices of the Healthy Athlete program Special Olympics enlists health care volunteers to provide medical screenings and health promotion workshops at competitions. Sports physicals, audiology and vision exams, dentistry, and physical therapy are provided to athletes through this program. Volunteers gather information about the health care needs of individuals with disabilities and train medical professionals about their appropriate care (Special Olympics, 2010f).

School-based Educational Materials

The SO Get Into Program provides curriculum resource kits to primary grade teachers of students with and without disabilities. The program learning goals include helping students to understand, accept, and celebrate individual differences. The activities and resources in the Get Into It kit are provided to teachers free of charge through local Special Olympics programs and will soon be available on the Special Olympics website.

Language/Terminology Programs

The Special Olympics website offers disability language guidelines that help to inform the media and larger community about the impact of the words they use to describe individuals with disabilities. These guidelines include recommendations for person-first, politically correct, and age-appropriate language. In addition, Special Olympics has organized a campaign to stop the use of the word *retard*. Thousands of individuals and over 200 organizations have joined this movement by pledging their support at http://r-word.org/.

In sum, Special Olympics uses sport and competition as a vehicle to first allow its athletes to change their views of themselves, and second to change the community's understanding and perceptions of people with disabilities. Through SO programming, athletes begin to view themselves as successful, and they begin to learn lessons that carry over into their lives as active participants in the community. Athletes begin to see themselves as individuals worthy of appreciation, and as the larger community witnesses their joy and success they also develop an appreciation and respect for the athletes as people with tenacity and ability. As the President and CEO of Special Olympics New York, Neal Johnson is fond of saying *How can you see an athlete lift 300 pounds over his head and say* he's disabled*?*

In Defense of Special Olympics

The primary concern with Special Olympics is that its programs promote the segregation, and therefore marginalization, of individuals with intellectual disabilities. As noted above, the philosophy and guiding principles of the organization directly contradict this concern with the goal to bring individuals with intellectual disabilities into the broader society under conditions that promote acceptance, respect, and opportunities to become productive citizens. The mission of the organization, however, is not centered on inclusion; it is focused on providing *opportunities* for sports training and competition for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

These opportunities are becoming more exclusive throughout our society. Young children are tracked for travel teams by age eight. Students who can't compete on the high school junior varsity or varsity team have very limited opportunities to compete elsewhere, and by the time they enter young adulthood, if they are still interested in playing after years of being unsuccessful competitors, there are very few opportunities for them to develop their skills.

Furthermore, there are many anecdotal accounts of youth with disabilities serving as ball boys, team managers, and mascots. These youth may have more skill or potential than the athletes who make the team, yet they are assigned to menial tasks associated with the team perhaps because coaches don't know how to support their individual needs despite their skills and talents. Although often heralded as miracles, inclusion advocates should find tragic the sensational stories of team managers with disabilities finally playing in a single game in their final season and scoring points they could have been scoring over multiple seasons (Dehs, 2006).

Special Olympics recognize that these opportunities are significantly limited for all populations, and endeavors to change this situation for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In effect, Special Olympics never set itself up as an organization solely focused on integration and it has remained true to its mission from the start. Although some aspects of life such as school and work have high expectations for integration, others are social choices. Individuals select their own religious affiliation, community organizations, hobbies, and past times. Many of these choices are in themselves segregated, either by design or self-selection, to an even larger degree than Special Olympics. Girl scouts, for example, is an organization dedicated to developing opportunities for young females to function independently in an inclusive world. This organization however is not in itself inclusive. Because Special Olympics is one choice among a very few for individuals with intellectual disabilities the organization is criticized even though it endeavors to promote inclusion in the larger society.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities should not limit themselves to recreation and leisure activities that are segregated in nature, but when there are very limited options, they should not be prevented from participating in an activity they choose. Special Olympics coaches are trained to explore the sport-specific integrated opportunities in their neighborhoods and educate athletes about these options. Coaches are also trained to honor the choices and wishes of the athletes themselves regarding participation in inclusive recreational activities. Although others have criticized Special Olympics for not promoting integrated programming at all costs, the organization recognizes that the athlete's choice is the most important decision-making factor.

Special Olympics is among the most inclusive sporting organizations when it comes to implementation. Unlike most athletic competitions, there is no admission charge for SO events and athletes are never charged for their participation. Special Olympics make use of facilities that are typically enjoyed by the larger community enabling athletes to come into contact with individuals they may not typically be exposed.

