



BACKGROUNDER: Special Olympics History Began in Illinois

First Games Held at Soldier Field, Chicago on July 20, 1968

In the 1960s, many children and adults with intellectual disabilities were either in large state institutions or at home, often underestimated and misunderstood by the world around them. They did not have opportunities to be athletes; most did not participate in sports programs of any kind. That changed on July 20, 1968, when 1,000 children ages 8-18 came from 26 states and Canada to participate in the first "Special Olympics for people with mental retardation*." A seed was planted that day in the hearts and minds of the athletes, families, volunteers and organizers that has grown into a worldwide sports movement involving more than 4.5 million people with intellectual disabilities in more than 170 countries today.

Dr. Freeberg's Programs at SIU Attract Attention of Kennedy Foundation

There were several forces that came together at the right time in 1968 to create this program. Dr. William "Bill" Freeberg, chairman of the Department of Recreation at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, had created an extensive camping program at Little Grassy Lake – both residential and day camps – for people with intellectual disabilities beginning in the early 1950s. He believed in the benefit of outdoor recreation for people with disabilities – concentrating on what people could accomplish, not on what they couldn't. His vision, wisdom and personality attracted interest and support from administrators, students, community leaders and others interested in providing more opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. The Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation contacted Bill Freeberg in the early 1960s and asked if he could help in developing a national program in recreation and physical fitness for people with intellectual disabilities. President Kennedy's sister Rosemary was born with mental retardation and his sister Eunice Kennedy Shriver spearheaded the efforts of the foundation (founded by her father in 1946) to finance research and support programs to better the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. She also had day camp programs in her backyard for children with intellectual disabilities. Mrs. Shriver visited the camp at Little Grassy and liked what she saw.

Dr. Freeberg agreed to work with the Kennedy Foundation. He conducted one-week workshops for recreation directors from municipalities across the country for the next several years. Recreation directors who attended were asked to encourage other directors in surrounding communities to develop day camp programs and the number grew to more than 800 day camps in the country by 1968.

Chicago Park District Expands Programs for People with Intellectual Disabilities

Chicago was a municipal pioneer in offering recreational programs for people with intellectual disabilities. Ten recreation teachers from the Chicago Park District attended one of Bill Freeberg's workshops in 1965 on a grant from the Kennedy Foundation. Among them was Anne McGlone (now Justice Anne McGlone Burke of the Illinois Supreme Court) from West Pullman Park.

By 1967, the Chicago Park District, under the leadership of William McFetridge, with the encouragement of Sargent and Eunice Shriver, wanted to step up the work that was being done for people with intellectual disabilities. McFetridge appointed board vice president Dan Shannon to take on the project. Anne Burke, who had had great results working with the children at West Pullman Park, became part of the team to look at the needs and potential of the program. She knew there was a greatly underserved population who could benefit from the recreation program. Burke said, "It took a lot of courage on the part of their parents to bring the children. But the parents soon came to see their children in a new light. They saw the children could do things which encouraged the parents' hopes for the children's future." Dan Shannon and Anne Burke called on Dr. Freeberg to help them develop a plan.

First Special Olympics Games Planned for Summer 1968

In order to focus on what the children with intellectual disabilities were capable of doing, Burke proposed a citywide track meet modeled after the Olympics. Chicago had a perfect site to showcase the athletes – Soldier Field. Dr. Freeberg suggested that they formulate a proposal for funding to Eunice Kennedy Shriver and the Kennedy Foundation. Mrs. Shriver embraced the concept but asked Burke to enlarge its scope to include more athletes from around the country. Mayor Richard J. Daley, the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation all agreed this would be a milestone event. The call went out to schools and agencies that worked with children who had intellectual disabilities. The brochure proclaimed: "Chicago Calls ... the thrill of a lifetime awaits retarded children who come to Chicago this summer for a chance to participate in all the glamour and pageantry of a genuine national Olympics."



