

A Family's Journey to the Olympics

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She formerly served as a parent mentor in Fulton County and has been involved in many other advocacy efforts. She helped found and runs a non-profit organization called [Great Prospects](#) in Roswell Georgia, which provides after school enrichment, summer programs, social interaction opportunities and a post secondary job training program.

She has also been a longtime supporter and volunteer of Special Olympics. She will provide updates and personal viewpoints about her family's journey to the Olympic Games, over the next few months.



PART 1: An Incredible Opportunity!

Many parents of children with disabilities have read the essay about taking a vacation to Italy and finding themselves in Holland. It is about the unexpected joys, fears and disappointments of parenting a child with disabilities.

All long journeys come with baggage, and I certainly have picked up plenty of my own along the way. Over the next few months, I will open my suitcases and look inside to see what I need to carry with me, and what has to be discarded for this new journey. I will share my parenting experiences, some good, some bad; my family's involvement with Special Olympics and other issues with you. I hope you enjoy my stories.

Several months ago, my son Christopher, who is a young adult with Down Syndrome, was nominated to be a power lifting athlete for the 2011 World Special Olympics Summer Games in Athens, Greece. This competition will bring 7,000 athletes from 180 countries together in Athens, Greece in June of 2011.

My handsome and self-determined young man was selected to be one of those athletes walking into Olympic Stadium in Athens on June 25th, 2011 as a member of Team USA! (Special Olympics Georgia is only sending 4 athletes - 2 power lifters and 2 in aquatics).

On that cold, rainy day at his first Special Olympics games in West Point, I never imagined he would compete in a first class WORLD competition. The baggage, filled with worry, doubt and fear of the future... baggage that I have carried through all these years ... has become so much lighter as a result of the shear JOY and Pride I feel for him to have this incredible opportunity.



Our hope, as parents and parent mentors (as well as the many other hats we wear), is that we somehow help our own children and many others to be prepared to live full lives.

With the Special Olympics Athlete oath in mind:

"Let me win

But if I can not win,

Let me be brave in the attempt",

I hope we can encourage and inspire our children and their families to be brave in the attempt to consider all life's opportunities and seize them to live life to its fullest!

This is what we all need to learn and live by!

PART 2: How it all Began!

In order to tell you how I got to where I am as a mother and an advocate, I need to take you back so you will understand some of the tools, hopes, dreams, and experiences that I have picked up along the way to my son's participation as a power lifting athlete for the 2011 World Special Olympics Summer Games in Athens, Greece.

During my junior year of high school, I had the opportunity to volunteer at a carnival held at a hospital that served individuals who at the time were called, "Mentally Retarded." I'm still not sure why I volunteered.

But I did.

I can only remember certain things about that day. One - it rained. This meant that we had to remain indoors. I saw individuals in hospital beds with very little on. People would scream and cling to you. Others were lying still and drooling. Some were just happy for the attention they were receiving from the volunteers. The thing that struck me was the smell of this very sad, sad, place. It ended up being a long day that left me drained emotionally. Sometime later, Geraldo did an exposé on this institution and brought to light the injustices that were going on. This place was "Meadowbrook"!

Time passed. I went on to work, college, got married and we started a family. My beautiful daughter was born, and then five years later along came my son. Christopher was born about 10 months after a friend of mine lost her son with Down syndrome at age 3 with heart complications. My son, Christopher, has Down syndrome.

At 3 months, Christopher was fortunate to start in an early intervention program. It was a wonderful program that involved the parents both in their child's progress and with the other parents of children in the program.



At 3 ½ years, through this program, Chris enrolled in the Special Olympics New York Area Games at West Point. I remember that it wasn't a particularly nice morning and as we waited for the parade of athletes to begin. I started to cry. I cried because I couldn't decide if I was in a dream or in a nightmare. "How could this be?" As the rain began to fall, I was relieved that the day was to be cut short because the reality of life just seemed too much.

In 1990, shortly after moving to Georgia, I was introduced to Pam and Gary Stedman who coached Special Olympics gymnastics with Alpharetta Parks & Recreation. I decided to give Special Olympics another try for Christopher. I was so amazed with the program, with Pam & Gary's dedication and with the parents of the other children. Chris and I immediately felt so welcome! Before I knew it, (with much encouragement), at 4 years old, Chris was out there on the gymnastics floor during the state competition, performing his routine while Gary prompted and coached his moves from the sidelines. I cried openly while I looked around and felt part of this wonderful and all accepting Special Olympics Family! After he received his 3 gold medals, I knew I was hooked!

This was the program that gave me the joy to balance off the challenges.

Over the years this program has grown and is now called The Special K's. We serve over 100 athletes in 12 sports. About 6 years ago, we introduced power lifting. It has been so fulfilling for me to watch Christopher grow and develop as an athlete. He competed year after year in the state competition and SE Regional competition.

I now appreciate the gift of the rainy days in my life, when I experienced such deep despair and hopelessness. We would never get to experience the beautiful sunshine of success and personal achievement if we had not taken those paths to get to where we are now.

Debbie will continue her story about her family's journey to Greece. Look for the next post soon!

[Related: A Family's Journey to the Olympics: Part 1 - An Incredible Opportunity](#)



Chris in 1991, participating in his first Olympics!
