

“How My Acts of Service Help Me Understand What My Community Means to Me”

Word Count: 782

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The air was electric. Music pulsed through the stadium. Balloon arches, mascots, proud families and smiles filled the space around me. The first bus pulled to the curb and an energetic crowd of students rushed to the doors creating an aisle of cheers and encouragement for the athletes to make their entrance. I was swept up in the emotion of those initial moments. The doors opened and our first athlete stood at the top of the bus stairs. His smile shone from ear to ear. He had arrived at this moment full of excitement and hope. Happy tears stood in my eyes. It was almost too much. Special Olympics Day had arrived and I was thrilled to be a part of it.

I am a member of Unified Club and a 4-year volunteer at our local Special Olympics. I initially started volunteering with the Special Olympics through an opportunity presented to me in my Leadership class freshman year. I was a little nervous at first. What would I be doing? Would I be helpful? Could I connect with the athletes? It turned out I had nothing to fear. As soon as I met the student I would be working with I knew it was going to be a great experience.

She came bounding over to our meeting area with her teacher in tow. I introduced myself and immediately received a big hug. Whelp, I guess we are friends now. It was that simple. Her excitement continued as we prepped for races and played games on the in-field. I was able to meet her parents and help her collect the ribbons she was awarded. She wore them proudly.

This day started to shape my understanding of ability and resilience. I learned about approaching difficulties and challenges with a positive mindset. I saw how encouraging words and supportive actions can turn doubt into confidence. I saw a community lifting each other up

and celebrating what makes each athlete unique. It was refreshing in a way that I didn't know I needed. This day lit something inside of me that I didn't know existed. My world, and my heart, opened up just a bit more.

I am one of the lucky ones. My personal involvement in my community has connected my personal values to meaningful actions. This has given me both a sense of fulfillment and direction. I have found purpose through inclusion.

This led me to join the Unified Club. Unified Club is defined by Special Olympics as, "a club for students with and without intellectual disabilities that comes together for sports, games, community service, school events, and most of all, to have fun" (Special Olympics, 2023). And, while all this is true, it is also a place for real friendships to blossom. It is a place where I gained perspective on perceived challenges and gained respect for the strength and beauty of our Special Education community members.

I was next offered an opportunity to work at an event by The Empire State Games for the Physically Challenged. Again, it was a beautiful and rewarding experience. Again, the athletes taught the volunteers more than we could have ever offered in return. They showed strength, drive, kindness, encouragement and engagement. Their families looked at their performances with a growth mindset and celebrated both big and small successes with love. As a three sport varsity athlete, I was humbled. Athletes come in many forms. All deserve acknowledgement.

My community involvement taught me a lot about what I value in life. I value seeing others. Really noticing what makes a person special. I value lifting others up and celebrating successes. I value perspective and gratitude. These values have been a motivating force for

me. I seek out opportunities to make a difference and connect and contribute to my community rather than be a passive bystander. I lead with my heart. I welcome new opportunities.

Through my experiences with the Unified Club and the Special Olympics I witnessed the strength and spirit of athletes overcoming challenges, finding connection and confidence and this led to me learning that the best way to find fulfillment is in helping others. This helped me realize that my calling was to become a pediatric physical therapist. I will be able to follow my heart in making a difference for athletes in every sense of the word.

The Special Olympics Oath says, "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt" (Handojo, 2021). I have learned to see bravery in my diverse community. I have learned to value our differences and the lessons they offer. Together we are better. We are connected. We are stronger. We are unstoppable.

## Works Cited

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