

Special Olympics Teaches Life Lessons for All

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The modern Olympics are the leading international sporting event in which thousands of competitors from around the world participate in a variety of summer and winter games. Athletes and their coaches prepare a lifetime for these events. Excitement is high for both the participants and the spectators. Many will travel thousands of miles halfway around the world to sit in the audience and witness outstanding athletes competing.

This week, Southeast High School had the honor of hosting 291 Olympians from Dalton City Schools, Murray County Schools, and Whitfield County Schools. In addition to the athletes, there were another 80 student volunteers from Southeast High and 45 adult volunteers from the community. These volunteers began their day at 7 a.m. to set up equipment and prepare for the arrival of the star athletes. They worked all day in the sun, assisting the athletes in their quests. No, these students were not participating in the world Olympic Games, but their dedication and the level of excitement they exhibited was just as inspiring as if they were competing in the Olympic Games in some faraway, exotic land!

The Special Olympics were founded in 1968 to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type events for children and adults. The mission remains as relevant and important today as it was during its initial year. At the Special Olympics this week, children with intellectual and physical challenges were given the opportunity to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience the fun of participating and building friendships with other athletes, peers, and adults. Through this field and track event, our students were celebrated for their abilities instead of concentrating on their disabilities. Most of these students don't participate in school team sports. This was a fun day for them to show the world what they could do when given the opportunity.

As I sat in the audience and watched the events, I observed many lessons being learned by our students involved in the competitions. These were not academic lessons, but rather the development of values that will help them throughout life.

They learned the value of setting a goal and achieving it. I watched as a student struggled to finish a race. Her pace slowed to a walk, and you could tell she was tired and wanted to quit. Her adult coach, however, was running beside her and encouraging her to complete her goal. As she struggled across the finish line, she stopped, turned, smiled, and began to yell encouragement to the next runner who was struggling behind her.

When the second student crossed the finish line, both students jumped with joy and congratulated each other. At that moment, their self-image was at an all-time high. They were proud of their ribbons and just as excited as if they had won the Olympic gold. I don't know if these two girls knew each other before the race, but at that moment they were developing a friendship and learning the importance of sportsmanship. It did not matter who won. What mattered was that everyone worked together to meet their goal to cross that finish line.

Adults can learn many lessons from these Special Olympic athletes. Our world would be a much better place if we all could concentrate less on ourselves and reaching our goals and more on helping others reach theirs. The Special Olympics encourages us all to be more tolerant of those who are different from us and to appreciate the differences that we all have. The Golden Rule sums it up – Treat others as you would want to be treated.