

Burt Baxley competing on the slopes.



Special Olympics in South Carolina

By Mary Jean Baxley

"Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

—Special Olympics Oath

My son Burt Baxley of Columbia and other athletes recite these words at each Special Olympic opening ceremony. The words tell so much about the courageous, hard-working athletes who also serve as great role models as they exemplify the Special Olympic oath. Burt loves the Special Olympic competition and has participated since he was eight. He doesn't always win the gold, but he always gives a golden effort.

This is the 40th anniversary of Special Olympics. Created from a single meet in Chicago in 1968, it was established and sponsored by the Kennedy Foundation under the guidance of Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

Special Olympics probably has more groups working collectively to make everything fall into place than any other organization. Athletes are trained for months by coaches and volunteers. Churches, civic clubs, military personnel, law enforcement staff, small businesses, large corporations and parents of athletes and individuals all work year-round to help with the competition.

It takes financial support and lots of caring volunteers to provide for over 15,000 athletes in

South Carolina. One organization that pledged their help statewide is the 11,000-member South Carolina Law Enforcement Officers' Association (S.C.L.E.O.A.). They collected between \$350,000 and \$400,000 in 2007.

Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott was president of the S.C.L.E.O.A. when they pledged to adopt Special Olympics as their cause. "I have four healthy children and I admire parents with special kids who give their lives to taking care of them. I want to help and I want to encourage others to volunteer their time and money. I see the pride and courage that the athletes demonstrate. The people at the sheriff's department care and are involved year round," said Sheriff Lott.

There are 22 sports events offered in South Carolina. At Swansea High School in Lexington District 4, Special Olympic athletes are involved in a mainstream partnership with the entire community. Football and softball coach Marty Mack and Special Education teacher Beth Tuten have formed a partnership, and high school students apply to serve as volunteers with athletes. They all work year-round during training and attend events.

Coach Mack looks for students who are willing to work and show compassion, which creates a win-win situation for everyone. Many graduates come back to help at the events, inspiring even further opportunities. One former student, Anna Bartels, hopes to become a special education teacher. Compassion and caring have special meaning, not only at Swansea High School, but with many volunteers. They find they experience personal growth because of their friendships with Special Olympians.

Beth Tuten says the athletes have to train a minimum of eight weeks in order to compete one hour each day during the competition. It is hard work. Athlete Daniel Floyd loves basketball. Floyd said, "I have competed for five years and enjoy it. I want more students to compete and more to help." Floyd is also the basketball manager.



Eunice Shriver & Burt Baxley.

Photo by Beth Tuten



Special Olympic athletes



More Special Olympic games



Swansea students compete in unified sports, which mean they pair up with a partner. This year, they compete in bocce, track and field, volleyball and basketball. The only individual event was alpine skiing.

Barry Coats, President and CEO for South Carolina Special Olympics, insist his job is not a job—it's a lifestyle. Coats said, "I enjoy what I do. I've been doing it 22 years." His eight-year-old daughter Erin competes in bowling, equestrian and gymnastics.

According to Coats, without volunteers running the programs and financial donors providing much-needed funds, the athletes could not be served. "We need more donors and volunteers. It takes over 10,000 volunteers during a year to keep programs going around the state," said Coats.

One local company that provides financial support and volunteers is Colonial Life. Tom Gilligan, Colonial Life Senior Vice President of Marketing and Branding, serves as chairman of the South Carolina Special Olympics Board of Directors. 200-300 employees donate their vacation hours to help at the competition. Many of them will help at the state games at Fort Jackson May 2-4.

This year Fort Jackson will celebrate 40 years of participation with Special Olympics. Colonel Kevin A. Shwedo, Deputy Commander at the fort, believes that in order to appreciate the community, you have to reach out and get involved. Colonel Shwedo said you get more out of Special Olympics than you put in. He adds that you can give as much or as little as you want, but he encourages people to come for the opening ceremony and help all the way through church services. His mother served as "a hugger" and instilled in him a great love for Special Olympians.

One athlete competing in track and field at Fort Jackson is Tara Freeman from Columbia. "I like to see my friends and I like bowling and track and field," she said. Her mother, Elizabeth Comer, coaches the master bowling team for Richland and Lexington counties. Master bowlers are over 21.

Comer has been involved for 20 years as a parent and volunteer and says she has loved every minute. She owns a small business (It's All In The Name, 919 Sumter Street), so she was concerned that she would not have time to juggle both responsibilities, but quickly learned she could balance both.



Group shot bocce teams. Parents and athlete compete as a team.

Not only should families attend practices with their children, they should also become partners on unified teams. My son Burt is a master bowler. Recently he joined a unified bocce

team with his dad, Norman Baxley. They competed in Anderson November 3 in the fall games. After months of practice, they were triumphant in winning gold medals. That was a first in our family—father and son standing together receiving gold medals. I was very proud of them.

Their bocce coach is Niko Sirignano and he has been involved since 1969 coaching basketball, bowling and bocce. His brother, Joe, bowls and competes in bocce (his favorite sport), basketball, track and field, softball, volleyball,

floor hockey and soccer. Joe likes his friends and coaches.

After the closing ceremonies in Anderson, Burt socialized with friends. Interaction with other athletes is a big part of Special Olympics. At one point I looked around and Burt was sitting and talking to his former coach, Dennis Jefferson, from Florence. Dennis took Burt to Boone for skiing competition and was his bowling coach. He and Dennis have a strong friendship that has lasted many years. Both Burt and Dennis had brothers who died. They have shared the grief of loss, yet the knowledge that their brothers are in heaven sustains them.

Gabriel Tubolino of Columbia competes with Burt in bocce and bowling. His entire family is supportive of Special Olympics. His mother, Margarta Tubolino, says that since Gabriel has been part of Special Olympics, he is more alert and enjoys going places with the group and being with his friends.

David Hensley of Irmo enjoys bowling practices and competition. His sister, Deb Matney, brings him and enjoys watching the athletes have a good time.

Steve Mintz and his parents, Bobbie and Joe Mintz of Lexington, have been bowling as a family for years. Steve is a master bowler who said, "I like Special Olympics because I get to go out of town with my friends and participate in different sports." He has won 12 gold medals and six silver medals. Bobbie Mintz says she likes the fellowship and encouragement the parents give each other.



Burt Baxley & Gov. Mark Sanford

USC will host area games in April. Coach Steve Spurrier stars in the South Carolina Special Olympics "BE A FAN" campaign. The athletes will be greatly encouraged if a lot of fans attend and cheer them on to victory.

In October, South Carolina sent four athletes to China for the 2007 World Summer Games. Diana Poiletman from Columbia won the gold in the 50 meter butterfly, a bronze in the 100 meter freestyle, and a bronze in an aquatics medley relay. Diana enjoyed meeting other athletes and making Chinese dumplings. She loved the opening ceremonies and competing with athletes from different countries.

South Carolina Special Olympics appreciates all the athletes, coaches, families, volunteers and donors, but they need your help, too! Please contact the Special Olympic Office at 1-800-765-7276 or 1-803-772-1555 to help and learn of current dates, times and locations in your area. The office is located at 800 Dutch Square Blvd, Suite 204, Columbia, SC, 29210.

Mary Jean is involved with her church and missions. She has written for newspapers and magazines and was Public Relations Director at the American Red Cross where she now serves as a volunteer on a Disaster team. In addition to freelance writing, she enjoys spending time with her husband, Norm, and her son, Burt, who serves as usher in his church and lives at home. Mary Jean can be reached at mjgkb@aol.com.