Although Special Olympics was not specifically designed to meet the needs of individuals without intellectual disabilities it does welcome their participation at all levels. Evidence of this inclusive and welcoming nature can be seen in the existence of Unified Sports programs for over two decades. Hughes and McDonald (2008) indicate that Special Olympics has had limited success with establishing Unified Sports programs and typically competitions are held at the same larger Special Olympics games which in and of themselves are segregated. It may be true that compared to the 3.1 million Special Olympics athletes overall, 150,000 athletes participating in Unified Sports is less impressive. The question to critics should be, 'how many athletes with intellectual disabilities are playing in integrated competitions?' In

fact, it is not possible to gather this information because these opportunities are not provided or accounted for by any single entity with the scope of Special Olympics.

One reason that Unified Sports does not attract the same level of participation as general Special Olympics chapters may be the use of *divisioning*. Divisioning is a form of segregation utilized in all Special Olympics competitions (Special Olympics, 2010g). Athletes are placed into different divisions based on age, skill level, and gender. This practice is not unique to Special Olympics or Unified Sports. It can be found in little leagues, K-12, college, professional, and recreational athletics. Divisioning allows competition to take place between athletes of similar skill levels and cohorts. It enables athletes to train with proper support, understanding, and acceptance. It promotes safety as older or more skilled athletes can not harm younger or less skilled athletes. It also promotes a competitive spirit and achievement motivation. According to Expectancy Theory, individual motivation is based on a person's expectations for reward (Edwards, 1954; Atkinson, 1964; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In athletic terms this suggests that athletes are motivated if they perceive a chance for success and if success is not perceived as too easy. In short, athletes will want to play to their best ability if they perceive that they have a *sporting chance* at winning.

In today's society, there are far fewer barriers than there were when Special Olympics first began. However, many individuals with significant disabilities who try to participate in integrated and open leagues are not finding themselves successful in competing against peers without disabilities. They therefore have fewer opportunities to improve their skills and potentially join the integrated team in the future. The exclusivity presented by divisioning is perhaps more important today than it was 40 years ago because it provides athletes with the opportunity to experience success, develop skills, and potentially gain the confidence to try out in open leagues.

Unified Sports has been more successful among athletes with higher skill levels perhaps because volunteers interested *and* equally skilled in a sport are not as readily available as the general population of volunteers willing to fund raise or participate on the day of an event. In addition, athletes who are perhaps less skilled in a sport than the general population, have been denied the opportunity to participate in integrated school and community settings. Individuals in the broader community had these opportunities over a life time, and those with less skill may have developed negative attitudes toward the sport therefore leaving them less willing to volunteer in this capacity. Individuals with intellectual disabilities may be happy to finally have the opportunity to play and asking a volunteer having higher skills to play down their skills in a competition would be demeaning to the athlete and perpetuate the negative stereotypes of the larger community.

It may be helpful to look beyond the practice of inclusion itself to the central goal behind the call for its implementation. If the goal of inclusion is acceptance, respect, understanding and friendship this happens more naturally in situations where individuals have a common interest and view themselves as competent participants in the activity. In many cases individuals with significant intellectual disabilities need self-esteem remediation to first understand that they have the potential for success, before they are motivated to risk trying an activity with others. Through its exclusivity Special Olympics provides athletes with the opportunity to train, compete, and experience success before they are persuaded to join more inclusive settings.

Beyond the lack of inclusive programming, Special Olympics has been criticized for reinforcing negative stereotypes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Media accounts and comments by famous individuals about Special Olympics have described athletes as *kids*, *mentally retarded*, and *suffering*. As previously presented in the programming information, Special Olympics has made a concerted effort to help educate the media and large society on appropriate language. This information is supplied directly to journalists and available on the organization's website (Special Olympics, 2010h). It appears that critics would rather deny athletes the opportunity to compete than risk having the media or society perpetuate a misperception. As the Shriver family described in their letter to the Special Olympics family, Eunice Kennedy Shriver sought to allow to athletes with intellectual disabilities to reach their full potential so that the larger society *might be forced to recognize our own false assumptions* (Shriver, 2010). Without public, competitive events society can not bare witness to these capabilities. It is unfortunate that the media fails to appropriately articulate the events they cover, but it is not Special Olympics that should bear the blame.

Additional negative stereotyping for which Special Olympics is called to task hinges on the *infantilization* or promotion of childlike perceptions of adults with intellectual disabilities. Among the specific concerns cited in the literature is the practice of hosting competitions in which athletes of different ages participate together and of having carnival-like activity areas to fill down time at events. In response to these criticisms it should be noted that athletes are placed in divisions based on age and therefore do not compete against athletes of significantly discrepant ages. This criticism is the equivalent of saying that wresters of different weight classes should not participate in the same tournament venue.

