

Charles - “The Spirit of Special Olympics”

*Whoever, with an earnest soul, Strives for some end
from this low world afar, Still upward travels though he
miss the goal, And strays – but towards a star.*

Bulwer

I stood looking at the little boy crouched in the corner with his head almost tucked hidden between his knees. “Who is that young man?” I asked my Human Services Technician, hoping she would enlighten me. She replied, “His name is Charles.” I walked over to him and leaning down I tapped him on his head hoping he would look up. He did not respond but kept silent in the same withdrawn position. My hand reached for his little shoulder as I observed his twisted legs on which he was propped. “Charles,” I said in a very loving and reassuring tone. Slowly, he began to raise his head and as he looked up I saw a sweet innocent smile start to glean across his face. Then, out of fear, he, immediately, retreated back to his closed form as if protecting himself from the outside world.

For several minutes, I worked to get his attention and to ensure him that I was, indeed, not a threat. Before long, Charles and I were looking at each other as I encouraged him to stand up. He acted embarrassed and wanted to withdraw from having eye contact with me. His cerebral palsy had maimed his legs and he was overly self-conscious about their deformed nature. I asked him in a gentle voice could he try to walk for me. It quickly appeared to be something of a major chore for him as he struggled to move across the floor.

In my mind, I wanted to change his handicap; to reach out and make his legs new. I could see the ‘Spirit of human beauty’ being crushed inside a broken body and tears came flooding into my eyes. Being a perfectionist, I wanted to make all things new. I had been trained as a physical education major to review the whole person; ‘*sound mind, sound body*’. I could see Charles had acquired his diagnosis of being developmentally delayed mostly due to his physical disability which had destroyed his concept of having a sound mind and body. It was evident to me that inside, he was screaming, “Someone get me out of this body. I am a human being. I want to be like others. Please help me!” I could literally feel his pain of being trapped and I knew I had to do something to help him.

As days went by, I started the lengthy process necessary to file articles of incorporation to develop our new Sunny Dale Special Olympics program within Area 12. It would prove to be a hard task because my district supervisor, over the southern D.H.R. mental retardation centers, was directly opposed to the Special Olympics’ concept. She consistently put roadblocks in front of me in every imaginable way possible to try and stop my process toward us gaining Special Olympics’ accreditation. Sometimes those who have never been handicapped do not understand the desires of a true handicap person who is physically, mentally or emotionally challenged. I could relate to my clients’ feelings because in my own small way, I had encountered an unusual handicapping condition as a child.

So, with the odds totally against me, I forged on with the process toward gaining Special Olympics’ accreditation. In the back of my mind, I kept remembering the very coach that had once given me hope, security and a chance to prove

to myself about my own capability of overcoming a handicap through athletics. Everyone needs a chance to reach their potential and that means everyone, regardless of handicap. Those born without a silver spoon in their mouth and disabled need additional opportunities even more desperately. I thought over and over about where I would be today if my coach had not come into my life and helped me soar to greater heights. Without hesitation, I prayed to God for guidance and drove straight-ahead toward accreditation.

Soon, the Sunny Dale Special Olympics program became a reality. My first desire was to begin polishing the young man I had lifted off the floor, months earlier, into a true champion. He became my driving force toward achievement of that goal because I knew the entire program rested, solely, on my shoulders. With a master's degree in psychology/counseling and guidance I knew full well that one's perception of oneself is the determining factor for success or failure in life. I was determined to prove to Charles that hidden deep within his body was the 'Spirit of a Champion' which was not bound by the external broken body in which it lived.

I had learned at an early age that not having a good self-confidence could hinder one's growth. So, if I could change the emotional process of feeling defeat, due to circumstances beyond one's control, then, I would be willing to fight to the end for what I knew forthrightly to be true -- Our Spirit, within, flies free! It is not hampered by anything in this physical realm. My crusade, now, had its foundational stone set in place.

Finally, the day I had been waiting for arrived. I walked into the out-reach department and told Charles, who always sat in the corner, each afternoon, after school, “You, Charles, are going to be an athlete!” He looked up at me in total surprise and responded, “Me?” I smiled and said, “Yes, you, Charles, and practice starts tomorrow, right here, after school.” As I turned to walk out of the room, I looked back at Charles. He was just staring at me in utter bewilderment. There was no doubt in my mind that I had just awakened something very special inside of him which he had no idea he possessed. I knew exactly what that awakening felt like and I could see it in his brown eyes. The only question I had was, “Could I entice Charles to develop the seed I had just planted in his mind, which he was, now, actively pondering as a potential possibility?”

As days past, Charles began practicing his basketball developmental skills. He would tell me, over and over, “I always wanted to play basketball!” Then, almost in the same breath, he would say, “Miss Joye, I can’t do this!” The only response I ever gave to his doubts, and he had so many, was, “Oh, yes, you can, Charles, if you will only believe!” I knew this worked because the real battle in this ole’ life can always be won, no matter what the circumstances are, if you will only believe!

There were days Charles wanted to give up; but, I carried him through those moments of doubt just as my coach had carried me many years, earlier, through one of my life’s most difficult blows. In the end, just like me, Charles found a truth about being created in the very *Image of God* that few ever grasp. We, both, discovered that, with faith, any mountain can, literally, be moved; if you will only believe.