The first Special Olympics attracted 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada. The city and a legion of volunteers laid out the red carpet. The athletes were quartered at the LaSalle Hotel in downtown Chicago. Celebrities like Olympic decathlon winner Rafer Johnson and astronaut James Lovell, along with Mayor Daley, Governor Samuel Shapiro and Mrs. Shriver, welcomed the athletes to Soldier Field on July 20, 1968. The athletes, ranging in age from 8 to 18, competed in track and field events and aquatics – in four different ability levels, determined by the Kennedy Foundation physical fitness tests. Stan Mikita of the Chicago Blackhawks and George Armstrong of the Toronto Maple Leafs coached a floor hockey game between Special Olympics athletes from the U.S. and Canada. The athletes left Chicago with great memories, medals, an increase in pride and self esteem, and a desire for more training and competition opportunities.

A National Special Olympics Program Is Announced by Kennedy Foundation

No time was wasted. Mrs. Shriver announced the creation of a national Special Olympics. Within a year, programs were started across the United States. Eventually, programs developed in more than 170 countries around the globe.

Today, Special Olympics, Inc. is the governing body for programs throughout the world. Timothy P. Shriver is Chairman and Mary Davis is Chief Executive Officer. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder of Special Olympics, passed away in August 2009, and is honored globally each year on the fourth Saturday of September during Eunice Kennedy Shriver Day. Special Olympics is the world's largest program of sports training and athletic competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. More than 4.5 million Special Olympics athletes 8 years and older compete in up to 35 sports in more than 170 countries; thousands of young children ages 2-7 compete in the Young Athletes program. Local volunteers support every aspect of the program from fundraising to coaching to transportation and competition management. International competitions take place every two years with winter and summer games alternating. The 2023 World Summer Games are to be held in Berlin. The Special Olympics USA Games take place every four years in the summer, with Minnesota hosting in 2026.

Illinois Continues to Expand Local Programs around the State

Illinois grew from one area program in 1968 – to two in 1970 (north and south) – to three in 1972 (north, central and south) – to 11 regions today, building a community of more than 55,000 traditional athletes, Young Athletes, Unified partners, coaches, volunteers, and more. Regions organize their own local competitions, training and fundraising before athletes advance to sectional or state games. From a once-a-year track meet, the program has grown to year-round training and competition in 18 sports. There are now approximately 190 competitions each year in Illinois, including the annual Summer Games and Winter Games and 11 additional state championships. In 1977, the state headquarters for Special Olympics Illinois moved from the Chicago Park District to the campus of Illinois State University in Normal. In 1989, its own headquarters building opened at 605 East Willow Street in Normal. Dave Breen is President and CEO of Special Olympics Illinois. The website is www.soill.org.

In 2002, an expansion of the headquarters included the opening of the Beck Volunteer Training Center. A Special Olympics Illinois Tribute Park adjacent to the headquarters in Normal opened in June 2005 to honor athletes, volunteers, families and donors. In 2007, Special Olympics Illinois began offering the Special Olympics Young Athletes program that had proven successful after a pilot program in 12 worldwide locations. This innovative sports program for children ages 2 through 7 with intellectual disabilities and their peers helps prepare children for formal Special Olympics training and competition when they turn 8 years old. It focuses on developing fundamental motor tracking and eye coordination and a sports skills activity program that builds skills consistent with Special Olympics sports play. It has been acclaimed by teachers, administrators and parents.



The Olympic Games and Special Olympics

Anyone attending a Special Olympics competition will see the similarities to the Olympic Games: the running of the torch, the lighting of the cauldron, the parade of athletes, the awarding of medals. The difference is, in Special Olympics, doing your best, competing in divisions by ability level, as well as being recognized and respected for your achievements are the ultimate goals. It is competition for the sheer joy of taking part and a demonstration of the true spirit of sportsmanship. Special Olympics opened the door to help integrate people with intellectual disabilities into society, giving them an opportunity to (as the mission states): “develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.”

Today, the program empowers athletes to reach new heights. A study released by Yale University in 1995 confirmed that athletes participating in Special Olympics develop better social skills than their non-participating counterparts, enabling them to have more success in school, at work and in the community. Recent studies commissioned by Special Olympics Inc. reveal that the greatest barrier for people with intellectual disabilities is the way the general public underestimates the talent and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities. (see www.specialolympics.org)