

Valverde School District Special Olympics Interview

Individuals participating:

Ayriawana Emanuel-Interviewer

Makayla Wilbanks-Interviewer

Sarah Nesvold-District Special Olympics Coordinator/Interviewee

Michelle Perryman-District Special Olympics Coach/Interviewee

(Start of Interview)

A. Emanuel: So we decided to do our project on the Special Olympics mainly because we wanted more coverage about it into to more like inform people because I believe that a lot of people understand why Special Olympics was created in the first place, no one knows the history of how the Intellectually Disabled were treated, so we wanted to bring light onto that specifically.

M. Wilbanks: So, can I have you please introduce yourself and your role in the Special Olympics and the district, please?

S. Nesvold: My name is Sarah Nesvold. I am the coordinator for Special Education Apartment. My role with the Special Olympics is that we started a partnership three years ago. At the start of our partnership, I was actually the executive director of the games at that point. What our partnership was with the Special Olympics at that time was to have a full day event called School games, where we partner with the Special Olympics and we have all the good stuff. We have the torch, the Olympics village, the opening ceremony, all the good stuff of Special Olympics, right? But it is all focused on our student-athletes.

M. Perryman: I'm Michelle Perryman. I'm the Special Education teacher on assignment within the district. I work specifically with the moderate/severe population, so our district's life skills program, our autism programs, and then like the adult programs, so like bridges and we also have an adult autism program. I support those, so, my role in Special Olympics the past three years has been, almost like teacher support. So I work a lot with the kids, I'm out there supporting them, working, you know, with supportive behaviors, getting them where they need to be, supporting the teachers, and supporting the staff. So, support role. Last year I did run the Olympic village, so that was a lot of fun. Got to see a lot of families go through there. But I set up the booths, ran different activities that the kids did, and then this year I'm actually helping a little bit more.

S. Nesvold: Yes, the second year of the event, Christian Web was our executive director and this year Michelle Perryman will be our executive director for the games.

M. Wilbanks: So, what was the District's motivation to bring the Special Olympics to our community?

S. Nesvold: Really the motivation came from our community, which was awesome. We, previous to partnering with Special Olympics, we had an event in our district called Sports Day. And our adaptive PE teachers developed that for specifically our students that had intellectual disabilities, multiple physical disabilities, and autism. And, so, we would come together as a district for those classes and, basically, have a fun-filled sports day. There wasn't necessarily any competition going on. We had good community support for that point and one of our community members came to us and let us know that there really isn't a lot of opportunity for students, specifically in our area of Perris and Moreno Valley, for them to be able to have sports in their lives. And sports are, sports, music, and all that stuff is so important to our kids. That really to us showed that we needed to create something in the district for them to have if it wasn't already out in the community. So, we reached out to Special Olympics and found out that they do partner with school districts for this specific event, which is school games, and we jumped right in for that because we wanted to make sure that we were providing those opportunities for our kids and our families.

M. Wilbanks: As coordinator, what interactions have you had with the Special Olympics athletes?

S. Nesvold: The first year I had the honor of serving as Executive Director of School Games leading planning and organizing with the various event directors who oversaw components of the games including opening ceremonies, sporting events, award ceremonies, and Olympic village. My role really was to support the games and training behind the scenes to ensure the day was successful for our athletes, coaches, and families. Kristin Webb picked up that torch for the second year and Michelle Perryman will this year. Each year gets bigger and better! I was able to participate in the event more closely with the student-athletes last year in organizing the awards ceremonies.

M. Wilbanks: Is there any evidence of positive changes in the attitudes of the Athletes?

S. Nesvold: Yes! They are so excited for this event and look forward to it all year. I think the most impactful change we've seen is the growth in their confidence! This event provides them the chance to show off their abilities and what they can do instead of what they can't do because of their disabilities.

M. Wilbanks: Has there been any backlash or negative effects of the program that you have noticed?

S. Nesvold: Thankfully no. I think the only feedback we've received that is a critique is that it is only an event one time a year. Coaches, athletes, and families would love to see more opportunities throughout the year.

M. Wilbanks: How has the community grown to support special education and their sports events?

S. Nesvold: We have had a tremendous outpouring of support from the community. That support has come from our community within Val Verde District, outside community organizations and families. The Special Education Department has had the unwavering support from all over the district. From the Board of Education, our Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents, District Level Departments, Principals, and our school sites! We have had to limit the amount of students and staff volunteers because so many people want to be part of this! From the community, we have had wonderful support from donations to volunteers! And of course, none of this would be possible without VVUSD families. Hundreds of family and community spectators come out to cheer on the student-athletes in all their events!!!

