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STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION

**Special
Olympics**



FACES OF INCLUSION

Stories

VOLUME II



INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the generous grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), Special Olympics launched *Play Unified: Learn Unified*, a landmark initiative that brought transformative, sport-based, inclusive programming into schools across 21 countries and jurisdictions worldwide.

Special Olympics takes great pride in having reached hundreds of thousands of athletes and their peer partners worldwide. As a vital component of this international effort, Play Unified: Learn Unified has revealed how young people define and desire a world of inclusion, envisioning an entire planet characterized by understanding, empathy, and dignity.

The following stories highlight the impact of Play Unified: Learn Unified through the lens of its key communities—students, coaches, teachers, parents, and organizational partners. These stories put faces on the many lives and communities forever changed through the transformative power of Play Unified: Learn Unified. By joining forces, SNF and Special Olympics have enabled their efforts and impact to spill far beyond the schoolhouse doors, fostering communities and cultures where intellectual differences are accepted and embraced.

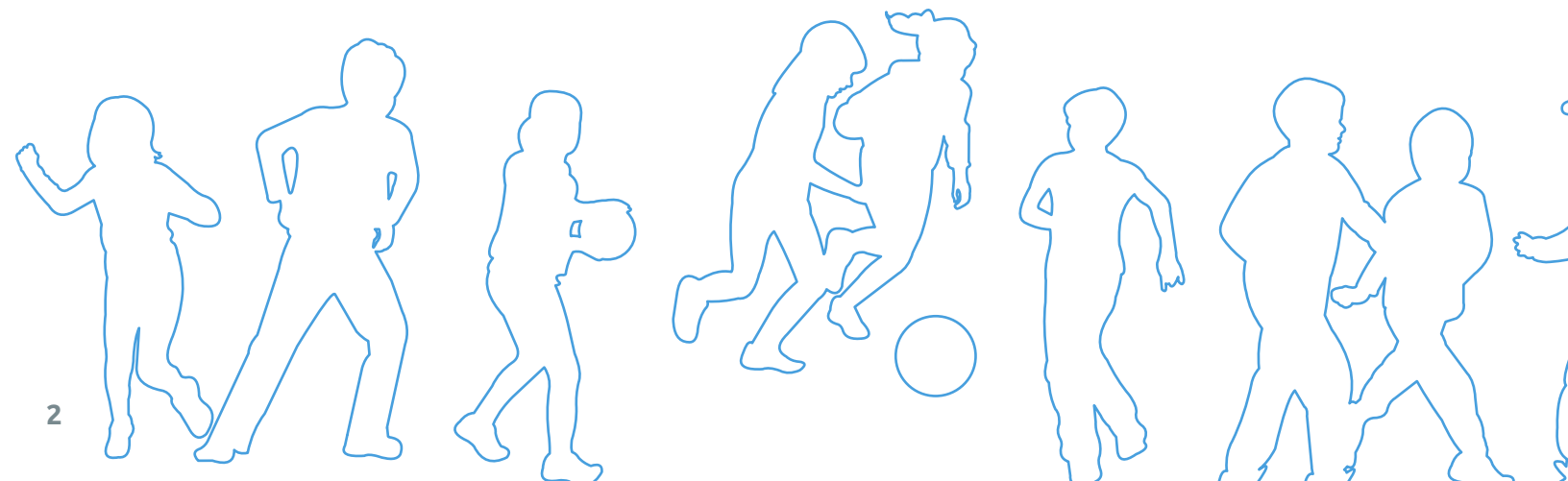
The pages that follow will introduce you to just a handful of the thousands of individuals whose day-in and day-out commitment has taken Play Unified: Learn Unified from vision to reality.

These are the individuals who are driving inclusion forward in their own schools and communities.

These are the individuals whose lives have been transformed because of Play Unified: Learn Unified.

These are their stories of impact.

Thank you, SNF, for bringing these stories to life!







Changing Mindsets in Jamaica

CECIL'S STORY



Nestled in the hilly landscape of central Jamaica, the small town of Newport is different from such celebrated tourist destinations as Kingston and Montego Bay.

But Cecil Hamilton, principal of Newport's Bethabara Primary School, wouldn't want to work anywhere else. The high elevation keeps the air pleasantly cool, and the sounds of city traffic are replaced by the songs and chirps of local birds. While there aren't any beach resorts nearby, he is grateful to have plenty of friendly neighbors who are happy to share crops from their farms.

As a principal and teacher in the region for over 20 years, Cecil has made this typical rural school his second home. His journey as an advocate for inclusion, however, has been anything but typical.

Though he's now a Program Leader for Special Olympics Jamaica, Cecil had no experience interacting with people with intellectual disabilities (ID) until after he became a teacher. Then, before becoming a principal, he volunteered at a special education school. Cecil admits that at first he was nervous about his opportunity to volunteer in an unfamiliar setting, but his mindset quickly changed.

"After my experience, I felt that I shouldn't have been timid and that people with intellectual disabilities are [just like] anybody else," says Cecil. He was surprised at how welcome he was made to feel as a volunteer. "I felt good. It helped me to change my perception about what we think about students with special needs and the need for inclusion in our schools throughout Jamaica," he says.

Previously, as the principal at another school, Cecil had advocated on behalf of a student with an intellectual disability who wanted to enroll there. In Jamaica, students with intellectual disabilities typically attend special education schools. There was community resistance to the idea of a student with ID enrolling at the school Cecil led.



Special Olympics Jamaica staff support a Unified football team in their new jerseys



Special Olympics Jamaica learned of the situation and offered to support Cecil's efforts. They held a workshop to explain the benefits of inclusion. Soon the student was not only accepted at the school but excelled there. Inspired by this success, Cecil joined the Special Olympics Jamaica team.

As part of Play Unified: Learn Unified, Cecil has created Jamaica's first network of Unified Schools. Bethabara Primary and four other rural schools are partnering with a local special education school to hold Unified football competitions. Each school has a team that includes both boys and girls. Each team consists of 10 athletes (youth with intellectual disabilities) and five partners (youth without intellectual disabilities).

Recently, Cecil organized an event to enable the members of all the teams to meet each other and receive their team jerseys. Soon the organized games will begin, marking the first time that these students with and without intellectual disabilities will play and compete together.

