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# PTO: Dream it. Believe it. Achieve it.

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Each year, New Jersey Special Olympics solicits volunteers to provide inspirational slogans for the backs of volunteer T-shirts to be worn at Special Olympics events. The headline of this story comes from the T-shirts that we volunteers wore at the New Jersey Special Olympics Summer Games for June of 2017. While the words on the back of the shirts that we wear change each time, those specific words strike a chord with me. They echo why I continue to volunteer for Special Olympics. I take these words to heart, as I am a dedicated volunteer at Special Olympics events in New Jersey and completely enjoy the experience while giving my whole self to the endeavor.

The Special Olympics started in the 1960s by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. According to the Special Olympics website, the organization is “a global movement of people creating a new world of inclusion and community, where every single person is accepted and welcomed, regardless of ability or disability. We are helping to make the world a better, healthier and more joyful place—one athlete, one volunteer, one family member at a time.”

When my two daughters were growing up, I was a coach or volunteer at every one of their extracurricular activities throughout their school years, whether they were sports, theater or otherwise. Now that my younger daughter is attending university, I have a bit more free time to dedicate to other interests.

I first became involved with Special Olympics about 10 years ago through a family friend who is a mentor and coach to a group of local residents. The enthusiasm, preparation, courage and skill of the athletes are both amazing and inspiring. After that first event, I was hooked.

Up until the end of 2016, I would volunteer at one to two local events each year for bowling, track or swimming. Athletes who medal at these local events move on to either regionals or directly to the state championships, depending upon the sport. Beginning

in 2017, I became more and more involved in volunteering at New Jersey Special Olympics bowling and track events. In 2017 I volunteered at every event that led up to, and included, the state championship for both sports — five all-day events in total. I also took part in a 3K run on December 3, 2017, that raised funds for Special Olympics New Jersey. I resolved that my increased participation in 2017 would be the baseline for my continued involvement, and as such I volunteered at the same events in 2018 and will attend other events through the end of this year.

I attempt to make a personal connection with each athlete with whom I interact. I spend the day high-fiving and cheering on athletes on every attempt — whether strike or gutter ball, first place or last place — to celebrate their efforts. Over the years, I have seen many of the same athletes at the events; some of the athletes have become my friends. I have gotten to know them personally, and we share laughs and stories. My good friend, Rhonda, is the athlete I’ve known the longest. She calls me “Uncle Petey.” We always joke about how much younger she is than I am, though we are pretty much the same age (but she hates when I reveal that).

Another story is about someone I have also known for many few years—my friend Chris. At this past 2018 NJ Summer Games, Chris was honored for having participated in NJ Special Olympics for FIFTY years, which is the entire time that Special Olympics New Jersey has been in existence. After fifty years, Chris still runs the 10,000 meter event! Chris is my one and only “hero.” I am blessed to know him.

The days I volunteer are some of the best days of my life! I leave each event with the sincere and humbling feeling that the athletes have helped me so much more than I have helped them. While my hope is to make a difference in the lives of the athletes, even if for one day, I know that I have become a better person from these experiences. Through my years of volunteering, I have come to understand that there are no “disabilities” among us. It is just that we all have different abilities.

I know that we are all busy and don’t have a lot of time to do all of the things that we would like to do. As a member of the CAS Committee on Professionalism Education (COPE), I also feel it is important to give back to our profession. However, if you are able to, I urge my fellow actuaries to give some extra time to whatever local event or organization makes a difference in your community. ■



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