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## Special Olympian Ryan Heptig gets gold

By Jon Kingdon



Ryan Heptig Photos provided

Nearly 800 athletes and 265 coaches from across Northern California June 22-24 were welcomed to UC Davis for the 50th annual Special Olympics Northern California Summer Games. Longtime Lafayette resident, Acalanes High School graduate and member of the Avengers Special Olympics Team, Ryan Heptig, was one of those participants, coming away with two gold medals (800 meters and 4x100 meters relay) and a silver medal (shot put).

In June 1962, Eunice Kennedy Shriver started a day camp called Camp Shriver for children with disabilities at her home in Potomac, Maryland. Shriver was concerned that children with disabilities had very little opportunity to participate in athletic events.

From this modest beginning, The Special Olympics is now the world's largest sports organization for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, providing year-round training and competitions to 5 million athletes and Unified States Sports partners in 172 countries. Special Olympics competitions are held every day, all around the world - including local, national and regional competitions, adding up to more than 100,000 events a year

When Heptig was about 5 years old, it was discovered that he had a brain tumor which led to a traumatic brain injury that caused nerve damage to his eyes and some learning disability. Despite these challenges, Heptig went on to graduate from high school and was involved in many of the programs offered at Acalanes.

Heptig ran on the school's cross country team, was on the practice squad for the golf team and sang bass in the school choir. Adds Heptig: "I also took groups trips sponsored by the Lafayette Methodist Church where we would visit Indian Reservations and other depressed areas, building structures to help those in need."

In 2010, right after high school, Heptig began working at Safeway and began his relationship with Special Olympics. It was a positive from the beginning for him: "I love sports and my first event was with the volleyball team. There was this huge crowd and they erupted yelling my name. I did not know that all my friends from Safeway were there so it was a good moment for me."

Heptig's parents, Mark and Lissa, immediately saw the benefits of participating in Special Olympics. Says Mark Heptig: "The number one thing is that you find friendships and it provides you with a feeling of belonging as it builds up your confidence. The athletes practice hard and there is competition but it's the participation more than the winning that is important, working towards a goal."

Volleyball was just the beginning for Ryan Heptig: "I ran the 800 meters, the 400 meters, the 4x100 meter relay and threw the shot put. I also play golf, softball and volleyball. The 800-meter race is my favorite event because of how long the race is and how you can catch up at the end if you're behind." Not coincidentally, Heptig's favorite golf course is Rossmoor where his father has been the director of golf for the last 25 years.

It's not just the spectators that find inspiration in the games; Heptig finds encouragement from his fellow competitors: "I love the Special Olympics. Just seeing people who you don't think would be able to participate, compete and win some of the events is amazing. I give my all in each event but when I see someone with a tougher situation than my own, it inspires me to give even more of an effort. It always makes me come back for more events."

Heptig's coach in track and field is Juliette Gee, who started The Avengers Team for personal reasons: "My daughter has special needs and is on the unified track team at Acalanes. I started the track and field team to make sure that she and the other special need athletes learn the proper technique to avoid injuries and to ensure that everyone is able to reach their highest potential."

Gee brought in coaches from the open masters senior track and field associations to tutor the athletes. For part of the year, the Special Olympics pays Acalanes for the use of their facilities. The rest of the season, the Avengers are permitted the use of the field free of charge by Acalanes. A number of the Acalanes track

coaches volunteer their time and expertise as well as student-athletes such as Johnny Choi and Ryan Nall who work with the athletes as well.

Gee has seen much improvement in the time that Heptig has been with the Avengers: "Ryan has grown a lot as an athlete. He takes direction very well and is very dedicated and responsible. I have come to depend on Ryan to marshal the younger athletes to whom he is a great inspiration. He never misses a practice."

Diablo Foods and Heptig have proven to be a match made in heaven in which both parties have mutually benefited from their relationship. After working for five years at Safeway, Heptig has been employed the last five years at Diablo Foods as a "courtesy clerk."

Dan Stokes, whose family is celebrating the 50 years that Diablo Foods has been in existence appreciates what Heptig brings to his store: "As a courtesy clerk, Ryan is the last person that our customers see. He will help them unload their carts, he will bag their groceries and he will then take their groceries out to their car. He is constantly smiling and is a great reflection of our store. Anything that Ryan wanted and needed, we gave it to him"

Heptig proudly wore his gold medal when he returned to Diablo Foods. "Diablo Foods and the Stokes family have just been incredible," he said appreciatively. "They have allowed me to take the time off that I needed to train and compete for the Olympics. You just feel proud for your family and your community and what you stand for. I received so much support from Diablo Foods allowing me to prepare and participate in these events."

Adds Heptig's father: "They did not know that Ryan was involved with Special Olympics when he started. The Stokes understand how important it is to us. We then found out that this is the way they treat all of their employees. They value everybody that works there."

Stokes explains further: "Our success comes from the 165 employees here. They all care about the store and the Stokes family. Ryan is in that category. He loves the store." Stokes saw a positive change with Heptig's success in the Olympics: "After Ryan performed so well at the Olympics, his confidence was sky high and it seems that everyone in town knows him."

The Special Olympics athlete's oath is, "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." With all of the support that Heptig has received from his family, the community, his workplace and the effort that he has put forth on and off the field, he certainly epitomizes that motto.



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