

BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS

*Special Olympics Young Athletes program boosts development
and confidence of children with disabilities*

By Elisha Valladares-Cormier | Photos by John Tully

To the average onlooker, it might not seem especially significant to see children carry an egg on a spoon across the gym at St. André Bessette Parish in Laconia, New Hampshire. Nor would they bat an eye at a child swinging at a suspended balloon like a baseball on a tee.

However, every activity of a Special Olympics Young Athletes program has a deeper purpose. Most of the participants, ages 2-7, have a physical or intellectual disability. Carrying an egg on a spoon increases children's wrist and grip strength, which they will use to hold a utensil to feed themselves; swinging pool noodles like a bat strengthens their core muscles and diaphragm, helping with speech and swallowing.

While not as well-known as other Special Olympics programs, Young Athletes introduces children of all abilities to basic sports skills to help them advance developmentally and socially. It also prepares them to compete in other Special Olympic activities as they age out of the program. Last September, Laconia Council 428 established the first Young Athletes program in the state's Lakes Region. Knights organize and oversee the weekly gatherings at St. André Bessette Parish, helping the participants navigate athletic challenges.

"It's so rewarding to see the response, not just from the kids but the parents too," said Grand Knight David Karl. "They're just so pleased that there's a program like this available to them."

The seeds of Council 428's involvement were planted about two years ago, when council member Philip Woodbury was searching for programs that his son, who was born with a form of congenital muscular dystrophy, could participate in. He discovered Special Olympics Young Athletes but learned there were only four such programs in New Hampshire and none in their community.

"I proposed to our council that we bring Young Athletes to Laconia, and they were all for it," recalled Woodbury. "It took me a year to get everything together, and the first few weeks of the program were a little nerve-racking, but it's been a blessing."



Doug McBride, a member of Laconia (N.H.) Council 428, encourages two girls participating in the Special Olympics Young Athletes program that the council organizes and hosts at St. André Bessette Parish.

Activities during the weekly sessions can range from balancing on a beam on the floor to beanbag tosses to work on eye coordination — every activity has an underlying developmental goal. But the Knights have noticed that a significant secondary effect has been character development and emotional growth in the children. They're more confident, more outgoing.

"Everything we do builds trust with the children," said Karl. "As you see them go through the program, they loosen up and stop worrying about running to the parent who's sitting there. They start to get a little independence."

An important aspect of Special Olympics Young Athletes is that children with disabilities play on equal footing and learn from children who don't have disabilities, Woodbury said. He recently met a woman who takes care of a grandson with autism and invited her to check out the program.

Right: Philip Woodbury, a member of Council 428, greets a participant of the Special Olympics Young Athletes program, which he leads each week. • **Below:** Knights and other volunteers gather with parents and participants of the Special Olympics Young Athletes program in St. André Bessette Parish Hall, a former school gymnasium.

"I started talking to her, and she said, 'Well, I don't know if he can even do that,'" Woodbury recalled. "But she agreed to bring him."

When they came, Knights had set up an obstacle course that required participants to step or jump over foam blocks. In no time, the boy joined the others in jumping over every obstacle, much to his grandmother's surprise.

"She came up to me and said, 'I had no idea he could jump,'" Woodbury said. "And this is someone who's with him every day. The program's peer modeling helps children learn from each other and, for those with disabilities, discover that they're capable of more than they or others believed they might be."

Terry Locke wanted his 5-year-old son, who has autism, to participate in something that would help him make friends and enjoy the positive aspects of sports. Participating in Council 428's Young Athletes program has achieved that and more.

"There aren't a lot of programs like this out here," Locke said, "and what the Knights provide here is fantastic. Not only is he playing with kids his own age, but he's learning skills that he can bring into the classroom."

Council 428 now has a waitlist of children who want to join the program, and Woodbury is in the process of traveling around the state to pitch other councils on the idea



of starting their own Young Athletes program. It's important, he says, because the program complements the Order's partnership with Special Olympics and its support for children with intellectual disabilities, but relatively few Knights are aware of it.

"This program cost \$0 to start," noted Woodbury. "All you have to do is work with your local Special Olympics and they'll help you get set up with all the supplies. You just have to show up and give the kids some time."

And in the meantime, Woodbury and his brother Knights will continue to help their Young Athletes group take further steps toward growth and independence, one balance beam at a time. ✚

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