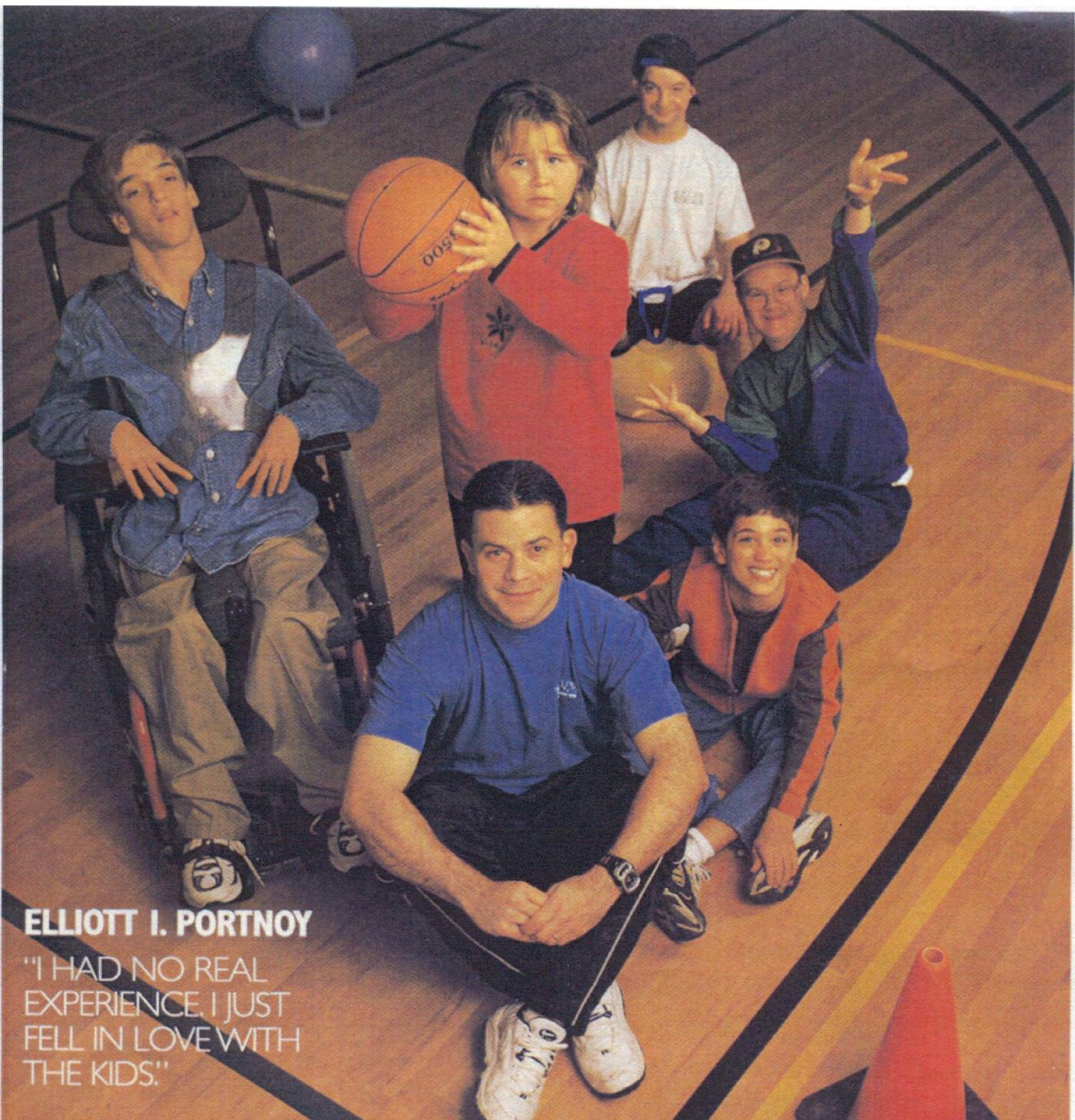


Nineteen Ninety Nine Washingtonians of the Year By Leslie Milk, Ellen Ryan



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When parents call Elliott Portnoy to ask about his sports program for children with disabilities, he often hears resignation in their voices. If their children have severe or multiple disabilities, the parents expect they'll be rejected.

They are in for a surprise. Elliott Portnoy's KEEN (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now) program has never turned away a child. With one or two volunteers for every athlete, lots of activities to choose from, and his own enthusiasm, Portnoy finds a way to get every kid into the game.

Portnoy doesn't charge a penny. He raises the funds needed to support KEEN while working more than full-time as a lawyer with Arent Fox. The law firm has "adopted" KEEN, donating funds, volunteers, and resources.

Elliott Portnoy was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford when he volunteered to teach tennis to kids with mental disabilities. He realized tennis is a hard sport for this group--it requires a lot of motor coordination. So Portnoy expanded the program to include more sports and rounded up friends to volunteer as coaches. Portnoy called the program KEEN because he wanted a name that sounded British.

Portnoy started a KEEN program in Washington when he came here in 1991 to finish his law studies. He linked with Greater DC Cares to recruit volunteers, making it clear that no schedule commitment is required. But many get so involved with their athletes that they can't stay away.

At the end of each session, there are "prouds." Each athlete tells what he or she did that day, and the room explodes in cheers. For some children who cannot speak, their coaches speak for them.

"You should see their faces light up when the cheering begins," a KEEN mother says.

"This is the first time I've seen someone else actually enjoy spending time with my child," says another.

Nobody has a better time at KEEN than Elliott Portnoy, the head coach, head cheerleader and at times the water boy. "The kids teach you about perseverance, about values," he says. "I do KEEN for the most selfish of reasons--because I love it."