It should also be noted that most competitive sporting events including professional games and the Olympics themselves include recreational areas that take on a community fair or festival-like quality. The Olympics has an Olympic Village and professional teams hold promotional events such as bat and hat days. These events are typically enjoyed by individuals of all ages, regardless of their disability status, for their social function.

Special Olympics volunteer opportunities have also been heavily criticized; especially the use of *huggers*. Although a number of veteran Special Olympic volunteers can recall participating on event days as *huggers*, there is not reference to the term in any of the current print or online resources promoted by Special Olympics. This term may have appeared at one time as a way to brand or market Special Olympic volunteerism, but is apparently no longer encouraged. Hugging itself however is not absent from Special Olympics competition just as it is not absent from any exciting athletic event in which well-matched teams battle to games end, or an underdog competitor comes out victorious. Cheering, screaming, high fives, and hugging are present and valued by many Special Olympics athletes, as they are by general society.

Single event volunteering is still a core Special Olympics need and gateway into higher levels of volunteering. Individuals are needed to register teams and other volunteers, direct the flow of participants, set up, clean up, etc. Each registered volunteer is provided with a handbook that addresses sensitive topics including appropriate terminology and physical contact. Quite often family members and friends of athletes are recruited on the spot as volunteers. When these individuals get caught up in the lives of the athletes they came to see, cheering and hugging following their successes, it certainly does not violate norms related to social space and touching. In fact, it is a teachable moment for an appropriate celebration of life events.

As for the use of volunteers as coaches, assistant coaches, and board members these activities are very likely to promote positive perceptions toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. They meet all of the criteria for establishing lasting relationships including frequent interactions with a high probability of future exposure (Chadsley, 2007). The only missing component is the requirement for *equal status* in the relationships. As Storey (2008) points out, coaches and board members without disabilities perpetuate a paternalistic relationship with athletes, suggesting that they are not capable of advocating for themselves. The coaching relationship inherent in sports does include an element of acquiescence to the coach. This occurs throughout the broader society and is a reality associated with quality team play. It is also a factor associated with employment, politics, and general democratic interplay. In our society it is beneficial for team members to have a voice but the coach, employer, elected official, etc. makes the guiding decisions for the group, such is also the case in sport. The SO volunteers serving as coaches and board members are often leaders in the business world. The interactions they have through Special Olympics may change their perceptions and lead them to hire athletes as their employees. This would, of course, perpetuate the paternalistic relationship into the work world but as stated before this is a common experience of the broader working society.

This fact of life does not suggest that individuals with intellectual disabilities should not be supported in their efforts to rise to these levels of leadership. Special Olympics provide opportunities for athletes to serve as coaches, assistant coaches, team captains, and board members through the Athlete Leadership and Global Messenger programs. Florence Nabayinda, a Special Olympics Athlete from Uganda, sits on the International Special Olympics Board of Directors and is an alumnus of the Global Messenger program. Loretta Claiborne, a Special Olympics runner, holds ESPN's Espy Arthur Ashe award for courage and an honorary doctorate from Quinnipiac College. Ms. Claiborne is a motivational speaker and serves on the Special Olympics Partnership Board. She participated in the First Global Athlete Congress, planning the 2003 World Games. The Third Global Athlete Congress met in Marrakech, Morocco in June 2010 with more than 60 athletes from 35 different countries. These athletes have

participated in the Global Messenger program and serve on this strategic planning arm of the organization focused on improving and expanding Special Olympic programming. In response to critics, Special Olympics makes a concerted effort to support athletes in their own advocacy and that of their peers.

A final criticism of the Special Olympics movement is the lack of research supporting its impact on the lives of athletes. Special Olympics actually brands itself as the *leader in cutting-edge research and evaluation to better understand the many challenges faced by people with intellectual disabilities and the significant impact of Special Olympics on their lives* (Special Olympics, 2010i, para. 1). Special Olympics has conducted a number of large-scale assessments on the impact of its programs on athletes, families, and society. SO funds research grant opportunities for students studying in the health and social science professions. In addition to direct assessment of its programs, Special Olympics is a leading the way in sharing research that directly impacts the lives of individuals with disabilities. Their efforts have led to policy changes, funding appropriations, and international partnerships that extend well beyond the scope of sports and into health care, education, and employment issues faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. For extensive information on the research conducted by Special Olympics visit their website (Special Olympics, 2010i).

