



SPECIAL OLYMPICS ST. MARY'S



BILL SIMPSON



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"Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."
These are the words of a Special Olympics athlete; words we can all learn something from.



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GAIL HOLLIS



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Special Olympics athletes experience the excitement and feeling of accomplishment that goes with competition and make lifelong friends along the way.



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Local Special Olympics organizations offer competition in a variety of sports, including sailing at St. Mary's College.

ATHLETES *Extraordinaire*

Story by Tina Wagner

In 1958, Eunice Kennedy Shriver had the idea that people with intellectual challenges would benefit from competing in sporting events. She opened "Camp Shriver" in her own backyard, and 75 children with intellectual disabilities participated. Ten years later, Special Olympics was born. Today, the international organization lives out its mission: "Through the power of sport, Special Olympics strives to create a better world by fostering the acceptance and inclusion of all people."

Here in Southern Maryland,

Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's counties all have branches of the organization so that local athletes can benefit from the excitement, camaraderie, competition and friendship-building that goes with participation in the Special Olympics. In all three counties, athletes perform in one big olympic event held locally each year, and are provided other opportunities to partici-

pate in various events all year long. Sports such as basketball, soccer, swimming and bowling are offered for special olympians throughout the region. Kayaking, powerlifting, equestrian sports and bocce are on the list, too, serving as a reminder that these athletes can do anything.

George Hoehl, assistant area director, treasurer, coach and unified partner of Special Olympics Maryland-Charles County, explains that "special olympians learn the rules and skills of each of the sports they participate in, and they build lifelong friendships. Special Olympics competitions provide an opportunity for the olympian to be successful and to achieve a sense of accomplishment." Hoehl also points out the importance of volunteers. "Only with the support of volunteers can our special olympians receive the quality of training that enables them to participate in national and international competitions."



SPECIAL OLYMPICS CHARLES COUNTY

Athlete Christine Hoehl and her coach, Joan Martin, at a competition in China.

According to Hoehl, in the last four years, Charles County Special Olympics has sent athletes to Las Vegas and Reno for unified bowling, Lincoln, Neb., for golf, and China for bocce. To be selected for these national and international competitions, a Special Olympics athlete must win a gold medal at a tournament that provides competition with athletes from the entire state of Maryland.

On the first Saturday of May, Charles County Special Olympics holds its largest event for olympians all over the region – the Spring Games. It normally offers competition in athletics (track and field), aquatics (swimming) and bocce. Planning for the event begins in February each year. During the organization's 30 years of existence, it has developed relationships with many county agencies and businesses that help with the event year after year. The Charles County Sheriff's Department stands ready to hand out medals to winners, and last year Chick-fil-A made sure there was plenty of food on hand for the olympians and their coaches.

"It's where the athletes learn, it's their socialization, what they look forward to, where they make friends."
Mary Lu Bucci, St. Mary's County Special Olympics

In St. Mary's County, about 330 athletes are registered with Special Olympics. Athletes range in age from eight to adult, and the sports in which they compete run the gamut from cycling to sailing. Athletes participate in events throughout the state and, this June, the soccer team will travel to Athens, Greece, to compete in the World Games. Mary Lu Bucci, county director for 21 years and

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mother of an adult special olympian, explains that Special Olympics is about more than just sports. "It's where the athletes learn, it's their socialization, what they look forward to, where they make friends." She's been with the organization for so long because she truly believes in the benefits it provides.

The director of Calvert County Special Olympics, Anne Harmon, also believes in the importance of Special Olympics, but stresses that it takes a lot of resources to put on events. She explains that the organization relies on donations and the help of volunteers, many of whom are parents of athletes, therapeutic recreational specialists or teachers from local schools.

For the past 16 years, Dave Ring has served on the Special Olympics Committee of the Calvert County Public Schools Special Education Department. Known as the voice of the Calvert County Special Olympics, he has the privilege of interacting with athletes by announcing their

medals. He also works to secure donations from organizations such as the Calvert County Lions Club, and Calvert, St. Leonard and Solomons Optimist Clubs.

Ring agrees that volunteers are essential to the success of the organization. "One of the things that touches my heart each year is the interaction that student volunteers have with the Special Olympics athletes," he says. "All of the high schools in our county have started what is called the Best Buddies program. The Best Buddies help special needs students to fit in and interact in daily academic and social situations. These buddies attend Special Olympics each year and do an incredible job of supporting the athletes as mentors and as friends."

To demonstrate how Special Olympics changes the lives of its athletes and exposes them to cultures they otherwise would not be exposed to, Hoehl tells a story about his daughter Christine. "It was a standing joke that any time Christine was asked which restaurant she wanted to go to, her

response was always 'not Chinese.'" Hoehl explains that, ironically, Christine was the athlete who got to go to China twice to participate in bocce events. During her trips, she was invited into the home of a Chinese family to learn their culture, and one lesson was on how to make wonton noodles. As a result, Christine now enjoys wonton soup and uses the broth to flavor her white rice.

Special olympians are amazing athletes and the organization provides them with an opportunity to excel in their favorite sport. The athletes, the volunteers and all those who make Special Olympics what it is today continue to bring Eunice Shriver's vision to fruition right here in Southern Maryland. ♦

For more about Special Olympics, including lists of events in 2011 and information about how to become a volunteer, visit your local organization on the web. Calvert County: www.somdcalvert.org; Charles County: www.charlescounty.org/cs/specialolympics; St. Mary's County: www.stmarysso.org.



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