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Everyone Wins

K.E.E.N. makes triumphs possible for children and young adults with special needs.

BY BETH WENGER

How important is winning? One glance at the activities of Kids Enjoy Exercise Now (K.E.E.N.) Foundation Inc., a novel, volunteer-run sports organization for children and young adults with disabilities, makes the answer abundantly clear: it's very important. At K.E.E.N., successes as big as scoring a goal and as seemingly little as standing up are celebrated with

cheers and high fives. These jolly and triumphant moments have made K.E.E.N. the "in" place to be for its volunteers and participants. In fact, they've created such momentum that K.E.E.N. is expanding in all directions and spreading out from its home base in Washington, D.C., to other U.S. cities.

The idea is simple. The effect is profound. This story is about the vision and evolution of a place



where children and young adults with severe developmental challenges can enjoy sports activities in the company of friends.

Seeing a Need

As an Oxford University Rhodes Scholar in the late 1980s, Elliott Portnoy understood the importance of expending energy in positive ways, like playing tennis, his favorite sport. So when a local woman asked him and his friends to teach the game to children with disabilities, they agreed without hesitation.

Once their new tennis program got underway, however, Elliott discovered it wasn't the right thing for all children with disabilities. Tennis had too many rules and required too much coordination and focus, which meant too many would fail, due to the nature of their disabilities. Elliott, who had no prior connection to or special affinity for people with disabilities, didn't want that, so he and his friends devised a different, more flexible kind of sports program that included tennis. From that modest start, K.E.E.N. today has become one of the largest programs of its kind in England, with thriving chapters in Oxford, London, and York.

When Elliott left Oxford and moved to Washington, D.C. to begin practicing law, he sought out volunteer opportunities, preferring to find a sports program like he helped create in England. Nothing similar existed, but parents in a community nearby were eager to support the same kind of programming. So it began in 1992: K.E.E.N. in the U.S.A.

A Place for Everyone

Now in its second decade, K.E.E.N. continues to bring together volunteers and young people with all kinds of disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy, for about 90 minutes of varied sports activities and one-to-one coaching.

Volunteers are coaches, regardless of their experience, and participants are athletes, regardless of their skills and abilities. Coaches and athletes match up in a middle school gym stocked with an assortment of basketballs, soccer balls, volleyballs, scooters, indoor hockey sticks and pucks, plastic bowling pins, and other equipment.

To encourage success between each coach and athlete pair, K.E.E.N., with help from parents and volunteers, developed a profile sheet for each athlete, highlighting activity interests, best communication approaches, and necessary disability-related information. Initially, coaches use these sheets to



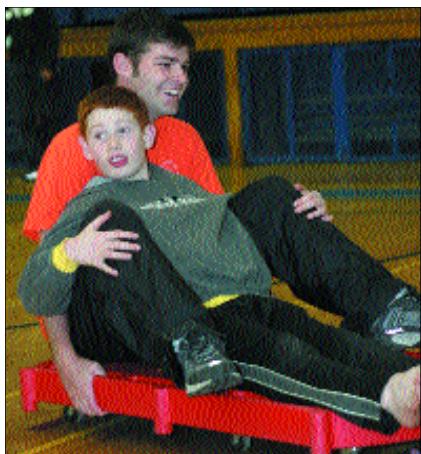
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guide them, but once they establish a relationship with their athletes, the profiles fall by the wayside and the pairs do what comes naturally. At the end of each sports session, the group sits in one large circle for "prouds," the time when one-by-one, the athletes—some with their coaches' help—tell what they did that day that made them very proud. Some



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boast one or two successes; others share it all, rattling off a list of everything they did that day.

What makes K.E.E.N. different? It finds success and winning in ways that are not dependent upon conventional sports criteria. It has a wide-open acceptance policy and has never turned away a child. Athletes with a high level of need simply get to enjoy two or three coaches instead of just one. Parents receive a degree of respite. And, its activities are offered at no cost.

One of K.E.E.N.'s first athletes was Josh Brynes, a sports-minded young man with mental retardation who stopped growing taller when he reached 4'11." As his contemporaries grew, the height difference alone made life on the playing field at school discouraging and competitions unequal. Josh started K.E.E.N. when he was 14 years old and found, at K.E.E.N., everyone is on the same team. Coaches focus on helping athletes have fun playing and exercising individually and with others, rather than correctly throwing or kicking a ball or even following all the rules to a game. There are no standards to meet, pressures to achieve, rivals to beat. It's a place where jocks like Josh can keep their competitive edge, as long as they do what he does—find the opponent within and always win.

Not everyone has Josh's athletic interests or his capacity for rigorous exercise, though. Caitlin Kelly, for one, can't compete or easily play in a game. And that's just fine with K.E.E.N. and Caitlin. Like any 18 year old, Caitlin's main wishes are to act cool, hang out with friends, and assert some independence from family. In fact, that's probably how she'd be spending most of her free time if it weren't for Rett syndrome, a neurological disorder robbing her of her motor abilities. At K.E.E.N., Caitlin gets all of these wants fulfilled. Besides having her buddies all around her, she has a coach who is dedicated just to her while her family members are off doing their own thing. Caitlin can't talk, but she communicates her feelings about K.E.E.N. very well. She says: "These days are mine!"

Satisfying Surprises

Don and Mary Rosenstein noticed right away a spirit and enthusiasm they hadn't encountered before. K.E.E.N. took in their son, Koby, as one of its own without even a pause, after others had turned him away.