Cecil wants to spread Unified Schools across central and western Jamaica, where students have fewer opportunities to engage in sports activities than do students in the more populated areas. This lack of involvement is especially true for students with intellectual disabilities. Cecil hopes Unified Schools will make families of youth with intellectual disabilities feel closer to their communities and more accepted there.

"It's emotional to hear their stories. Parents want their children to have an avenue to express themselves. As students, they are left behind; but this program gives them the chance to be in the forefront," Cecil explains.

Cecil believes Unified Schools also will benefit students without intellectual disabilities.

"Interacting with people with intellectual disabilities can show students that the world is made up of a lot of different types of people," says Cecil. "It can also show students a model of how to respect people who have other abilities and seem different from them."

“Interacting with people with intellectual disabilities can show students that the world is made up of a lot of different types of people.”

Cecil wants schools in Jamaica to be fully inclusive one day. But for now, he's happy to see the athletes and partners simply playing football. "We're excited to spread the word of Special Olympics. We're all going to be cheering for each other," remarks Cecil with a smile.

Then he grins and adds, "I'm also looking forward to putting on my jersey and showing a few football moves." Cecil is proudly using his own example to lead the way toward inclusion in Jamaica.



Principal Cecil Hamilton speaks at a school meeting



ADVOCATING INCLUSION IN BANON LI'S STORY



Advocating Inclusion in Lebanon

TALI'S STORY



Tali, a recent secondary school graduate in Lebanon, has ambitious goals for her future. She plans to study business at the American University of Beirut and eventually further her education in France. Charismatic and open-minded, Tali is a natural leader, comfortable around people of all walks of life.

Hard work and dedication certainly helped Tali get to where she is today, but she also credits her lifelong involvement with Special Olympics Lebanon as a catalyst for her success.

Tali's father, once a Lebanese track and field star, founded Special Olympics Lebanon. Therefore, it is not surprising that Tali chose to become actively involved with Special Olympics at an early age.

She says, "Since I was four years old, I have been around [Special Olympics Lebanon] athletes—playing with them, talking with them, building friendships. So to me they are like any other person; I do not see differences," said Tali.

Tali believes her exposure to inclusion at such a young age helped her become the promising leader she is today. She has extensive volunteer experience, has been able to travel, and has formed deep bonds with individuals whom most people would see as different.

Special Olympics Lebanon joined Play Unified: Learn Unified in July 2021 and since then has expanded its Unified Schools presence across the country. As a Youth Leader, Tali urges educational institutions to become Unified Schools. She also advocates youth with and without intellectual disabilities interacting with one another. She wants other students to receive the same benefits she experienced from participating in inclusive activities.

"My message is we have to increase the frequency of Unified [activities] and let children at an early age meet Young Athletes and play with them," Tali explains.



Tali and her sister (front row) participate as children at a Special Olympics event



Special Olympics Lebanon shares joy and healthful snacks at a Unified activity

Barriers fall and friendships are built.

Through her advocacy, Tali has seen firsthand that mindsets can indeed change. Her recent presentation to the principal at the Kayan International School led to an agreement to have a youth team organize Unified events on campus. Seeing the success of this venture, Tali recognizes there is a lot more work to be done.

“Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of inclusive schools in Lebanon, but through Play Unified: Learn Unified we are working to achieve this goal,” says Tali.

One point Tali frequently makes while advocating is that inclusive environments break down stereotypes and allow people of all abilities to embrace differences.

“People without intellectual disabilities who do not know much about people with intellectual disabilities meet them through Unified Schools and see they can be friends based on similar interests and ages,” says Tali.

As a result, Tali explains, youth with intellectual disabilities become more visible and youth



Tali (top left) supports Special Olympics Lebanon at a Unified race

without intellectual disabilities increase their emotional intelligence.

“Individuals with intellectual disabilities will not see themselves as different from others when [others] reduce inequalities. They will be more confident when accepted in the community. People without intellectual disabilities will learn how to be responsible and will accept [each other’s] differences,” notes Tali.

As a Youth Leader, Tali has been able to share her story with many people. She doesn’t lose hope when Special Olympics Lebanon speaks with others who aren’t yet ready for inclusion. Instead, she finds inspiration from the change in behavior she has repeatedly witnessed as educational institutions in Lebanon have embraced inclusion. “Each time we run a Unified activity on the ground, we witness a spontaneous change in behavior,” Tali claims proudly.

“At first, athletes are sitting by themselves, and students are sitting in their own corner. But when the activity starts—whether it is basketball or football—barriers fall and friendships are built.” For Tali, this experience confirms that barriers are meant to be broken. She’ll continue to push for inclusion in her community and spread awareness about the benefits it can bring to all people.



Tali finds it rewarding to support inclusion at a Young Athletes event



Leading Through Action in Kenya

BONIFACE'S STORY



Boniface Kimeu is known for his dedication to serving his community. As an owner of a small grocery store in the town of Kitui, Kenya, Boniface routinely travels via motorbike to various markets throughout the county to make sure he has all the items that people in his neighborhood need.

Boniface also has a keen interest in providing youth in his community, especially those who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, with opportunities to learn and play just like everyone else. For Boniface, this mission is personal. Boniface himself has an intellectual disability, and during childhood he experienced discrimination from teachers and students in school because of his differences. When Boniface was introduced to Special Olympics at the age of 14, his life forever changed. "People used to know me just by my



Boniface facilitates a Special Olympics Kenya training on athlete leadership

weaknesses and my intellectual disability. But when I started [my involvement with] Special Olympics, I felt included," says Boniface.

Over the past 15 years, Boniface has transformed into a global leader for inclusion with Special Olympics. He represented Special Olympics Kenya as a football player in both national and international competitions. He has participated in numerous leadership trainings, learning how to create more opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities in sports and education. Most notably, Boniface is a current member of the Global Athlete Leadership Council, where he represents all Special Olympics athletes in Africa and provides feedback, guidance, and ideas to the Special Olympics International Board of Directors.