M. Wilbanks: Have you noticed a positive shift in attitudes in those who volunteer, toward the intellectually disabled?

S. Nesvold: Definitely. This event has helped to support inclusivity throughout our district. Non-disabled peers compete alongside students with special needs as teammates fostering friendships that last beyond the games. Many, many students and staff volunteers from sites such as cheerleading squads, basketball teams, and ASB work together to support the day and celebrate all the student-athletes as they compete! From this, we have seen an increase in students and staff requesting to get more involved in activities throughout the school year.

M. Wilbanks: Does the district have any plans to expand on their partnership with the Special Olympics? If so, what are the plans?

S. Nesvold: Yes! We are very excited and proud that we will be expanding on the partnership we have with the Special Olympics organization. We are currently in the process of moving towards our long term goal of becoming a Unified Champion School District. VVUSD school sites have the opportunity to obtain the title of a Unified

Champion School by meeting three requirements: Special Olympics Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole-school engagement. We look forward to this exciting endeavor through our partnership with the Special Olympics Organization.

A. Emanuel: As a Special Olympics coach, how would you describe the positive impact that this program has had on the athletes?

M. Perryman: Well, kind of like we talked about before, it's the pride you see that comes out of them and the happiness and the smiles when they see that everybody's there to watch them. Whether it's the opening ceremonies, I mean our kiddos that get to carry the torch or be on the stage, they just light up and just the sense of pride that they have, that they get to do something like that, you know it's not something they always get to do. So, they just are so happy to be there. They love the audience. I think the most important thing is that it gives that opportunity for our volunteers, our non-disabled volunteers, to come alongside them because that carries on onto campus after the Special Olympics are over. So they're working together while they're training, they're working together before the event, and two weeks later it's like "oh, hi Johnny!" Now they know each other and that's something that we don't always get the opportunity to do. As teachers, as coaches, we try to create those relationships throughout the year. We try to create bonds between our disabled students and non-disabled students but this is something that really brings them together and creates that bond.

S. Nesvold: It's just a natural way for those things to happen instead of adults telling them to do it.

A. Emanuel: Are there any specific social skills that coaches help these athletes develop?

M. Perryman: Oh gosh, there's so much. Yes! I mean the life skills and social skills we work on so hard with our kids in, you know, a classroom environment, kind of like a false environment for really working on social skills and friendships and noticing people and interacting with people. This, like she said, is a natural opportunity because it's something fun and something that they have to work together on, so it just reinforces everything we're working on in kind of a setting that is natural. You know the classroom where we work on these skills, you know, it's not natural but this just brings it to real life. They get to go out, they interact, and in some cases, with some of our kids they get to make eye contact, and it just reinforces everything we work on.

A. Emanuel: In our research, we have found that adversaries of the Special Olympics have found that the program promotes segregation, pity, and childzation. Do you think the benefits of the program outweigh such claims? If so, why?

M. Perryman: I think it definitely does, it just depends on your angle. If you're trying to bring different populations together and that's your focus, and that's what we're doing. I mean, it's just how you're looking at it. If we had kids and they don't normally interact without their coaching and helping and people being alongside them, I think it's the opposite effect.

A. Emanuel: Do you believe that the Special Olympics might promote and reinforce stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities due to the event being segregated?

M. Perryman: Again, it's kind of your lense or the way you're looking at this. So...if you're going to look at these kids as disabled, well then that's what you're going to see. You can also look and say wow, they can do a lot of what we can do. They have talents, they have abilities. I think it's kind of an opportunity to highlight what they are able to do. They can play basketball with their friends. I have a student that I said for forever, he's trained for American Ninja Warrior and he gets to go there and he gets to show it! He's so athletic. But, he wouldn't have that opportunity. So, instead of showing how different they are, I think it shows how similar they are and that they can do the same things as their typically developing peers.

A. Emanuel: From your hands-on experience, have you found that the Special Olympics has helped bring families of the athletes closer together?

M. Perryman: Yes, it's an opportunity for everyone to come together. They get to meet each other, they get to talk to each other, and that's not something that always happens. I was talking to one of our family members afterward, probably like a month after, and she was saying how she always kind of feels isolated. She's a single mom and she feels isolated and she feels like she's the only one with a student with a severe disability, but at that event, she was able to meet people and just see the population. And, it was bigger than she ever thought. She felt included and she didn't feel alienated.

A. Emanuel: Do you believe that these athletes form special bonds with each other through the Special Olympics by interacting with people similar to them?

M. Perryman: Yes I think they, both similar and different from them. That's what we as coaches, we try to just really foster. Whether we're working on a set of specific skills in

the classroom and then try to generalize it to this event where it's the real world. It's just what we're all aiming to do.

M. Wilbanks: Thank you so much for your time.

(End of Interview)