

7/16/2008 Recognizing Special Olympics for 40 Years of Empowering Individuals

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Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize and congratulate Special Olympics for 40 years of extraordinary service to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Beyond giving 2.5 million athletes a chance to compete, it gives their families a way to involve their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters. A chance for them to cheer. A chance to coach. A chance to connect in a special way. A chance to see their family member be accepted and respected in their communities.

Originally an initiative of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the first Special Olympic Games were held on July 20, 1968 at Soldier Field in Chicago, Illinois. Participation in Special Olympics develops improved physical fitness and motor skills, greater self confidence and a more positive self image. Through competitions like power lifting, cycling, track and field, aquatics, tennis and gymnastics, athletes exhibit endless courage and enthusiasm and enjoy the rewards of friendship.

Last month, I had the great privilege of addressing the athletes, fans, and families during the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics Kansas 2008 Summer Games in Wichita. This year's Summer Games theme was "Be a Fan of Courage." This theme reflects the sentiments of the athlete oath, "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." These words were uttered by gladiators in ancient Rome, and are equally appropriate for modern-day gladiators overcoming their own adversities.

After 40 years, there are now millions of stories of courage in the Special Olympics, but one athlete who has taken the oath and that embodies this year's theme is LP Esquibel from Dodge City, Kansas. He is more than a fan of courage. He IS courageous and because of his courage he was awarded the Most Inspirational Athlete award at the Summer Games this year. Cerebral Palsey kept him from walking until he was five years old, but it hasn't kept him from becoming a 13-year veteran of the Special Olympics. It also hasn't kept a smile from his face. From all accounts, LP is more than a great athlete in his events of basketball, shot put, and the 100-yard walk, he is an encouragement to his fellow teammates and helps them on the court.

It is stories like LP's that has sold me on the power and benefits of the Special Olympics. Since 2007, I have served as the Honorary Chairman for the Kansas Law Enforcement Torch Run. The Torch Run covers hundreds of miles throughout the state and raises thousands of dollars in support of Special Olympics Kansas programs. This year-round fundraiser and awareness initiative was implemented by Wichita Police Chief Richard LaMunyon in 1981. It became an international event three years later in 1984 when Chief LaMunyon presented it to the International Association of Chiefs of Police. The Law Enforcement Torch Run is now the largest grass-roots fundraiser and public awareness vehicle for Special Olympics around the world.

It was an honor to help raise money this past summer to help send Kansas athletes to compete in China at the World Olympics. I enjoyed meeting them and hearing of their success.

Special Olympics does remarkable work, both in the State of Kansas and across the globe. I would like to commend the leaders and volunteers of Special Olympics for 40 years of outstanding service and wish them continued success in the future.