Storey's (2008) concern that the research does not support Special Olympics programming over more integrated opportunities may be accurate, however these opportunities are not widely available for comparison, and Special Olympics is not the impediment to starting these integrated programs. In fact, their research on Unified Sports is leading the way (Special Olympics, 2010j , 2010k).

Although the scholarly research has not yielded much in the way of comparison studies between Special Olympics and more integrated sport-focused programs, in the last five years alone there have been numerous studies of the impact of Special Olympics on athletes, families, and the general public. Studies of SO impacts on athlete participation, fitness, health, self-concept, and development demonstrate generally positive results (Hild, Hey, Baumann, Montgomery, Euler, Neumann, 2008; Sinha, Montgomery, Herer, McPherson, 2008; Weiss & Bebko, 2008; Gillespie, 2009; Harada & Siperstein, 2009; Tedrick, 2009; Tamse, Tillman, Stopka, Weimer, Abrams & Issa, 2010). Studies have also identified improving attitudes of the general public (Townsend & Hassall, 2007; Conaster, Naugle, Tillman, Stopka, 2009) and mental health of athletes' caregivers (Weiss & Diamond, 2005; Goodwin, Fitzpatrick, Thurmeier & Hall, 2006; Weiss, 2008).

Special Olympics programming may also combat the more general findings on sedentary life styles of youth and adults with intellectual disabilities. This research suggests that adults often remain in day habilitation facilities isolated from their peers and these centers have been negatively associated with physical activity (Emerson, 2005). Research further demonstrates that individuals with intellectual disabilities are often encouraged in their sedentary behaviors by well-intentioned individuals from their support system who see them as vulnerable or frail (Stanish, Temple, & Frey, 2006). Participating in Special Olympics programming enables the larger society to view athletes as competent and empowered individuals who engage in physical activity and sport as a social outlet just as their peers without disabilities (Frey, Buchanan, Rosser & Sandt, 2005).

Conclusion

Mayor Richard Daley said to Mrs. Kennedy Shriver on opening day of the First International Special Olympic Games *You know, Eunice, the world will never be the same after this* and he was certainly right. Special Olympics now offers opportunities to millions of youth and adults with intellectual disabilities around the world. In addition to sport training, they now have improved access to health care and leadership training. The larger society is also changing as a result of this movement. There are more integrated sports and recreational opportunities, including Unified Sports, and people are beginning to realize the impact of their language choices on the perceptions of others.

Special Olympics has faced a number of challenges in its attempts to improve opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. As Mrs. Kennedy Shriver well understood at the time of her passing, the race for equality and social justice for this population is certainly not finished, but her vision for the Special Olympics movement lives on in the many volunteer and athlete participants.

Rather than discontinuing Special Olympics, as some critics have called for (Moon, 1994; Storey, 2008), it may be more productive to join a movement that has demonstrated success for more than 40 years, and help it to continue the vision of Eunice Kennedy Shriver to allow athletes *to reach their full potential so that we might in turn be changed by them, forced to recognize our own false assumptions and their inherent gifts* (Shriver, 2010, para. 1). It may also be less paternalistic to consider the desires of Special Olympics athletes for training and competition than it is to disregard their feelings and presume we know better.

Critics of the Special Olympics movement might better offer a model or example of athletic programming that does more to allow athletes with disabilities to change their understandings of themselves and the community's perceptions of them. Storey and others are correct in identifying the availability of integrated and inclusive recreational opportunities. Presumably these programs are not openly discriminating but they are certainly underutilized by the population of individuals with intellectual disabilities. They are also not openly offering opportunities for those needing to develop their skills so that they may one day play at the level of competition of the broader community using their facilities. Following two decades of casting aspersions on Special Olympics (Hourcadde, 1989; Storey 2004, 2008) critics should, by now, be able to suggest alternative programs, either in theory or active practice, with the potential to offer the same or better impacts for individuals with disabilities in the larger community.

Biographical Note

It is important to recognize our apparent biases in favor of Special Olympics at the outset. The primary author is a trained Special Olympics coach having volunteered for the organization for the past four years, and established college level programming to attract and prepare future volunteers for service to the organization. The co-author is an employee of Special Olympics New York, acting as its former Director of Outreach and current Director of Training. Balancing these admitted biases readers should note that the authors have a long history of advocacy for educational and community inclusion for individuals with disabilities; having studied under and with some of the most radical leaders of the inclusive movement, authored articles promoting inclusive practice, and serving in various direct advocacy capacities locally, nationally, and internationally.

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