



Photo by Wayne Martin

Bowling and other sports provide a big emotional boost for those with intellectual disabilities.

LET *the* GAMES BEGIN

A club dedicated to Special Olympics athletes is helping stage the mammoth 2015 Special Olympics Summer World Games in Los Angeles.

BY KATYA CENDEL

Lion Ron Copley bends to hug Sarah Noonan. At 6 feet 7 he is a giant of a man. And Noonan is a wisp of a young woman.

"How's my girl?" Copley asks Noonan at the recent annual awards ceremony for Special Olympics athletes in Southern California.

He doesn't expect a verbal answer, and Noonan doesn't give him one. But she smiles. In a month Noonan will be 30, a birthday she will celebrate with a trip to Disneyland, like so many of her previous birthdays. Noonan has intellectual disabilities and mild cerebral palsy. She knows she is different. But when she takes part in Spe-

cial Olympics, a global program that provides training and competition for athletes with intellectual disabilities, she fits in and can be herself, says her appreciative mother, Jill Wall.

"Nobody's looking at her," says Wall. "She's just one of the athletes, which is a good place for her to be."

This summer, when the 2015 Special Olympics Summer World Games is held in Los Angeles, Wall and Copley will be among the Lions helping out. Some 7,000 athletes and 3,000 coaches representing 177 countries will gather in Los Angeles from July 25 to Aug. 2, making it the largest sports and humanitarian event anywhere in the world in 2015.

Special Olympics athletes compete in a multitude of sports thanks to Lions. That's Lion Dean Crowley offering basketball tips.



But unlike many of the other volunteers lending a hand, Copley and Wall will continue serving Special Olympic athletes long after the games are over. Both belong to the Whittier Special Olympics SOLA Lions Club (SOLA). The club is exclusively devoted to supporting Special Olympics athletes, holding competitions for them and raising money for their programs.

Having the World Games in its own backyard is a momentous occasion for the club. SOLA's 50 or so full and associate members are so excited about helping that SOLA President Steve Nichols says he has had to "pull in the reins a bit."

In the few years since the club was chartered many members have matured from knowing relatively little about Special Olympics to being robust champions of the athletes.

Copley admits he knew little about the organization when he and fellow Lion, Elisa Roche, were tasked with establishing the service club in 2009. "I thought they [the athletes] were kids," says Copley, 75, a member of the Whittier Host Lions and an affiliate member of SOLA. "But they're not."

Although Special Olympics athletes can begin competing at age eight, the program is for adults as well as children. Copley was not the only local Lion who lacked knowledge about Special Olympics. Before he joined the club, Nichols was unaware how many special needs athletes there were in the community, even though he spent years working as a deputy sheriff. "I was out there on the streets every day; I should have known," says Nichols.

The subject might have been unfamiliar to Copley and Nichols, but the relationship between Lions and Special Olympics is not a new one. Since 2001, the Lions Clubs International Foundation has helped fund the Opening Eyes Program, which provides eye care to Special Olympics athletes around the world. In addition to the financial support—more than \$13 million—Lions clubs provide volunteers who have helped test 350,000 athletes. Eye care is just one component of Opening Eyes; Lions have also helped with the free health exams offered through the Lions and Special Olympics partnership.

The link between the two service organizations extends to service clubs such as SOLA. There are about a dozen or so Champions Lions Clubs worldwide that serve those with intellectual disabilities. Some include Special Olympics athletes (SOLA does not).

Copley remembers being asked to form the club during a Lions convention in Fresno, California, in 2009. Then Lions Clubs International President Al Brandel asked Copley and Roche to "see if you can't carve out a Lions Club then and write a model for the rest of the world," says Copley. The club was chartered and held its first event the same year, with Copley serving as the Guiding Lion.

Although he knew little about the athletes, Copley knew quite a bit about Lions, having been a member of the Whittier Host Lions Club since retiring as manager of a flour plant in the late 1990s. Both his father and father-in-law were longtime Lions, maintaining perfect attendance during their respective 50- and 60-plus year memberships. His wife, Carol Copley, serves as SOLA's treasurer.

"We always wanted to give back," says Copley. "Life's

good."

It is a phrase he often repeats, and one the athletes help him remember. Their joy at living and positive attitude are infectious, Copley says. Nichols uses similar language when describing the athletes' enthusiasm: contagious. "It's like everything they do—they're hitting a home run," says Nichols, 62.

Nichols knows a bit about having fun. He makes his living building outdoor playgrounds and putting together indoor playground displays for stores like Costco. He got involved with Lions after donating leftover playground parts to a friend in the Whittier Host Lions Club, an all-male club in the city of Whittier, about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The friend invited Nichols to a meeting and next thing he knew he was a member. When SOLA formed, it was a natural fit.

"Our sole purpose is to support these athletes and that's what we do. We fundraise. We put on events, and it's an absolute blast," says Nichols.

At a baseball competition where he served as an announcer, Nichols says the athletes got so involved they gave themselves nicknames, as they had seen competitors do on television. The competitions, he says, draw them out of their shells and help build their confidence.

A few of the Southern California area athletes the club serves have been selected to compete at the Summer World Games, an international competition held every four years. When L.A.-area athlete Destiny Sanchez, 16, learned she would be running in the 100- and 200-meter races she was speechless. "Everyone she meets now, she's so happy that she tells them," says her coach, Amber Morales.

