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Special Olympics returns to Acalanes after two-year hiatus

By Jon Kingdon



Photo Jon Kingdon

It was 11 years ago that the Special Olympics began what was to be an annual event at Acalanes High School. It was something that was always looked forward to with great anticipation but for last two years, it was just another victim of the coronavirus. So, when the official announcement was made that the Special Olympics was to restart last Friday, April 22, the news was met with both relief and excitement.

An event like this does not come together overnight. "We started setting up in October and began meeting in January to make sure that everything was flowing," Program Coordinator Sheri Roberts said. "With the kids not being able to go to school or anywhere the last two years, they're very excited to be here today and it's exciting for me as well."

There is still a carryover to what went on with the virus in that there were only 28 classes represented whereas there had been at least 54 classes in the past. "With so many bus companies having gone out of business, getting enough buses was an issue and a number of the teachers were really tired from all that they had gone through."

There were over 300 special ed students participating in the events, over 200 general ed students in the stands cheering them on and 111 Acalanes students

volunteering, mostly from Kat Bautista's Leadership class helping out in any way they could.

After the opening parade, the athletes had the opportunity to participate in the 50-meter, 100-meter and mile runs, the standing long jump, the softball throw and the turbo javelin.

Introducing all of the classes was ABC News Anchor Dan Ashley. "I was asked to be the Master of Ceremonies along with singing the National Anthem," Ashley said. "I don't usually sing at 10 in the morning so it's going to be interesting. (He gave a great rendition). I've always supported the Special Olympics and have done so many times over the years. It's a beautiful organization and events like this are just wonderful and whenever I have a chance to support it, I'm happy to do it."

For Natalie Chargin, a speech therapist at Acalanes, it was her first time at the event and she saw how excited her students got just waiting for the day to arrive. "I watched videos with them in preparing them for this event and I became really excited as well," Chargin said. "It's such an amazing day with everyone smiling and engaging together. This community with the staff and students is just wonderful."

Acalanes senior Emily Starn, one of the student volunteers, had more personal reasons for her involvement with the program: "My brother has Asperger's Syndrome so I've always been involved with this type of work. I love volunteering for the Special Olympics, and it means a lot for me to be here."

Chris Clark, Acalanes' athletic trainer, always makes himself available to oversee the athletes. "If they are brought to the medical area, I make sure that they have all their medications and medical information to appropriately address whatever might be going on," Clark said. "We're ready to take care of anything but ideally, all we will have to treat are the various bruises that can be treated with band-aids."

Chevron has been a big donor for Special Olympics and Mary Francis was their representative on the field: "We've been long sponsors of the Special Olympics organization and really support their mission, allowing everyone to celebrate their unique abilities and the acceptance of it. This program is more than about sports. It's a valuable education experience that unifies students of all abilities and encourages acceptance and respect."

Sheri Roberts spoke for more than just the Olympics when she concluded: "This is a big event that hopefully is kicking off a whole new era of getting back to normal."

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