Boniface talks to community members about the benefits of Special Olympics programming



Boniface regularly applies his experience and expertise in inclusion by working with Special Olympics Kenya athletes and partners from two Unified Schools in Kitui. He coaches 32 athletes and 70 partners in Unified football and educates them about healthy habits such as personal hygiene and dietary choices. Boniface is passionate about providing youth in his community with Unified activities. He goes to great lengths to support their involvement, even transporting students to and from their homes if they have physical limitations or need other travel assistance.

As someone who is personally aware of the misconceptions people can have about intellectual disabilities, Boniface also proactively attends local government and community meetings to recruit students to join his Unified activities. He says he has found success in reaching teachers and parents of youth with intellectual disabilities because he talks about his own experiences with Special Olympics. "I say that I relate to their children because I also have an intellectual disability, and I list the benefits of Special Olympics in my life," says Boniface. "Sometimes, the parents of

children with intellectual disabilities think they cannot go anywhere. . . . I get them to understand how that isn't so and how Special Olympics can help their child," he explains.

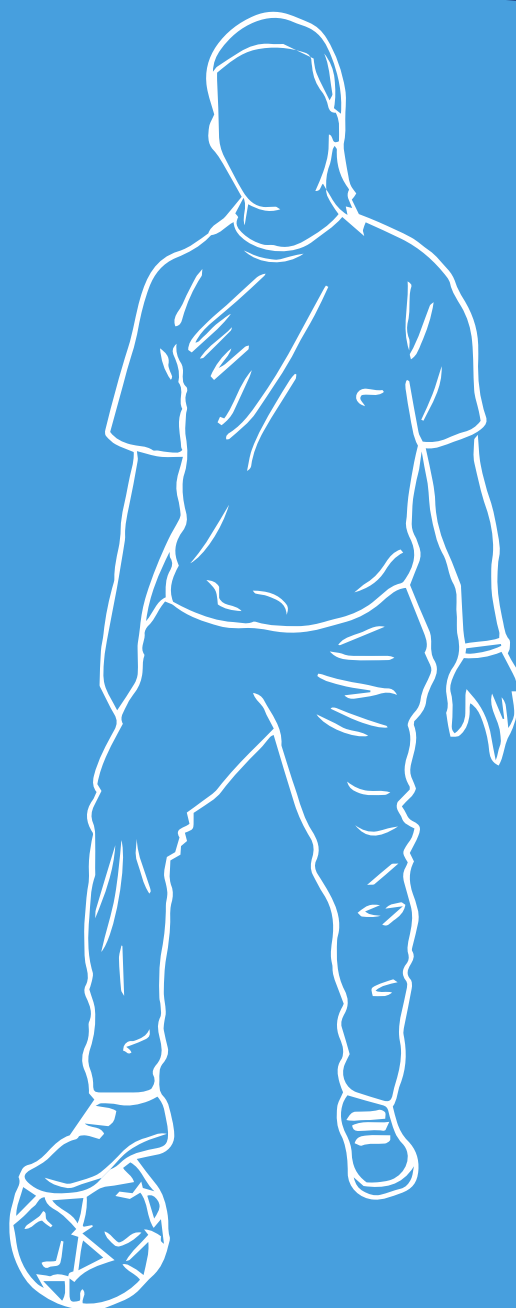
Outside of Special Olympics, Boniface's advocacy has not gone unnoticed. He was recognized with a Head of State Award, given by the president of Kenya, for his contribution toward building a more inclusive society in his country. Awards aside, Boniface is determined to do even more. He plans to extend his coaching efforts to a third Unified School in Kitui and hopes to influence the establishment of permanent inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools throughout the country. Even though achieving his goals will take time, Boniface keeps working for other people to have the same opportunities he feels fortunate to have experienced.

"When I see another person with intellectual disabilities [in need], I feel something in my heart. I feel like this person is also me, or that they are my family. I must try and help them," says Boniface.

“ Sometimes, the parents of children with intellectual disabilities think they cannot go anywhere. . . . I get them to understand how that isn’t so and how Special Olympics can help their child. ”

Boniface’s efforts have positively impacted hundreds of lives in his community alone, and he credits his own personal journey with Special Olympics in helping to create this change.

“People can see what Special Olympics has done for me, and that’s why they’re following me,” says Boniface. He adds, “I know that I’m changing lives, and that is my happiness.”



A FAMILY

STRIVING FOR

INCLUSION

STRENGTHENING

COMMUNITY

TOGETHER

WE CAN



A Family Striving for Inclusion

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

SENEGAL'S STORY



In the past year, Special Olympics Senegal has been successful in spreading the message of inclusion through its participation in Play Unified: Learn Unified. To date, the country has developed a network of 27 Unified Schools and has engaged hundreds of students of all abilities in Unified Sports and awareness sessions.

To reach such impressive numbers, Special Olympics Senegal has found that an effective strategy is to engage family members of people with intellectual disabilities in the programming. In many communities across Senegal, multiple generations live together in one household, and extended family members are highly involved in

each other's daily lives. This collectivist culture forms strong family units and, to the benefit of Special Olympics Senegal, it greatly assists in recruiting new Special Olympics athletes and partners.

The impact of this strategy is evident in the story of Aby and Yacine. Aby is a high school student in the town of Bignona, located in the southern region of the country. Aby's cousin, Yacine, lives in the same neighborhood. Aby and Yacine are not just cousins; they're also close friends. The two often take walks together in the afternoons and help each other with chores and cooking.



Yacine (green shirt) participates in a Unified activity with athletes and partners



“What I really love about Yacine is that she loves people and in general likes to help people out,” says Aby.

Aby says Yacine is playful, curious, and always fun to be around. Outside of the company of her own family, however, Yacine hasn’t always been able to reveal her personality. Yacine has Down syndrome and has experienced bullying from others because she’s different.

Aby says when people bully Yacine, it’s hurtful to her whole family and prevents Yacine from just being herself.

“Whenever we go out and people make fun of her, it always breaks my heart. People call her slurs. I try my best to educate them and remind them that she has a name, and her name is Yacine.

And if they want to talk to her or address her, they should address her by that name,” says Aby. “Whenever people bully Yacine, it always pains me to the core. It feels almost like they are calling me those slurs, too,” she says.

This past year, Aby’s high school became involved with Special Olympics. At her school, Aby and fellow classmates participated with Yacine and other Special Olympics athletes in Unified Sports and educational sessions on intellectual disabilities.

As a result of these Unified activities, Aby has noticed a significant improvement in the mindsets of people in their neighborhood. She says Yacine has been embraced by her peers and now feels more welcome in the community.



“Nowadays, whenever we go to [Unified Sports] training, it’s always fun and it’s never awkward, because people know what to say and what not to say to her. Before she used to be all by herself and closed to the world, but we have witnessed Yacine becoming more open to people and more talkative,” says Aby. “That is the change that Play Unified: Learn Unified has made in her life,” she says.

By bringing students of all abilities together, Play Unified: Learn Unified has smashed the barriers of exclusion in Aby and Yacine’s neighborhood. Moving forward, Special Olympics Senegal hopes that Aby and Yacine’s story can be a model to others in Senegal of the positive impact that inclusion has on the everyday lives of people with intellectual disabilities and on the lives of their extended families.



Aby contributes her thoughts in a discussion at a Unified event



Celebrating Inclusion in the Community

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

EL SALVADOR'S STORY



In San Salvador, El Salvador, a series of community events are attracting the interest of the public. Hundreds of participants, volunteers, and spectators are coming together in public spaces to enjoy recreational activities and meet new people. These events create moments of joy and education within the community, especially as the purpose of the events becomes clear to newcomers: to celebrate Special Olympics athletes in public spaces. Over the past six months, Special Olympics El Salvador has held four sports festivals, all open to the public, where Special Olympics El Salvador athletes showcase their broad range of skills and lead participants in Unified activities.

At these dedicated events for Unified Sports® and activities, Special Olympics El Salvador athletes and their supporters celebrate the talents of people of all abilities. Furthermore, people with and without intellectual disabilities work closely together toward a common goal on the playing field, learning from each other in the process. Through sharing such collaborative experiences, Special Olympics athletes gain confidence and become more empowered to act as their own advocates. Meanwhile, members of the community are introduced to Special Olympics programming and the message of inclusion in an interactive and welcoming setting.

Paola Salguero Flores, a project coordinator for Special Olympics El Salvador, says the idea for the festivals began with a desire to involve people with intellectual disabilities in public spaces, such as community venues, that are traditionally occupied by people without intellectual disabilities.

“[The festivals] allow us to carry the message of inclusion to help others understand intellectual disabilities and show it’s not impossible for this population to have the same opportunities, participate in all aspects of life, and develop their capacities to the fullest,” says Paola.

To date, each of the festivals has centered around a unique activity as its theme, including a variety of sports as well as dancing. In organizing each event, Special Olympics El Salvador draws on its local relationships to secure resources, gather volunteers, and recruit spectators for the events. To ensure enough space for all the festivals, Special Olympics El Salvador collaborated with the office of San Salvador’s mayor to obtain a large public bike path as event space. Special Olympics El Salvador also partners with a public high school to use its facilities, allowing athletes and partners to participate in a variety of sports.



Jennifer (front row, center) joins her Unified dance team at a public festival in El Salvador

Special Olympics athletes say the public festivals allow them to share their stories and skills with new people. Jennifer, an athlete from San Salvador, attended a festival focused on dance and aerobics. She loved the festival and hopes more such events can be held in the community. “My favorite part of the festival was that I felt happy and relaxed,” says Jennifer. “I love dancing and meeting new people . . . and I like that people outside [Special Olympics] got involved because they were attracted to the cause and what we shared.”

In addition to generating support for Unified Schools from local organizations, the events spread awareness of the importance of inclusion to people who previously never interacted with people with intellectual disabilities. Rodrigo, a coach at a local football club, had his first experience participating in a Special Olympics event through volunteering at one of the festivals. He shares that the experience was special, and it ultimately inspired him to be more involved with Special Olympics El Salvador. “I saw how natural the interactions between

Special Olympics athletes and partners were in the sports activities, and it made everyone feel so good. The experience was so fun and full of laughs, hugs, and sincere competition that [it] really hits you and makes you want to do more to help in the inclusion of all these athletes,” says Rodrigo.

Through these festivals, Special Olympics El Salvador has seen immense improvements in the self-esteem and socialization skills of athletes. Special Olympics El Salvador plans to continue to organize these festivals in collaboration with more athletes, partners, and supporters. With the participation of local organizations and schools, as well as through reaching new people to join the movement for inclusion, Special Olympics El Salvador hopes to expand its impact to as many people as possible. Most important of all, Special Olympics El Salvador is happy its initiative has created spaces where all people feel welcomed.

“My favorite part of the festivals has been seeing the coexistence of people with and without intellectual disabilities. . . . I’m thrilled to have helped create this inclusive space,” says Paola.



A Special Olympics El Salvador partner and athlete embrace inclusion during a public festival



Giving Students a Voice in Mongolia

THE ASPIRATION SCHOOL'S STORY



Mongolia is a country rich with history and natural beauty. Landlocked between Russia and China, 80 percent of the nation is covered in grasslands. Many families live on these lands as traveling herders, continuing what has been a traditional way of life in Mongolia for thousands of years. Interestingly, however, the capital city of Ulaanbaatar is home to around half of Mongolia's population. In recent decades, economic opportunities have brought people from the grasslands to the capital. Sprawled throughout the city are both tent neighborhoods and modern apartment buildings, providing a unique portrait of Mongolia's transition to a more urban-centered way of life.

Located in the center of Ulaanbaatar, the Mongol Aspiration School has undergone a transition of its own. Thanks to its recent partnership with Special Olympics Mongolia, this secondary school is now part of the country's new Unified Schools network. The school's efforts are changing the

way the community views people with intellectual disabilities.

Mrs. Enkhsaruul Purevdorj, a history and social sciences teacher at Mongol Aspiration, leads the school's public speaking club. She organizes competitions in parliamentary debate and Model United Nations and works to enhance her students' communication skills. In September 2021, Mrs. Purevdorj extended the club's membership to students with intellectual disabilities.

She first met students with intellectual disabilities at a Unified event and noticed how the athletes struggled to communicate with her.

