

Unbeatable Together

An Interview with Timothy Shriver, Chairman of the Board, Special Olympics International

EDITORS' NOTE *Timothy Shriver leads the Special Olympics International Board of Directors, and together with six million Special Olympics athletes in more than 200 countries, promotes health, education, and a more unified world through the joy of sport. Shriver joined Special Olympics in 1996. He has been a leading educator who focuses on the social and emotional factors in learning. He co-founded and currently chairs the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading school reform organization in the field of social and emotional learning. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, President of the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, and a co-founder of Lovin' Scoopful Ice Cream Company. He has produced six films, authored The New York Times best-selling book, Fully Alive – Discovering What Matters Most, and has written for dozens of newspapers and magazines. Shriver earned his undergraduate degree from Yale University, a Master's Degree from Catholic University, and holds a Doctorate in Education from the University of Connecticut.*



Timothy Shriver

turned 100 in 2021, and she was a brave visionary for her time. We can still learn from her, as the dangers of inequality are more apparent than ever.

She deeply loved her sister, Rosemary, and her family, and she gave herself unconditionally to the mission of spreading love and respect for people with intellectual disabilities. My mother was an athlete, and the whole family played sports together. It was through sports that she saw the pathway for changing attitudes about

people who have been marginalized. She knew that playing together, training together, and competing together could create common ground for people of all abilities.

My mother was restless in the face of injustice, and instead of breaking the rules, she wrote a whole new playbook. In the 1960s, when her brother was the U.S. president, the country was at a critical point in the collective conversation about civil rights. At a time when public swimming pools were a microcosm of the larger conversation on segregation and integration,

my mom invited people of color to swim in our backyard pool. She was cleverly rejecting the existing paradigms of segregation and setting new expectations for equality.

What began as a backyard sports camp is now a global movement with more than six million athletes and Unified partners and one million volunteers in over 190 countries and territories. Most people are familiar with our flagship World Games, but in a typical year Special Olympics hosts over 100,000 sports events around the world. Special Olympics is truly a year-round, grassroots movement.

The next Special Olympics World Games are in Berlin in June 2023, where 7,000 athletes from 190 countries and territories will compete in 26 sports. Our Official Broadcast Partner, ESPN, will cover the Games and share our message with the world: We are unbeatable together.

How do you define the mission of Special Olympics?

Special Olympics is a movement from people with intellectual disability, not a charity for people with ID. Special Olympics uses sports as a catalyst for inclusion, and our impact transcends the playing field. Athletes

INSTITUTION BRIEF *The mission of Special Olympics (specialolympics.org) is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to 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.*

Will you highlight the history of Special Olympics and how the organization has evolved?

In 1962, my mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, invited young people with intellectual disabilities to a summer sports day camp in our backyard. Special Olympics was formally created in 1968 with the first World Games in Chicago, Illinois. Today's global movement for inclusion began as a reflection of her core values: faith, love, sport, and restlessness. She lived by the faith that every person is unique, sacred, and worthy – no exceptions. She would have



Timothy Shriver with members of team Germany - Closing Ceremony Special Olympics World Summer Games, Abu Dhabi 2019

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learn skills like discipline and teamwork which are directly transferrable to schools, workplaces, and communities.

We do more than prepare people with intellectual disabilities though. The standards for diversity, equity, and inclusion are always rising. Through our Unified sports program, we bring people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. By training together and competing alongside people with intellectual disabilities, those without ID learn the value of inclusion. They take this first-hand experience with them into healthcare, business, education, everywhere.

Perhaps most importantly, our international Board of Directors and Boards of local Special Olympics Programs include athlete leaders. Countless people with intellectual disabilities are employed throughout the more than 240 Special Olympics Programs around the world. Our global organizational governance includes local, national, regional, and global Athlete Input Councils to ensure athlete interests are represented anywhere decisions are being made.

The next World Games – Berlin 2023 – is by Special Olympics athletes, not just for them. From the original bid for the Games to the logo design and vendors supplying Games merchandise, people with intellectual disabilities are the leaders.

Will you provide an overview of Special Olympics’ programs in its work to create an inclusive world?

Before every competition, athletes recite the Athlete Oath: “Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.” As a global movement, we are always challenging the status quo. While sports is the heart of the movement, we are changing expectations in education, health, and leadership.

- Health – providing free health screenings to athletes, training healthcare providers, building community-based health promotion programs, and partnering with healthcare systems.

- Education – empowering young people, educators, coaches, and families to build inclusive schools and communities for all.

- Leadership – turning unconscious bias into conscious inclusion and changing the attitudes and behaviors of people without ID to create meaningful inclusion in workplaces, communities, and families.

By creating an atmosphere – online and in-person – of equality, unity, and pride, Special Olympics educates the public about people with intellectual disabilities, changes perceptions, challenges stereotypes, and addresses barriers to inclusion.

Workplaces inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities are more profitable, more productive, and have higher morale. Companies looking to amplify their DEI or ESG efforts should look to Special Olympics. Intellectual disabilities transcend location, income, race/ethnicity, gender identity, etc., which is why Special Olympics is a natural fit for companies that have taken an introspective look at their brand, leadership, and workforce and decided to champion the idea that everyone is equal.

How did Special Olympics adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

Special Olympics has been supporting athletes through COVID-19 by pivoting to online spaces:

- Hosting virtual games, virtual workout classes, physically distant workouts in the park, virtual book clubs, and more.

- Launching School of Strength with WWE – an online fitness behavior change platform.

- Sharing best practices across the movement with global webinars every other Tuesday.

- Creating the go-to hub for COVID resources for people with ID: online workouts, tools for emotional well-being and mindfulness, printable health education posters, and fun activities like healthy recipes, how to start a podcast, coloring books and more.

Globally, people with intellectual disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to die from COVID-19. In the U.S., people with ID are almost 6 times more likely to die from COVID-19.

People with ID had fewer opportunities to stay socially connected and physically active during the pandemic, so we accelerated the launch of a fitness program called School of Strength featuring WWE Superstar Becky Lynch, which was featured on the *TODAY Show*. School of Strength has been so successful, we launched a Spanish version, Escuela de Fuerza, featuring Gleyber Torres of the New York Yankees and Willson Contreras, formerly of the Chicago Cubs who just signed with the St. Louis Cardinals.

The pandemic showed us that we are able to shift priorities from an organization-wide perspective in a way that worked for grassroots stakeholders on the ground in nearly 200 countries. As the world figures out what the new normal is – post-pandemic and as social justice goes from being a movement to becoming an expectation – Special Olympics is here to remind people that diversity goes beyond gender identity, race, ethnicity, or sexuality; it also includes every kind of human diversity and gift. ●



Timothy Shriver poses for a photo with members of the delegation from Venezuela during their visit to Healthy Athletes at Special Olympics World Summer Games Abu Dhabi 2019