

# beyond special olympics

by Hans F. Lessmann

As I ponder my experiences with Special Olympics, I am struck with several observations. Why has this program been so universally accepted? What attracts such a diversity of cultures and nations?

Why do so many wonderful coaches and volunteers continue to show up and perform so admirably at all levels? Why do we all walk away feeling good? Who thinks badly of Special Olympics? Behind the scenes there are always issues, but why is it that these issues seem to be largely managed?

People seem to come together for Special Olympics, why?

My daughter, Jessica, 14, recently returned from our local Special Olympics Pennsylvania (USA) county Summer Games with four gold medals. My wife reported that as they left the event, Jessica said, "That was fun, thanks mom." How often does a teenager say thanks? That is special. Prior to this event, Jessica always finished third. Amazingly, that third place was just as gratifying as first place. In her mind there is no difference; we came together; we ran together; we finished together; what is more important, placement or togetherness? However, her training and consistency has allowed her to excel. A good lesson for all of us.

As an optometrist, I know the importance of training and health on performance. Hence, the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes® initiative is a vital program toward enhancing athletic performance. As part of the Special Olympics-Lions Clubs International Opening Eyes® vision screening program, I serve as the western Pennsylvania Clinical Director. Jeanine Ceasar, our state President, has commented to me that the coaches notice their athletes perform better when they see better. That should be a no brainer, but it is important to note that it is an issue. Examining special populations is challenging, and part of this program is familiarizing professionals with these issues and best practices.

So what is beyond? One of my first contacts with Opening Eyes was Paul Berman, who recently was recognized as Optometrist of the Year by the World Council of Optometry. Early on, he stated to me that what Special Olympics is really about is acceptance!

Acceptance of what? As we struggle with the many problems of life, how is it that these challenged individuals come out and compete? How can they do this and be happy about it? Aren't they worried about tomorrow? How will they survive? Yet, they are surviving, even thriving, and miraculously celebrating it. Why can't we enjoy life as they do? In the chaos and pace of the modern human race, how do we connect with those essential reflections of life?



*Hans and Jessica Lessmann's excursion on Pennsylvania's Rails-to-Trails, 4 July 2004.*

Photos: Courtesy of Hans Lessman

In the regular Olympics, or the not so special Olympics, is it all about competition? On first thought most would say yes, but is there something else? Don't the best television ratings come from the Opening and Closing Ceremonies? That's not competition. Do we not learn something from each other's cultures and nations that sheds new meaning on our own lives and culture? As we come together don't we all aspire to show our best? Is it not fitting that from time to time we should come together and celebrate each other, our lives, and be thankful in any measure of accomplishment? After all, what could be more important?

Maybe, as we come to accept Special Olympics athletes and celebrate their efforts however great or small they may be, we just might come to accept ourselves a little more despite the many disappointments we may have.

So, as we pause to share in their celebration, maybe they share something with us: that whatever ails you, your past is history, the future will be what it will be, but we do have today so let us rejoice and be thankful.