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Student Service Initiative Ignites Smiles and Spirit in Special Olympic Contenders



From left, Peter CuvIELLO '13, Georgios Stylianides, Ph.D., associate professor of exercise science, Rachael GNIAS '12 and Katie McAllister '12 organized members of the exercise science honor society at the University – along with some swim team members – to provide zumba classes and swim lessons to help area children train for the Special Olympics.

As a freshman, Rachael GNIAS '12 answered a call from Bob Durkin, who asked members of The University of Scranton's swim team to volunteer with swim classes for children, including his son, training for the Special Olympics.

As a senior and president of Phi Epsilon Kappa, GNIAS called on Durkin to see if members of the exercise science honor society could help out again.

Through the support of the Phi Epsilon Kappa officers and faculty moderator, the call led to bimonthly zumba classes in the fall and weekly swim practices in the spring – as well as scores of smiles and hugs from the children participating.

"This was totally the students' idea," said Durkin. "They wanted to do something, and they did."

Durkin explained that the children participating have a range of disabilities – and abilities. Most programs for the children involve the active participation of parents. With this program, the students have taken charge, allowing parents to watch from the sidelines, and the children the thrill of interacting with someone closer to their age.

"The children gravitate to the students," said Joe Paladino, a parent of a participant. "Learning from their peers is a different opportunity for the children."

Jean Sandberg, who organizes the Special Olympics training program with the students and Georgios Stylianides, Ph.D., associate professor of exercise science and honor society moderator, said the University students "are terrific with the children; showing patience, genuine care, encouragement and instruction." Sandberg was also grateful for the more advanced swim instruction some of the University swimmers were able to provide.

"The University's swim team members, who joined the honor society members to help out in the pool, have the training and experience to help the more advanced swimmers train for the competition," said Sandberg. "The children are also getting more individual attention because of the number of student volunteers."

The initiative has proven to be just as beneficial to the University students.

Dr. Stylianides said this program compliments classroom instruction by providing the students real-life, hands-on experience. He and the officers of Phi Epsilon Kappa were so committed to this project that the organization did not include the initiative as one of its required service projects. In addition to GNIAS, the other officers are exercise science majors Antonietta Bruno '12 of Teaneck, N.J., vice president; Anahita Saadat '12 of Boonton Township, N.J., treasurer; and Katie McAllister '12 of Nazareth, secretary.

"This is something we just wanted to do," said GNIAS. "The zumba classes were lots of fun and fit easily into students' schedules. It was a huge success. The students really enjoyed participating."

GNIAS reached out to swim team members to help provide consistent instruction for the spring semester swim practices that ran weekly from March through May in the Byron Recreation Complex.

"It's nice for children to see the same face every week," said GNIAS, an exercise science major from Langhorne, who will pursue a DPT degree after graduation.

"This project let me learn, have some fun and help in the community," said McAllister, who will also pursue a DPT degree after graduation. "Working with the children has been a great experience. They have a special place in my heart."

Exercise science major Peter CuvIELLO '13 enjoyed the one-to-one interaction with the children.

"Small things go a long way," said CuvIELLO of Glen Rock, N.J. "Seeing a face light up after a word of encouragement is the best feeling."

"The students are just terrific," said Durkin.

The feeling is obviously mutual.

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