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A Volunteer's Gains: Long-time volunteer Rachel Paul tells about her KEEN marriage proposal and much more.

“Will you marry me?” were the last words I expected to hear on my first day of volunteering with KEEN Greater DC (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now). Yet within one hour of meeting Jamie, I received my first proposal. Jamie was eleven years old at the time and he also happened to be the first person with Down syndrome with whom I had ever interacted. Though he may not have understood what he was saying, he quickly put me at ease. It did not take long to figure out that first and foremost, these are just kids and they come to KEEN to have fun.

KEEN is an organization that provides recreational activities for children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities. Each child, or "athlete" in KEEN lingo, is matched with a volunteer at the beginning of the session. Together they play sports, join in group games, and get to know each other. There is something for every athlete, from general sports programs to swimming to music. KEEN is unbelievably special because it does not turn away any child, regardless of the severity of their disability, and provides its programs at absolutely no cost to the families. It allows the parents some time to get things done while at the same time knowing that their child is happy and safe.

Almost seven years after my first session, I am still volunteering with KEEN whenever I can. A bond with a child with Down syndrome, autism, or cerebral palsy is much different than a bond with a typical child. Because there are often communication barriers such as a lack of comprehension or even an inability to speak, when I connect with these children I feel like it is on a completely different level. I feel like I am able to help them learn, socialize, and build self-confidence. What they probably do not realize is that they have helped me at least as much. Through my volunteer work I have dealt with a number of my own personal fears and issues. I used to hate public speaking but now I go early to KEEN sessions to run the orientation for new volunteers. Having something that I am passionate about makes it infinitely easier to speak up. More importantly, I have matured significantly and become much more secure in myself. There is no pressure at KEEN—all of the children as well as the volunteers are accepted exactly the way they are. Though it is not always easy, it makes me more thankful for everything that I have and has taught me that there is no need for pity because these children are beautiful and talented in their own ways.

KEEN is such a successful program because it has an incredible group of dedicated volunteers who spend countless hours planning, organizing, and making sure the kids have a great time. Thanks to the great fundraising projects that have been created and the strong base of volunteer support, I have no doubt that KEEN will keep making a difference well into the future and hopefully continue to expand across the country as well to make a difference in the lives of even more children. Though I am unable to cure their conditions, I know that I can make an incredible difference by just showing up and giving them the greatest gift possible: friendship.