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Friendships rolling for Special Olympics

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By PAUL DAILING pdailing@stmedianetwork.com

AURORA -- Walking into the Parkside Lanes bowling alley, 15-year-old Olivia Redman spotted the mother of a friend.

"Where's Cole?" the bright-faced teen asked.

Angi Paravola, of Oswego, pointed to her son, Cole, 13. Yorkville resident Redman grinned and walked over to Cole calling "Hey, Troy." She gave him a hug.

"She calls him Troy from 'High School Musical,'" Paravola said, chuckling. "So there'll be a track meet and she'll be yelling 'Go, Troy! Go!'"

Like Cole, Olivia has Down syndrome.

They, along with 60 other Kendall County residents with special needs, have been meeting every Thursday to bowl and socialize in preparation for Sunday's Special Olympics Area 2 meet in Naperville.

The gold medal winners from the Naperville meet will compete in the October regionals in Rockford for a chance to go to the December state finals in Peoria.

But for Angi Paravola, watching her son make friends like Olivia is more important than how many pins he knocks down.

"He can be himself because he's with his peers," she said, watching the two teenagers joke and laugh.

Growing group

The Kendall County Special Olympics group is run through a volunteer support organization and the Kendall County Special Education Cooperative, a coalition of local school districts' special education programs.

Usually, a school-based group like that would only have a Special Olympics program for athletes aged 8 to 21. With most of Kendall County out of the jurisdiction of the Aurora-based Fox Valley Special Recreation Association, a parks-based program, KCSO's athletes have nowhere to go.

"Our kids don't leave us when they're 21," head coach Deb Clason said. "They stay with us because there are no real (Special Olympics) programs in Kendall County."

While cities like Yorkville and Oswego have arranged reduced rates for residents to join the Fox Valley group, others have not.

"There's a very high poverty level in Kendall County and there's a number of families who can't afford even the \$20 we charge (per sport)," Clason said.

Scholarships available

Athletes continuing past 21, coupled with Kendall County's growth and the group's increased outreach, mean KCSO has grown from about 20 to 60 athletes a year during Clason's 33 years with the group.

"In the last few years, we'll get 10 new kids and just five leave," said Clason.

But equipment, fees, uniforms and transportation get expensive. Lately, non-profits and schools haven't been able to help each other out as much as normal, Clason said. For example, schools don't waive the rent and janitorial fees for events anymore.

The most recent yearly Fun Festival fundraiser, which usually covers the group for the whole year, brought in about \$22,000 of the needed \$30,000.

"This year we've had to do small fundraisers all year long just to sustain us," Clason said. "When we do get donations they've been smaller because everyone's been hit by the economy."

Older and younger

Sara McGregory, 21, of Oswego, is diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified, which puts her on the autism spectrum.

"I've been in Special Olympics for 10 years. I love to swim. I'm a good swimmer. Right, mom?" she said, turning to her mother.

McGregory then returned to the lane and picked up a spare.

Having older athletes helps limit the group to four of the 35 Special Olympics sports.

"Doing team sports was always difficult for us," Clason said. "You can't have a basketball team with an 8-year-old and a 22-year-old."

One thing the age difference does offer, Clason said, is role models for the younger athletes.

Ben and Nancy Chandler of Plano are the parents of two children, both with special needs due to a rare genetic disorder known as PKU. Younger sister Carly Chandler, 14, grew up watching her older sister Kristen, 19, compete.

"She was dying to get in here; she could not wait until she was 8 years old," Nancy Chandler said of Carly.

Friendship key

Volunteer Angela Reinbacher, 14, an Oswego High School freshman, pushed Alexis Lawson's motorized wheelchair up to a metal ramp in front of the lane.

After pulling the front wheels over a bar to secure the chair, Reinbacher selected a purple ball from the ball return and placed it on the ramp.

Alexis, also 14, of Montgomery, gives the ball a push. It rolls down the ramp, down the lane and, until Reinbacher and another volunteer reposition the ramp, straight into the gutter. Soon, Alexis is knocking down pins with the best of them.

Alexis has 13 separate diagnoses, including cerebral palsy and epilepsy. She can walk short distances, but is mostly confined to the chair. She uses a walker for track and field.

Of the four sports KCSO competes in, bowling is the most popular, with 62 participants. Winter games, which includes both cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, is the least popular with 36.

"Winter games are in winter elements -- it gets very cold," Alexis' mother Tammera Lawson said.

In the bowling practices, socialization is key, both for the athletes and their parents. Both the Chandlers and Tammera Lawson talked about the importance of talking with people who understand the what it's like to raise children with special needs.

Olivia Redman never stopped smiling as she listed off the friends from bowling. Although she called him by his real name, "Troy" had a prominent spot on the list.

She would have gone on had it not been her turn.

"I need to bowl," she said, getting up to walk to the lane.

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