"I wanted to talk to [the students with intellectual disabilities], but it was difficult. I could tell they wanted to communicate, but they were shy and didn't really know how to talk to me. So, I wanted to find a way to help," explains Mrs. Purevdorj.



Mrs. Purevdorj (front right) joins several of her secondary school students

This experience prompted Mrs. Purevdorj to connect with Special Olympics Mongolia and invite special school students to join her pupils in the public speaking club. On a weekly basis, club members who attend Mongol Aspiration meet with students with intellectual disabilities and work together on improving the latter's speaking skills. The students learn how to introduce themselves and how to communicate through drawings, and they even study English. The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't deterred the lessons from taking place, as students with and without intellectual disabilities have continued to meet online and work together.

Tsetseehen, a Mongol Aspiration student who assists Mrs. Purevdorj in the Unified club, uses her excellent English skills to help with instruction. She says the experience has given her more empathy and understanding towards people with intellectual disabilities.

"I learned that everyone has potential. It's not right to judge people for their disabilities and limit their [social] environment," declares Tsetseehen. "People with intellectual disabilities are being discriminated against because of something that they're not responsible for. So, if it's not possible for them to change their condition, then why don't we change our point of view?"

In addition to the public speaking club, Mongol Aspiration continues to increase its involvement with Unified Sports training and activities. One of Tsetseehen's classmates, Nomiunbileg, represents Mongol Aspiration on the playing field alongside students with disabilities.

Nomiunbileg says building friendships with Special Olympics athletes has become more common at her school. "I've mentioned that I play sports with students with intellectual disabilities, and some of my friends have said, 'That's great,' and they want to join," says Nomiunbileg.

“Don’t be different; just be yourself!”

As with any new experience, Tsetseehen and Nomiunbileg say when working with students with intellectual disabilities, it’s important to act naturally. “I recommend students behave just as they would with other people. Don’t be different; just be yourself!” says Nomiunbileg.

Mrs. Purevdorj and her students are building a new Unified generation across Mongolia—one that will embrace and celebrate differences. Mongol Aspiration is showing that at a Unified School, all young people are excited to learn from each other, in the classroom as well as on the playing field.



Nomiunbileg interacts with an athlete at a Unified Sports event



Members of the Unified public speaking club come together for an activity



USING GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS TO ACHIEVE INCLUSION PEOPLE POLY STO



Using Government Partnerships to Achieve Inclusion

SPECIAL OLYMPICS HELLAS'S STORY



On a beautiful spring day, students at the 1st Junior High School of Vrilissia in Athens, Greece, gathered in the front schoolyard to celebrate the end of a successful school year. The students were different from each other in both age and ability—some were students with intellectual disabilities and others weren't—but that didn't matter. They exchanged handmade treats, laughed and chatted easily with each other, and celebrated friendships made throughout the year.

Similar scenes can be found at an increasing number of schools across Greece. Since 2018, Special Olympics Hellas has initiated Unified Schools programming in consultation with the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to foster the social inclusion of youth with intellectual disabilities in school communities. With over three years of evidence that Unified Schools programming has produced a powerful impact on local communities—including people both with and without intellectual disabilities—Special Olympics Hellas and the Ministry further strengthened their partnership and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation that has elevated Special Olympics activities. With the official support of the Ministry,

teachers, students, and administrators are receiving more robust and institutional support to implement inclusion in education.

Charalampos Papaioannou, the head of the Directorate of Special Education for the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, collaborates with Special Olympics Hellas in numerous meetings and discussions to ensure that programming initiatives are primed for success.

"[We] support the educational programming of Special Olympics Hellas . . . to empower social inclusion of persons with disabilities, supporting their families and sensitizing the educational community," says Mr. Papaioannou.



Ambassador Dionyssios Kodellas (left), president of Special Olympics Hellas, and Niki Kerameus, Greece's minister of education and religious affairs, celebrate the start of the official partnership among educational institutions throughout Greece



1st Junior High School of Vrilissia celebrates the end of a school year with a Unified activity

Through this government partnership, teachers have yearlong access to e-seminars related to Special Olympics and its philosophy, sports-for-all and its benefits, and the creation of Unified teams and inclusion. According to Georgia Kollileka, a teacher at 1st Junior High School of Vrilissia, these resources are crucial for teachers to effectively implement inclusion.

“It is well known that the educator’s role is not limited to mere knowledge transmission but, mainly, [and] taking as a starting point the students’ specific needs, it becomes consultative, cooperative, and supportive. I strongly believe that teachers, through their participation in these educational seminars, can dive into the sheer meaning of empathy, understanding, and acceptance. This way, they will be able to more effectively [help] students with learning difficulties, and they will ingrain these values in the students so that they can gradually accept . . . the inclusion of people with disabilities, [in] the school environment at first and [in] society later on,” says Mrs. Kollileka.

Furthermore, teachers can attend the e-seminars during their scheduled work hours and receive a certificate for their completion. Through this series of educational seminars supported by both Special Olympics Hellas and the Ministry, more teachers are becoming equipped with the knowledge and tools to teach students the value and importance of inclusion. The Ministry also benefits from the official partnership. By collaborating with Special Olympics, the Ministry has access to programming that can be implemented throughout the country without expense to the Ministry itself. Additionally, the Special Olympics resources can be used by the Ministry to showcase its capabilities to various audiences and stakeholders beyond Special Olympics Hellas’s network.

As made evident by the e-seminars, the resources created by this partnership are not just for promoting inclusion on the playing field. The Ministry has integrated inclusive coursework curated by Special Olympics into the school curriculum as a course option in



Ambassador Kodellas (left) and Minister Kerameus sign the Memorandum of Cooperation between Special Olympics Hellas and the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs

participating schools. Teachers who take the e-courses can share their knowledge with students, who in turn receive course credit for their participation. In effect, this policy removes invisible barriers that previously prevented educators from incorporating inclusion into their classrooms and kept students from learning more about Special Olympics programming.

As somewhat of a capstone for the partnership, starting next school year the entire country will celebrate the first annual National Special Olympics Day by holding Unified events. This initiative will amplify the message of inclusion and spread awareness of its importance. Artemis Vassilikopoulou, the national director of Special Olympics Hellas, expresses why she looks forward to a time when the intent of the Memorandum of Cooperation is fully realized.

