

Published April 26th, 2023

## Student-athletes from 30 schools shine at Acalanes' Special Olympics event

By Jon Kingdon

By Jon Kingdon



Student-athletes participated in the April 21 Special Olympics at Acalanes, with hundreds of volunteers helping make their dreams come true. Photo Jeff Heyman

it takes several months to get everything together."

Roberti gives credit to the people at Acalanes who make this event so special. "It's the support from Katherine Walton, their leadership teacher and the student volunteers," Roberti said. "The support from the boosters is excellent, making snack bags for the athletes and selling hot dogs and chips."

Walton, who is also on special assignment over culture and climate, spearheaded the effort, assigning students from her leadership class to oversee the 130 volunteer students from Acalanes. "What's so cool about this event is that I do not have to do much to get our students to volunteer because they want to be out here," Walton said. "I just put up the announcement and the students signed up with smiles on their faces. It says a lot about our community, which is something I really value."

Sophomore Miles Blackhart and junior Alexandra Van De Poel are the two leadership students who were put in charge of the meet. "I really love hanging out with the special education kids on campus," Van De Poel said. "I was a volunteer last year and this was an opportunity for me to lead and do something that I felt was meaningful."

Both put in a lot of time to make certain everything was set up correctly. "The past couple of months, we've been dedicating every class period to just organizing the different aspects of the event and making sure that we wouldn't be rushing into things at the last minute," Blackhart said. "It's been a lot of work, but it's definitely been worth it."

The leadership class is involved in many other causes like blood and clothing drives within the community, but the Special Olympics is most important to Van De Poel. "It stands out because we involve a number of other schools with their special education programs and when they continue to come back to Acalanes, it means that we did a good job."

Hayley Takeshima, a sophomore volunteer, sees the event as a way to create a bond within the Acalanes community but says it's also deeper than that. "It's also the interconnection between all the schools that come to the Special Olympics," Takeshima said. "It's being able to create new bonds and seeing new faces and getting to know them. As the host school, we get to be around people that need to be celebrated for their incredible athletic performances and by volunteering I can help do that."

Parent volunteers Yanni Rho and Melissa Chen learned of the need for volunteers in the parents' newsletter. "This is a nice way for me to give back to the community," Chen said. "I love the fact that Acalanes was hosting this for so many schools and students so that they could compete in sports and have fun doing it."

Rho echoed those sentiments: "I believe that it's critical that students with special needs be able to participate in these types of events and it's something that called to me."

Mariia Petukhova, the special-ed teacher at Acalanes, appreciated the support she gets from the school. "Acalanes has been great about mainstreaming our students," Petukhova said. "We have two classes, and

they were all very excited about this event. They prepared a lot by playing the Kahoot game (a game-based learning platform designed for students to create, share, and play) and they watched a lot of videos and participated in United Sports (a program that provides students with disabilities the opportunity to play a variety of sports alongside students without disabilities)."

This was the first time at the event for Bergen Woodberry and her 8-year-old son, Alex, who is a student at the Wagner Ranch School. "Alex is really excited to be here," Woodberry said. "Alex is a great runner and swimmer and has been practicing a lot. We're just happy to be here and see what it's like and get the feeling of it. For me, it's just so inspiring to see all these kids and to have the whole community come out and support them is really wonderful."

For Max Nunez, a senior at Acalanes, it was his first time participating in the Special Olympics. "It's been a lot of fun and I've done a lot of practicing," Max said. "I'll be in a running event and also the jumping event." Max was true to his word as he won the 100-meter dash running past his father Mauricio, who was proudly videotaping the whole race.

Besides the joy, pride and satisfaction that the student-athletes get out of participating in the Special Olympics, Walton's desire is that the students all gain a new viewpoint after witnessing the effort put forth by these special student-athletes: "The students in my class and the many volunteers who aren't in the class don't get any prizes or awards. What I hope they get out of this is to see that these opportunities can exist for all, and they can make a great day for a set of marginalized kids that don't always get the same opportunities as they do. I hope that they can carry that perspective with them every single day because we have 24 Acalanes students who competed here today, and my hope is that they have that that same spirit and bring it to campus every day."



Photos Jeff Heyman



Photos Jeff Heyman

Reach the reporter at: [sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA