

This will be my 9<sup>th</sup> summer as Woodside's Head Swim Coach. But I'm not sure many people know this about me: My sister, Julie, has Down Syndrome.

Julie is two years older than I, born in December, 1978. She, my older brother, and I grew up in the 80's. We would frequent parks, fast food restaurants, and grocery stores with my mom. Back then, acceptance was not at its highest. I grew accustomed to points and stares from strangers on our outings. In fact, it became the norm. Little boys would frequently mock my sister's actions and speech. Some folks would even ask my mom, "what language does she speak?" I have a vivid memory of being at the arcade of a roller rink (yes, I said roller rink!). I couldn't have been more than 6 years old. A 10+ year-old boy was mocking my sister to his friends. So I marched my sassy, blonde, 6 year-old self up to him, wagged my finger in his face, and told him that his mom needed to do a better job of teaching him how to be nice to people who are different. (Those that have known me for years are less than shocked by this story, I am sure).

Shortly thereafter, my sister got involved with Special Olympics, at about 9 years old. She first participated in track and field for a few years, then she started taking an interest in swimming. It was about the same time that I was taking an interest in swimming as well. She would come watch my swim meets. She actually taught herself how to do a flip turn just by watching me and my teammates do them as I competed. I watched her take so much joy in the competition and comradery with friends that Special Olympics offered over the years. The organization has done so much for her and our family overtime, through high school and college.

Fast forward to Spring 2019. Acceptance for differences of all kinds is much higher, and the days of my finger wagging to 10 year olds are a laughable, distant memory. My sister is 40 years old (part of me can hardly breathe when I say that out loud – she's our forever child). My sister has been competing in Michigan Special Olympics State Games for 31 years of her life. But the last 5 years have been difficult for Julie and her friends. Funding has been cut, and the State Games competition that participants have grown accustomed to going to over time, have resorted to having to work on the lottery system. The region of the state in which an athlete competes determines how many individuals can be funded to attend State Games. If there are more athletes than spots, then they do a lottery to select who can go. Some regions in our state can't send any athletes at all. If you've never felt what it's like to have your heart break, sit in a room with these athletes when they are told who can go, and who cannot.

As some of you may be aware, the state of Michigan has made even MORE cuts related to Special Olympics recently. And you may not be aware, either, that the NSSL, as a league, has made it its goal each year for over 25 years to help fund this fantastic organization. And now, more than ever, the Special Olympians need our help.

When you see opportunities this summer on the pool deck to give to Special O', please consider donating to this organization. To say that it is near and dear to my heart is a colossal understatement.

Thank you for reading,

~Coach Anne