“We will be able to achieve the maximum results as we will address even more educators and

even more students on a long-term basis with the support of the Ministry. Moreover, if, from an early age, children receive the appropriate education and become aware that the world belongs to everyone and that respect and dignity are owed to everyone, then . . . marginalization and bullying incidents will keep diminishing and . . . eventually they will be erased,” says Mrs. Vassilikopoulou.

The partnership between Special Olympics Hellas and the Ministry serves as a model of a sustainable partnership that is already having an impressive impact. The partnership will remove barriers to inclusion and dramatically enable the expansion of Unified Schools across Greece. As Mr. Papaioannou notes, “We are certain that this collaboration will change the foundations of not only the educational community but also society as a whole as concerns their attitude [toward] and acceptance of persons with disabilities.”



A Refugee Camp Paves the Way for Inclusion

SPECIAL OLYMPICS TANZANIA'S STORY



In many ways, the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in western Tanzania is quite different from other communities in the Play Unified: Learn Unified network. Still, the positive impact of Special Olympics programming is much the same.

Nyarugusu was founded in 1996, during the First Congo War, to accommodate people from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who were fleeing violence and persecution. The camp was also a haven for Burundian refugees during that country's civil unrest in 2015. Today, over 130,000

refugees from the DRC and Burundi, forced to leave their countries of origin due to lasting conflict, call Nyarugusu home.

Dependent on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Tanzanian government, and other donors for many of its services, Nyarugusu has limited independent resources and facilities. These constraints naturally provide challenges to implementing Special Olympics programming. Despite these limitations, Nyarugusu has been highly successful in promoting Play Unified: Learn Unified in the community.

In the past year, the collaboration between Nyarugusu and Special Olympics Tanzania led to the establishment of seven Unified Schools. This Unified Schools network currently boasts 263 athletes, 134 partners, and 34 teachers from the Congolese and Burundian populations. Members of the community and Special Olympics Tanzania are already inspired by Nyarugusu's success.



Athletes and partners in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp gather after a Unified football match



A group of Special Olympics Tanzania athletes and partners share their excitement following a Unified football event

“Play Unified: Learn Unified has [quickly] changed the negative attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities in the camp’s schools,” says Boniface Bernard Akembe, a program coordinator with Special Olympics Tanzania. “[Play Unified: Learn Unified] has stimulated the community’s love of learning and playing in an inclusive context,” he adds.

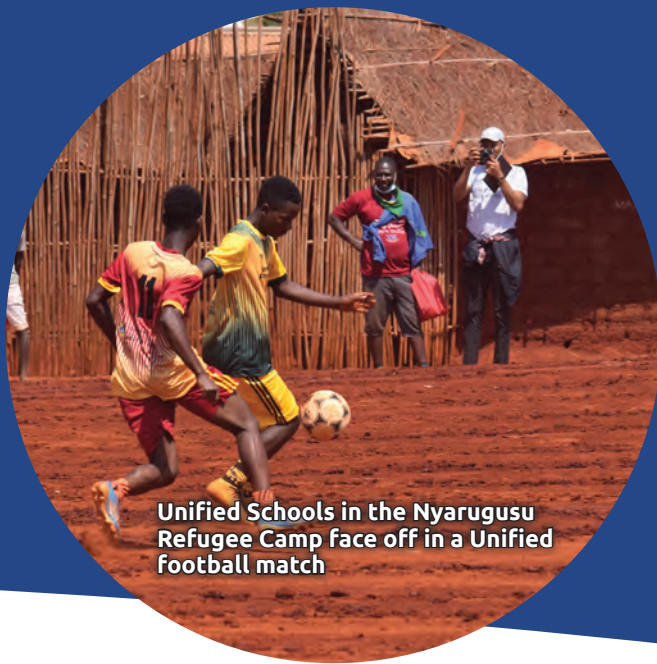
Since the implementation of Play Unified: Learn Unified, the people of Nyarugusu have noticed a significant decrease in the isolation of people with intellectual disabilities in schools and in the community. Athletes, partners, and teachers in Nyarugusu have also shared their stories and cooperated with others in local, national, and

international Special Olympics events. These experiences provide Unified Schools with best practices for building the skills of students and teachers, as well as ideas for spreading awareness about inclusion in the community.

Play Unified: Learn Unified also offers students in the camp the opportunity to interact deeply with individuals whom they likely would not otherwise encounter, let alone befriend. A Unified Schools network in a community such as Nyarugusu, with its unique multicultural makeup and sizeable number of people with intellectual disabilities, allows youth to break through age-old barriers of language, culture, and stigma.

Wilondja, a 13-year-old Special Olympics partner in Nyarugusu who enjoys participating in Unified activities such as football and races, says Play Unified: Learn Unified has led to new friendships among people of all abilities.

“ I didn’t have enough experience with children with intellectual disabilities before [Play Unified: Learn Unified]. Through this project, I’ve learned that persons with intellectual disabilities have the right to play with persons without intellectual disabilities and create friendships together. ” - Wilondja



The support of Play Unified: Learn Unified in Nyarugusu energizes people with intellectual disabilities. Ebinda, a 17-year-old Special Olympics athlete, has a goal of using the skills gained from Unified Schools programming and collaboration with Special Olympics Tanzania to teach communities the importance of educating people with intellectual disabilities. Unified Schools also provide Ebinda and other students with continuous social interaction involving people who aren't family members or other people with intellectual disabilities.

☐☐ When I play Unified Sports, I make new friends and we get to know each other very well. I'm happy that people with intellectual disabilities feel included in the community and play with other children. ☐☐ - Ebinda

Surprisingly—or perhaps not, given the known impact of Special Olympics programming—the establishment of Play Unified: Learn Unified in Nyarugusu has even changed the mindsets of teachers in the community who have experience working with people with intellectual disabilities. In Nyarugusu, for example, the inclusive nature of Play Unified: Learn Unified changed the perspective of Akili Baguma Yohana, a special needs teacher with 10 years of experience, about the best way to work with students.