Welcoming though the first sessions were, the Rosensteins still had their reservations about whether it was safe leaving Koby in someone else's

care. "In the beginning it felt like nobody in the world could understand what it's like for us to have a kid who doesn't stop moving all day long. I remember his first couple of K.E.E.N. sessions, I didn't want to leave or go far in case I'd need to take him out of the program early," Don explains. Koby runs, a lot. Without warning, he'll become a redhead blur darting out the gym door and down the hall and causing a high-speed foot chase, but K.E.E.N.'s "whatever it takes" policy put Koby's parents at ease. In a short time, the Rosensteins realized that people without special training could take care of their son for a while and have fun doing it. "It helped a lot to know we're not on duty 24/7, and there's opportunity for real respite," Don says.

Sue Hartung, the mother of two K.E.E.N. athletes and one of K.E.E.N.'s biggest champions, strongly supported K.E.E.N.'s concept from the beginning and knew it would be good for her children. She felt, however, that her son, Warren, wouldn't like it and would only participate if his dad or grandfather coached him. "Sports are really hard for Warren, and like most children with autism, he resists change and anything new," she says.

Her fear was exacerbated because at K.E.E.N. volunteers don't have to make a long-term service commitment; they simply attend whenever they can, which means Warren generally encounters a new volunteer every session. But after a few sessions, Warren was hooked. Since Warren can't speak for himself, no one knows for sure why he took to the program. His mother says it's because his coaches always met Warren at his level and showed him respect. They discovered Warren loves to run, as long as he has his coach's hand. So, that's what they do, run around the gym carefully skirting other athletes, coaches, and moving balls. Warren is now a teenager with 12 years of K.E.E.N. experience, his manner is somewhat restrained, but he does a little soft-shoe shuffle, which his mother and K.E.E.N. coaches know is his happy dance.

Continuous Growth

Moments like Warren's happy dance, a heartfelt "thank you" from parents, and the opportunity to see athletes try hard and have fun in spite of their difficulties leave K.E.E.N.'s volunteers with positive, lasting impressions. More than 7,000 volunteers have coached K.E.E.N.'s athletes over the years. Some have developed long-term friendships with particular athletes, choosing to get together for dinner and various



social activities. Others have found their career focus, deciding to study and teach special education, or changed their careers to ones serving people with disabilities. Many have taken on leadership roles within K.E.E.N., such as running its sports programs, special events, and fundraising activities, as the infrastructure of K.E.E.N. has grown. Volunteers return to K.E.E.N. regularly because of the sheer magnetic pull of the atmosphere and personal rewards.

Jennifer Colaguori started volunteering at K.E.E.N. shortly after she finished graduate school. It was her interest in sports that brought her to K.E.E.N.; the athletes' joy and parents' profuse appreciation made her a regular, committed coach. "I needed a community or an organization where I felt like what I was doing was making a difference," Jennifer says. "I got that at K.E.E.N. and that just kept me going back, and as I got more involved, it became harder not to go; you get used to that feeling." Now, she helps lead the K.E.E.N. Club, a program for teenagers who are paired with teen volunteers for team sports. The group meets either at the gym to play modified versions of floor hockey, volleyball, kickball, and other team activities or for outings, including trips to see professional hockey and basketball games.

K.E.E.N. Club is one of several offshoots of K.E.E.N.'s original Sunday Sports program, which served children and teens with disabilities, ages 5-18, with a single year-round sports program. Like most programs for kids, K.E.E.N. started out pretty much stationary. It figured its participants would come in, eventually outgrow the activities, and move on to other things. But over time, two things happened: K.E.E.N. discovered there weren't many possible "next steps" for its older athletes, and its coaches and athletes formed such

unbreakable bonds that K.E.E.N. chose to remove its age ceiling and grow up with its athletes. As it added specialty programs such as swimming and tennis, K.E.E.N. also created separate programs offering age appropriate activities for its kids, teens, and young adults. Some of its newest programs include fitness center workouts, bowling, and Tae Kwon Do for young adults. Now, it runs several programs every weekend.

With flourishing programs in England and in Washington, D.C., K.E.E.N. is ready to send out shoots across the United States, hoping to recreate itself in a number of cities next year. The prospects for growth are good, because K.E.E.N.'s foundation for success is not dependant upon genius, extraordinary commitment, or special procedures. Rather, it taps directly into real needs, workable actions, and the best in human spirit.

Shared Victories

Always eager for those moments when she can do her own thing in her own time, Caitlin



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letes burn off energy, develop friendships, and learn new skills and coaches enjoy making all that possible and seeing it happen. "It's nice to know that people who come in contact with your child might be touched in ways that make them do good," says Don. "What's cool about it is that that's a gift your kid gives to someone else." ■

keeps a close eye on her K.E.E.N. days, making sure she doesn't miss them. She isn't alone. More than 250 children and young adults with disabilities and their families, as well as many volunteers, have become closely tied to and proprietary about K.E.E.N.'s sports programs.

Why? It's one of those happy and rare places where everyone wins. Parents get a break from their care-giving responsibilities, ath-

Beth Wenger has been a K.E.E.N. coach for more than 11 years. She runs its Young Adult Sports program, serves on its Board of Directors and Coaches Committee, and is helping the effort to spread K.E.E.N. nationwide. The web site is www.keenus.org.

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