

Martha Jo Braycich, Special Olympics Europe-Eurasia

Good afternoon. My name is Martha Jo Braycich and I am the Senior Director for Community Impact Initiatives at Special Olympics Europe-Eurasia. I am with Martin Nielsen, a Special Olympics athlete from Denmark and his mentor Mads Henriksen (HEN-RICK-SEN), who is a teacher at a sports school for persons with special needs here in Copenhagen.

As most of you know Special Olympics is a worldwide organization that provides sports opportunities for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. We have almost 5 million participating athletes in 172 countries. Last year, over 100,000 competitions were held either at local, national or international level.

Today I would like to say a few words about how Special Olympics raises awareness among young people to the inequality and exclusion of persons with intellectual

disabilities and at the same time encourages them – within a sports platform - to finding solutions to these issues.

Sports positively impacts a young person with intellectual disabilities, as it does a nondisabled peer, in terms of physical and mental health, self-esteem and self-confidence, social skills and interaction. Working together with a coach or being part of a team gives a young person with an intellectual disability a sense of belonging, purpose, motivation, achievement and support.

Special Olympics has found that when young people are integrated at an early age the positive encounters stay with them as they grow older. This is why Special Olympics introduces children between the ages of 2 and 7 to an inclusive sports and play program where they learn how to interact with others and develop skills – like

sharing and taking direction - that help them in family, community and school activities.

Special Olympics works equally well in segregated and inclusive school systems. With Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports (ages 12-25) young people with and without intellectual disabilities play together as equals, each with a valued position on the team. This shared experience results in good teammates and good friends.

Once exposed to Special Olympics, particularly through Unified Sports, we encourage young people to take the lead in organizing their own inclusive sports activities with the aim of building awareness among their peers about dignity, respect and acceptance. These inclusive youth-led activities reduce bullying and rejection, promote healthy lifestyles, and combat damaging stereotypes. At the same time, we see young people with intellectual disabilities – who are involved in traditional

or inclusive sports – step into highly visible roles as Special Olympics team captains, coach assistants, sports officials, spokespersons, advocates, fundraisers, volunteers and committee leaders. These roles expose the public to the capabilities of youth with intellectual disabilities while serving to further prepare them to meet the challenges and opportunities of life as adults.

I would like to end by showing you a video that highlights the exuberance, energy and potential of all young people to be effective catalysts for positive social change. Let us support this Unified Generation and become Game Changers too.

Video starts: “Game Changers”