☐☐ Play Unified: Learn Unified has changed my mentality because I once thought that children with intellectual disabilities could not play with children without intellectual disabilities. I no longer think this way. Since participating in [Play Unified: Learn Unified], I have noticed the youth change their mentality and behavior with regard to inclusion. ☐☐ - Akili Baguma Yohana



Developing Changemakers for Inclusion

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

THAILAND'S STORY



For the past few years, Special Olympics Thailand has partnered with local universities to offer Youth Activation programs. Through these programs, university students implement projects that advocate for inclusion in schools, assist people with intellectual disabilities, and promote acceptance.

When the partnership process started, participants in Special Olympics Thailand's Youth Activation program consisted solely of university students studying special education and physical education, and many of their "activations" consisted of sports- and play-related programs. Over the past year, however, Special Olympics Thailand has spread the message of inclusion to students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to engage with people with intellectual disabilities, bringing in new and diverse ideas for youth engagement. Recently, Special Olympics Thailand invited students from the Business Computer Science department of Lampang Rajabhat University to participate in the Youth Activation program. Many of these students have no previous experience working with Special Olympics or people with intellectual disabilities, and they express doubts about their ability to meaningfully contribute to the Youth Activation program.

Tossapol Tansakul, national coordinator for Special Olympics Thailand's Building Communities program, understands the university students'

concerns but assures them that if they give the program a chance, they will be successful. Mr. Tansakul tells the prospective Youth Leaders that any form of community engagement can change the lives of people both with and without intellectual disabilities. He convinces the students that "anyone with any talent and skill can become a part of Special Olympics and work together to help our athletes."

Through coordination with the Business Computer Science department, 27 students from Lampang Rajabhat University have joined the Youth Activation program as Youth Leaders. Over the past few months, they've applied their academic skills to create a set of 2-D animation learning tools via digital multimedia—an innovative learning development device for the over 60 people with ID who attend the nearby Lampang Special Education Center. The Youth Activation program provides many of the Youth Leaders, such as Chutipol, with their first experiences in working with and learning about the challenges people with intellectual disabilities face in Thai society.

"I [had] never joined any Special Olympics Thailand Program before [the Youth Activation program]. I [had] no experience interacting with any people with ID," says Chutipol.



Chutipol captures fond memories of his participation in the Youth Activation program with athletes from the Lampang Special Education Center

Chutipol and the other Youth Leaders use learning development tools to teach students with intellectual disabilities the life skills that help them become more independent and socially adaptive. These multimedia tools—which cover issues such as safeguarding, morality, self-care and personal hygiene, social roles, and self-sufficiency—are artfully and cleverly designed to encourage students with intellectual disabilities to develop an interest in spending more time learning. Using color, movement, and sound, the tools capture the attention of the students who attend the Center—most of whom are between 5 and 20 years old—and help them focus on their learning tasks.

Naphasin Duanggrapha, deputy director of Lampang Special Education Center, notes that these tools have the potential not only to help people with intellectual disabilities integrate more into society but also to help others recognize the full humanity and dignity of people with intellectual disabilities.

“Each and every person with disabilities can develop and improve their abilities, given the chance to learn. Therefore, [every] learning opportunity, however small, can and will help people with disabilities. All of our students here have the same right to be served and educated as [do] any other students in the country,” says Mr. Duanggrapha.

The implementation of Special Olympics Thailand’s Youth Activation program also benefits the lives of the participating Youth Leaders. Thanks to the program, Youth Leaders are becoming more aware and accepting of people with intellectual disabilities, and the experience of providing hands-on support bolsters their confidence in their ability to participate in inclusion advocacy.

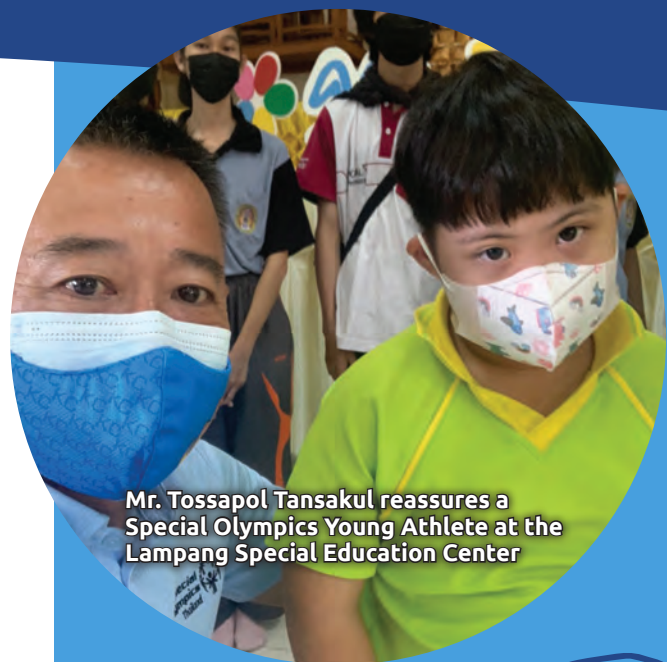
“The most significant lesson that I have learnt is about how to include people with intellectual disabilities in our society. . . . All the children with intellectual disabilities that we have met, each of them has very different . . . need[s] and social character[s]. We have to develop different motivation[s] for each person. It is challenging but also fun,” says Youth Leader Chutipol.

“The experiences and reflection that they gain from joining the Youth Activation program will help towards their career and personal goals.”

News of the program's success at Lampang Rajabhat University has spread to other areas of the country. Six different universities across Thailand are now on board and have committed to undertake similar projects this year. Special Olympics Thailand hopes its enthusiasm will help promote further expansion to other universities, addressing the goal of having Youth Activation programs and their message of inclusion be sustainably passed down from university senior students to new students each year.

The Youth Activation program meaningfully improves the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and provides university students with hands-on, problem-solving experiences that cannot be found in the classroom. Furthermore, Mr. Tansakul believes that these students are the next generation that will become society's leaders, and they will be aware of the needs of people with intellectual disabilities in society.

He adds, “The experiences and reflection that they gain from joining the Youth Activation program will help towards their career and personal goals. Having the new generation's understanding of people with intellectual disabilities will create more acceptance in society in the future.”



