

2-2009

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Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "Spirit of Sportsmanship: Liberty Professor, Wife Team Up to Help Special Olympics Athletes" (2009). *February/March 2009*. Paper 13.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2009_feb/13

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Spirit of Sportsmanship: Liberty professor, wife team up to help Special Olympics athletes

February 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

Jim and Heather Schoffstall will never forget the Special Olympics track event they watched a few years ago.

"They're sprinting, and about halfway one of them falls. Well, they all stop. They all go back, help [the runner] up, and then they keep going," Jim recalled, grinning. "You wouldn't see that at the NCAA level. You don't see that at the Olympics."

Jim, who teaches in the Health Sciences and Kinesiology Department at Liberty University, said the sportsmanship and spirit of Special Olympics is infectious - and Heather, director of LU's Bruckner Learning Center for academic support, agreed.

"They're always cheering each other on," she said.

The couple's passion for Special Olympics and people with special needs has been long-standing, but they took their commitment to a new level recently by becoming the official coordinators for Lynchburg's Special Olympics.

"There's a lot more things involved than we'd realized and a lot more time and effort than we'd anticipated, but it's worth it for the athletes," Heather said, detailing the hours of paperwork and

fundraising to make sports such as volleyball, golf, bowling, gymnastics, basketball and track available to the local athletes.

Lynchburg has nearly 25 Special Olympians ranging from their late teens to age 61 - but the Schoffstalls see that as only a starting point.

"We really are planning on expanding the program," Heather said.

Seeing God in the details

"You can sort of see how God led us to this point," said Heather, 36. "It's really neat to see how He works."

Heather, who grew up with a special needs sister, recalls that many special education classes were segregated into portable classrooms outside her school when she was growing up. Her sister's needs weren't as severe as some of the other children's, but Heather still thought someone could do a better job for those students.

"I always had the heart for special needs," she said.

Jim, who lived next door to a special needs person as a child, had an interest in aiding people with disabilities even before he met Heather at a university in Norfolk, Va.

Heather earned a special education degree while Jim completed course work to become a licensed special education teacher, and both started teaching in public schools. They also began caring for foster children before their 3-year-old son, Toby, was born. Many of their foster children had special needs - so Jim and Heather got them involved in Special Olympics.

"We knew we wanted to get more involved even back then," Heather said.

The couple moved to Lynchburg in 1999 and worked for Lynchburg City Schools. Not long after that, they were hiking at the Peaks of Otter on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Heather was wearing a Special Olympics T-shirt she got from previously volunteering with the non-profit. As she and Jim hiked, the couple passed another woman on the trail who pointed to Heather's T-shirt and said she had a special needs daughter.

"[She] put us in touch with the local Lynchburg person, and we've been involved ever since," Heather said.

Jim started working with the golf team, and Heather took on gymnastics.

"It's a year-round training program. There are only a few weeks during the year that there's not some training taking place," said Jim, 39.

The LU connection

Jim started teaching at LU eight years ago — and one of his classes deals with modifying physical education classes for students with specific physical or mental challenges. To give the future educators some hands-on experience, Jim requires them to do three hours of work with the Special Olympics or a similar organization.

Describing how some LU students first react to the assignment, he said: “The biggest thing is fear of the unknown, especially the ones who have never worked with anyone with disabilities. They’re like, ‘I don’t know what these people are going to be like, what they’re going to do, what they’re going to say’ — and it’s really interesting to see how their attitudes change throughout the semester.”

Close to 20 students and staff from LU volunteer with the local Special Olympics, he said.

Further nurturing the relationship between LU and the Special Olympics athletes, the Schoffstalls organize trips for the Olympians to watch sporting events on campus, and sometimes the LU athletes even arrange a friendly game against the Olympians.

“Some of the [Olympians] are so talented. They’re better athletes than we are in some of the sports,” Heather said, explaining that Special Olympics attracts a broad range of talent.

The Olympians are a constant blessing to Jim, and he believes LU students and staff could be equally blessed by volunteering their time.

“Some of the skills are really new to some of the athletes, and it takes patience,” he said. “It is nice when you see them doing things in competition that they’ve been working on and they finally get it.”

You don’t need to be an expert to volunteer with Special Olympics. For more information, email hschoffstall@liberty