It was not long before my staff and I were able to raise enough money, through donations to our Irwin Association for Retarded Citizens (A.R.C.), and secure Special Olympic uniforms for our new athletic program. Our first official meet was the State Winter Games in Athens, Georgia. Charles, Landy, and Michael were the three athletes chosen to represent Sunny Dale at the State competitions. Charles was about to become my *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. His desire to fly higher than anyone had ever dreamed possible for him, quickly, inspired others. Those clients watching him began to sign up for their chance to find the 'spiritual athlete' hidden deep inside each of them, regardless of their own handicaps.

Charles' determination and willingness to practice was, constantly, witnessed by his peers. Soon, everyone, including his teachers and case workers, began noticing that the once, silent, shy, handicapped little boy was changing into a happy, smiling, champion of a man. With each blue ribbon and gold medal, Charles was, literally, being transformed before their very eyes. His Spirit, once so downtrodden, was being set free every time he, successfully, completed his athletic events in victory! Something he had never experienced in his lifetime.

At practice, each afternoon, Charles gave, more and more, of himself to improve without having to be prodded. It was not long before he quickly moved out the developmental sports program into normal skills training that offered him stiffer and more strenuous competition. Then, within a couple of years, he was on his way to becoming a vital member of many athletic and unified sports teams. Yes, Charles, eventually, became so outstanding that he was chosen to participate in the highest level of skill offered in

Special Olympics – that of being a unified team athlete. Very few, if any, unified team athletes had ever started out as a developmental skills athlete. He had gone from competing in the lowest level of sports skills to the highest level in just a few short years. Charles kept believing and never gave up. He became an amazing athlete and was honored by the State of Georgia as their coveted “Special Olympian of the Year”!

As the Sunny Dale athletic program expanded to include more and more sports, additional athletes began to sign up. Eventually, all 80+plus clients served by our Center, where I served as Executive Director, were enrolled in Georgia’s Special Olympics Program. Their ages ranged from seven to eighty years old. Our sports and athletic skills’ training increased exponentially and became a year-round program because Sunny Dale was offering every athletic competition skill available to our athletes. In fact, several athletes and Sunny Dale coaches were chosen to represent the United States in the International Special Olympics because of their outstanding athletic and coaching achievements.

Dedication and hard work put forth by Sunny Dale’s athletes took them far away from the city limits that had once confined them. In the past, they had been confined not by their will, but because of their handicap. *“No longer did they have to stand idly by on the sidelines of life.”* Instead, they were changing their lives and modifying their circumstances; rather than, their circumstances modifying their lives. For once, there was hope on all of my athletes’ faces. Their lives were being renewed. ‘True Champions’ were being born from the bodies that, before, no one had challenged enough to make them believe that their circumstances could be changed. It was not a piece of

cake! But, they quickly discovered if they were willing to work at it, there was indeed a better life out there for them.

Those days of hard work, toward meeting each of their athletic goals, were lengthy. Practicing most days was always done outside in either hot or cold weather, depending on the season. Before long, every athlete had one goal in mind. The attainment of a blue ribbon! It meant, to them, on that day, that their life would never be the same, again. No longer were they a loser. Instead, they were a winner in their game of life that, now, had more purpose than ever before.

I watched, daily, as my athletes transformed into happier human beings. They were not as sick, they worked harder by staying on task in the workshop, their behavioral patterns improved, they smiled more, they worked better as a team, they ate better food choices, and in the end they became more physically fit. And that is why my program, *To Reduce Obesity in the Mentally Retarded Adult Population*, became my *Major Applied Research Project* as part of the requirements for completing my Doctorate of Educational Leadership Degree, in Administration.

As part of this 24-month project, I was able to successfully prove statistically that physical fitness, on a daily scheduled basis, would improve all aspects of a handicapped person's life, regardless of their age or level of disability. My research plotted each athlete's physical, emotional, and spiritual change. It, also, noted that these athletes had been capable of reaching a much higher level of performance than had once been conceived possible based, solely, on psychological examination. In the end, each athlete in my unique program attained the *Presidential Sports Award*

from President George Bush based on their sustained athletic ability and not on their level of handicap.

In no time, all my athletes were defying the odds. Several of them ran 5K and 10k road races competing against only a field of normal athletes. No longer did they feel they could not compete on an even scale with the rest of the world. The Sunny Dale Special Olympic Track Club founded and hosted the *Georgia Sweet Tater Trot 1 mile and 5K Road Race* as part of the *Run and See Georgia* accredited Road Races. My runners were not afraid to compete against non-handicapped athletes. In fact, many could outrun and outplay their normal friends at school or on the recreational fields. As I continued to coach them, I could see each athlete growing their self-confidence into more normal patterns as a human being. Each day, my heart would fill with so much gladness as I relished their achievements and moments of glory.

Unfortunately, fighting for what I believed were the rights of my athletes caused me so much pain over the years from those who were closed minded. But, in the end, my battle scars were worth it all. I got to see Charles play top-notch Unified Basketball and his team win the State Championship, Bill and Martha win the State Golf Unified Team Championship with me, send Sandra and Benjie to run a successful 10k marathon in Washington D.C., and train Lawrence in Tennis, Carlos in Bowling, Michael in Nordic Snow skiing and Sandra in Track and Field to all represent the very United States at the coveted *International Special Olympics*. My State Championship Teams of Volleyball, Softball, Swimming and Diving, Basketball, Soccer, Tennis, Table Tennis, Cycling, Snow Skiing, Speed Skating, Track and Field, Bowling, Ice Skating, and