The World Games will take place at USC and UCLA. Around 30,000 volunteers are expected to help out during the nine-day event, including many Lions. Copley estimates that as many as 200 clubs from four districts could get involved. SOLA in particular is "taking a major lead," says Eloise Crawford, regional director of Special Olympics Southern California. Along with other Lions, SOLA members will staff the hearing and vision clinics of the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes program.

SOLA members and other Lions also helping to coordinate the lodging and transportation of athletes as well as organize activities for them. SOLA's special responsibility are 117 athletes from Macao in China.

Copley is working with Leos on a wristband initiative. Leos will sell the wristbands for \$5 at high schools in Southern California, helping to spread awareness about Special Olympic as well as giving students attending the competition another incentive to cheer on the athletes. The "Fans in the Stand" program is part of the special positive atmosphere of a Special Olympics event.

The club is used to putting on its own events and holds four competitions a year: softball, swimming, basketball and bowling. "It's just a unique partnership," says Crawford. "We're very fortunate it's in our backyard so we're able to help support all these athletes."

While none of the events SOLA organizes are as big as the World Games, it doesn't seem to matter to the athletes, says Nichols. When they dance at the holiday party it's like they are on the television show "Dancing with the Stars,"

he says.

It was at the holiday party four years ago that Cristina Sanz, 25, and Angel Callahan, 23, met. The young couple have been inseparable since. “Me and her, we always stick together,” says Callahan.

They play on the same Special Olympics basketball team and at the most recent party they were rarely apart. During dinner, Callahan placed a napkin on Sanz’s lap and pushed in her chair. When it came time to dance, Callahan was the only one gracefully twirling Sanz on the floor. The event was a chance for other friends to catch up as well, and soccer teammates Courtney Qualmann and Colin Garcia, both 24, exchanged high fives before the main meal. Playing in the World Games would have been the perfect birthday present for Garcia, who celebrates his birthday around the same time as the games. But their team will not be competing. Fellow athlete Cindi Nardi also will not be taking part, but she is a regular at the local competitions and familiar with Lions. “I love how they help out,” says Nardi, 48.

Wall, the mother of Noonan, was impressed by SOLA members’ dedication, noting how they would arrive at six in the morning to help with a softball tournament and stay until three in the afternoon. “They really, really love the athletes,” says Wall, “something you can tell because they get all choked up.”

But it was the fact that few members have Special Olympic athletes of their own that really convinced her and her husband, John, to join the club. “I think that’s what really did it for us,” says Wall. “They just do it out of the love of their heart.”

Wall’s daughter, Noonan, is an “honorary member” of the club. At the holiday party she helped in the kitchen alongside her mother and stepfather, a role the family performs each year. She wore jeans, a SOLA shirt and a necklace with a charm shaped in the American Sign Language hand signal for “I love you.” It is the same sign she tries to make with her hands in post-competition photos. Wall says her daughter’s behavior immediately improved after she began taking part in Special Olympics events in 1996. Being physically active, being involved in something and being just like everybody else all played a role in making her more patient. As for Noonan, she loves to show off the dozens of medals she has won in track and field over the years.

“She’s got them in her backpack, hanging in her room, at her dad’s, at her grandpa’s— they’re everywhere,” says Wall.

Her favorite medal, says Noonan, is “gold.”

An affiliate member of SOLA, Wayne Martin is “tickled” Special Olympics is showing off the abilities of athletes like Noonan. A quiet man with a white mustache, Martin is in charge of the SOLA newsletter and website, something



Photo by Wayne Martin

SOLA Lions such as Jeff Martin help the competitions run smoothly.



Special Olympic athletes Cristina Sanz, 25, and Angel Callahan, 23 (above), and Maria Luksetich, 24, dance at an annual awards ceremony for the athletes.

he is “having a ball” doing. Martin is retired now, but the 73-year-old spent almost 50 years teaching special needs children and views SOLA as a nice extension of his work. Unlike the Whittier Host Lions Club, to which he belongs, Martin feels SOLA members are closer and more affectionate. And no matter how much or how little you do for them, the athletes are guaranteed to remember your name, he said.

Rosa Masterson knows this well. In addition to holding competitions, raising money and volunteering at events, SOLA members also take individual athletes shopping for sports-related clothing and equipment. A few years ago Masterson took a swimmer shopping for a new bathing suit. After trying on several suits, the swimmer, a young woman in her early 20s named Candice, settled on a black one. Later, when Candice spotted Masterson around town, she shouted her name and hurried to greet her.

“When I walk through Whittier, wherever I go, this young lady will always remember my name,” says Masterson.

A petite cosmetologist, Masterson joined SOLA for a poignant reason. Her only child, Gary Wiggins, a deputy sheriff, was killed on a charity motorcycle ride in 2005. After his death, Masterson and her husband Jerry, both now 68, wanted to keep his memory of community service alive and find a way to distract themselves from their loss. When friends suggested joining SOLA, they saw it as an opportunity to do both, and to remind their grandson, Garrett, about the service to which his father dedicated his life.

“It’s been a really loving, caring experience,” says Masterson. “And the best way to keep my son’s spirit alive.”



Photos by Katya Cengel

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