Mr. Tossapol Tansakul reassures a Special Olympics Young Athlete at the Lampang Special Education Center





Manifesting the Spirit of Inclusion

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

BRAZIL'S STORY



As the second-largest state in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro is dominated by its city of the same name. Rio is known for the staggering size and vibrancy of its urban sprawl. Home to samba music, beautiful beaches, and its annual Carnival—perhaps the most famous festival in the world, the city is also a study in contrasts. While estimates tally over 13 million people in the metropolitan region, a shared cultural identity of being “Cariocas”—a term meaning the residents of Rio—makes the atmosphere of the city much more welcoming than the sheer numbers might suggest. Additionally, tucked among the picturesque hilly terrain and upscale tourist destinations overlooking the Atlantic coast are large numbers of favelas; these densely populated, economically poor, and often unstable communities house up to a quarter of Rio’s population.

The characteristics of a bustling city such as Rio influence both the attitudes and goals of its community members. Special Olympics Brazil understands the local customs well and uses them to good advantage in creating opportunities for inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in both social and educational settings. Special Olympics staff in Rio are known for organizing large-scale events that cater to the lively personalities of their fellow citizens. The staff strive to serve a variety of athletes and partners—from the city center to the mountainside favelas—so all can benefit from the message of inclusion.

Recently, 70 Unified Schools across the municipality participated in a festival of sports and inclusive activities for Special Olympics athletes and supporters of all ages and abilities. Held at the Olympic Park, the site of the 2016 Summer Olympics, the Cariocas Inclusive Games was an all-day event that drew over 1,000 students and hundreds of teachers. Widely publicized, the games served as a platform for Special Olympics athletes to showcase their abilities in the midst of a supportive crowd in a public space. As the biggest event in the city since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event also boasted extensive media coverage and was attended by representatives from local government ministries.



Roberto, Carla, Renato, and Soraya celebrate their time at the Cariocas Inclusive Games



Soraya Rosa's students respond to her enthusiasm during a Unified activity



Special Olympics Brazil staff present caps to students at Maria Therezinha School

What made the Inclusive Games particularly exciting and memorable for these 70 Unified Schools was the opportunity to compete and to celebrate inclusion in the highly regarded setting of the Olympic Park. For many of the attendees, it was their first time to visit the famed Olympic venue. Staff from special education schools, in particular, expressed exuberant joy that the event allowed their students to be highlighted in activities that extended beyond their schoolhouse doors and brought them a newfound measure of community respect.

Maria Therezinha Special Education School was one of the sites that benefited from this singular experience. The school serves over 150 students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), as well as a handful of adults without disabilities who have little or no prior education. Many of the students reside in favelas and depend on the school to guide their educational and personal development, and the staff have consistently embraced this challenge. The positivity and grit of the school's administrators and teachers are contagious, and their example is reflected in the behaviors and accomplishments of the students.

Representing one of the city's leading Unified Schools, the students and teachers of Maria Therezinha Special Education School embody the "Carioca" spirit. The students were the stars of the Inclusive Games' opening ceremony. They performed a skit and a dance, and one student shared her personal experience for a news package filmed by ESPN Brazil.

Soraya Rosa, a physical education instructor at Maria Therezinha, has been working with students with IDD since 1989. She choreographed the school's performances at the Inclusive Games and says such events reveal the potential of her students to contribute to their community and break down people's misconceptions about IDD. "When people see the abilities of our students, they will believe in their potential," claims Soraya. She also believes that continued partnership with Special Olympics will change more mindsets throughout Brazil. "With my work, I can touch the hearts of parents and administrators in my community. [Special Olympics] can help increase this to a whole country. It's very important. People with intellectual disabilities are showing their faces and they are not invisible anymore," says Soraya.



Students from Maria Therezinha School dance to the beat during the Cariocas Inclusive Games



Renato and Roberto are classmates who did not have an opportunity to attend school until they were already adults. Both have found a welcoming community and opportunities for growth at Maria Therezinha. Renato, a Special Olympics athlete who joined the school in 2019, dreams of studying tourism. He shares that Unified events such as the Cariocas Inclusive Games have improved his confidence. “I’m making friends and I’m supporting my health, and the Inclusive Games event has also earned me another medal,” says Renato proudly.

Roberto, a Unified partner who has been a student at Maria Therezinha since 2017, learned how to read and write at the school. He didn’t know anyone with intellectual disabilities before attending Maria Therezinha. Now he believes that as more schools partner with Special Olympics, they will help people see life from a different perspective and be more understanding toward people who are different from them. “Before joining the school, I was scared to learn about people with disabilities. But students here don’t judge anyone or put people into categories. They

embody the true meaning of love. What I’ve learned here, besides education, is to act like this outside of school in my daily life,” Roberto says with heartfelt sincerity.

Special Olympics Brazil hopes to use the positive energy generated by the Cariocas Inclusive Games to encourage more involvement in Unified Schools from government ministries and local organizations. As both a coordinator who connects families with Special Olympics activities and as a teacher at Maria Therezinha School, Carla Siqueira Cassalta says that fostering and sustaining the representation of people with IDD in society is a mission that needs everyone’s support. Special Olympics Brazil and schools such as Maria Therezinha are leading the way in taking steps to achieve this goal. As Carla observes, “Unified programming offers people with intellectual disabilities the chance to have a presence in society. [The Inclusive Games] is a big step, and there is more work to be done.”

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The stories shared in this book are a microcosm of the events that are occurring every day because of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation's partnership with Special Olympics. Tens of thousands of athletes, peer partners, Youth Leaders, coaches, teachers, parents, and organizational partners are leading the way, with joy and courage, along the path to inclusion. There is a remarkable diversity of faces among the people on this path; like bricks and cobblestones, they give the path strength and embody the promise of a better world for all.

As a result of SNF's grant to Special Olympics, lives and communities are being forever changed. New dreams are taking shape on the horizon. Futures that were bleak are now bright. Where some young people once saw differences, disabilities, and "less than," they now see teammates, talents, and friends. Faces that once revealed sadness, fear, and loneliness now shine with joy, confidence, and hope. Watch for these faces on the streets where you live, play, work, and learn.

They are the faces of inclusion!





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FACES OF INCLUSION

Stories

VOLUME II