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Community gathers to cheer Special Olympics student-athletes

By Jon Kingdon



Participants cross the finish line at the April 23 Special Olympics event at Acalanes High School. Photo Tyler Krochmal

not otherwise have during the school day. There are over 35 classes from all over Contra Costa County, bringing in over 600 athletes. Acalanes is one of our bigger events. The school very generously provides everything for free. Besides the use of their facilities and providing snack bags for the athletes, there are over 100 volunteers from the high school."

The athletes competed in track and field events. There were wheel chair races, 50- and 100-meter runs, relay races and a mile run. The field events entailed throwing the turbo javelin, softball and tennis ball throws and the standing long jump.

Under the tutelage of Acalanes Leadership Teacher Katherine Walton, seniors Nick Bettencourt and Audrey Glosson led the coordination of the event with the over 100 volunteers from Acalanes. Bettencourt explained how it all developed: "In my leadership class, I was on the community outreach committee which entailed the Special Olympics and Audrey and I decided to spearhead and run the whole event."

Bettencourt and Glosson arrived at 6 a.m. and did not leave until the end of the school day though their efforts began long before the event. Working closely with Sheri Roberti, the coordinator of the Special Olympics Schools Partnership Program, Glosson said meetings began a few months ago and they worked on registering the 60 different schools that came in from Northern California. "We had parents who volunteered and also had 110 student volunteers that allowed us to make this event happen. The students signed up for certain time slots and Miss Walton let the teachers know which period the students would be working and missing those classes."

Acalanes senior Alex Fellner has been a great supporter of this event and she brought a personal understanding as to what this event means: "I was in leadership and I volunteered for it as a freshman and volunteered for it every year since then. I have a cousin with Down syndrome. She never got to compete in anything like this and it's great to watch kids be able to compete in these events. My favorite part is the opening ceremony when the athletes walk out there with their teammates and the signs for their schools. They are so excited just to compete whether they win or not."

Ethan Slovick, a student at Stanley Middle School, participated in several events and spoke with great joy about the event: "I had a lot of fun. I did some training with running and throwing the softball and javelin and I got to meet new people." His favorite part of the day? "Running to the finish line."

Carter Tuckerman, also from Stanley, enjoyed the day: "The best part was running super-fast. I met new people and threw the softball and javelin. I had five of my friends here and I like the fans rooting for me."

Gio Garrett, another Stanley student, had a lot of fun participating in the events: "I enjoyed running the races and the long jump. I don't like other sports. I did train a lot. I worked on my jumping on the trampoline. I made a lot of friends and it's just been a great day for me."

Tony Ohlson, the life skills teacher and coach for the Miramonte High School team, brought 12 athletes to Acalanes: "The kids really look forward to the event. We also participate in soccer in the fall, basketball in the winter and this event. The kids love it and in participating, they have a connection with the other

Even with a small group of people, it's almost impossible to come together with a single opinion about any one issue. On April 23, there was a gathering of athletes, fans, coaches, volunteers and family members that came together with a unanimous opinion on one issue: The Special Olympics Northern California Contra Costa Schools Partnership Area Games was an event that was both entertaining and inspiring.

For the sixth straight year, Acalanes High School was the host for these games. It was an appropriately sunny day for the special education student-athletes who came from elementary schools up to post-high school transition schools.

Keiko Arzouman, the area manager for the Schools Partnership Program, oversees over 100 events for schools in Northern California throughout the year: "The interschool programs provide the special needs students with an opportunity for sports that they normally would

athletes."

One of his students, Fox Gerungan, spoke of what it meant: "I am excited about the event. I run track and just love any sport and get to meet other athletes."

Ember Bailey whose sons Tobin (Stanley Middle School) and Jonah (Acalanes) have participated in these meets for years said: "They are confidence boosters for them. They are around their typical peers and their classroom peers and have a lot of fun with it. They talk about it for weeks before it happens. It's a family event for us and it's a very grounding event for the parents. It's just awesome to see the support that the community and the school brings. They cheer each other on and they make friends from the other schools. It's like a family reunion for the parents as well."

Robyn Dobruck, whose son Sam has Down syndrome and is a first-grader at Burton Valley, very much appreciates the support he gets from his school: "I'm thrilled to see Sam's first grade class here along with his fourth-grade buddies who help the first-graders read and helped train Sam. Sam is just running and responding to the energy here."

It's not just the parents and students that volunteered for this event. Members of the police departments from Lafayette, Pinole, Danville and San Ramon were on hand and gave out the ribbons to all of the athletes.

Acalanes trainer Chris Clark put in a yeoman's effort, spending the entire day over a grill, wearing an apron with the title "The Meat Team" at the Acalanes snack shack, preparing sandwiches for sale to the public: "I've been doing the barbecuing for the last 12 years at this and various other events at Acalanes. I have had different volunteers each year - it's like the passing of the spatula. All of our profits go back into the Special Olympics."

Dick Callahan, who has been the Oakland A's public address announcer for the past 16 years, has been voluntarily serving as the announcer at events like this one for the past 20 years. In explaining so eloquently and emotionally why Special Olympics means so much to him and everyone else who was in attendance in person or in spirit should strike home for everyone: "My answer is, What is not special about Special Olympics? I love what the kids do and how they compete and how the parents take care of them and get them out in the community. It's an amazing thing to watch. People may have restrictions in their lives but you can't tell that when they're competing. They have a heart, a will and a desire and wouldn't it be nice if we all had that. It's been a wonderful experience for me and I love being here."

Roberti spoke highly of how well things were run: "Working with Katherine Walton, who was fantastic, everything ran very smoothly. The kids were hot, but happy. The event gets better and better each year. We are looking forward to returning to Acalanes next year. It's a huge undertaking but it always ends up being a great event with lots of kids and we very much appreciate Acalanes hosting this event."

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