Translating for a Special Olympian

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On August 14th 2010, after an interview with Special Olympics Taipei secretary Pi-chen Ku, I enrolled as a volunteer at the Special Olympics. My initial task was to travel with one of Special Olympics athletes to Korea as his translator since the original fellow fell ill two weeks prior to the trip. The athlete, Da-yu Huang, was a talented table tennis player that suffered issues in dealing with visual perception (identifying the objects that he perceives.) During our trip to Korea for the Special Olympics East Asian Invitational Tournament, I gradually found that I had an interest in interacting with intellectual disabilities. He was my wake up call, he eliminated my misconception that people with intellectual disabilities were difficult to cope with or even dangerous; Da-yu’s easy-going personality proved to be my best assurance for going forward in dedicating my time in helping people with intellectual disabilities.

Through Da-yu’s introduction, I joined the Special Olympics Table Tennis Training Sessions as an assistant coach/fellow to the project. My job at that point was to organize rotations and pairings for the athletes, to manage roster lists, and to help out on drills and training exercises for 30 athletes during the sessions. The sessions occurred weekly on Saturdays for 3 hours starting from 9 AM. Through the span of 4 months, I saw the effect of sports on the athletes; how much they improved, how bonds formed between athletes, and most importantly how it helped with their personal confidence. I was surprised by how much they have improved, most of the athletes I was in charge of were already skilled table tennis players when they entered the program, but through time I saw how their accuracy, focus, and speed improved through time. My best example would be Zheng-kai Kuo, Zheng-kai is friendly but highly competitive; I couldn’t pair him with anyone better than him or else he would throw fits and temper tantrums lasting for hours if he had lost. However, Zheng-kai’s improvements were astonishing; after 6 months it was difficult for anyone to win a match against him, even I had a hard time beating him. However, Zheng-kai’s improvements didn’t stop there; his competitiveness eased as soon as he got to know everyone better. I felt that through the friendships he formed with the other athletes, he overcame his own insecurities and that specifically allowed him to become a better athlete and person. Right now, Zheng-kai no longer feels the need to win, he was confident in his own skills and he didn’t need to prove it to anyone!

I believe in Special Olympics, specifically in how they “Empower Through Sports”; I saw how sports allowed the athletes to believe themselves, to be in a surrounding that bore no judgment upon their disabilities. I wanted to expand that sphere and environment to more students and so I discussed with the Secretary, Mrs. Ku, and the coach, Mr. Yang. I found that there were also similar programs operated by the Paralympics and 2 other Special Education schools. The secretary informed me that there were past attempts to consolidate all the programs, but due to different agendas and beliefs the plan never materialized. However, I decided to give it a try seeing the opportunities for expansion and better resource allocation.
My first meeting with all of the project heads for the Paralympics Table Tennis Program, the Wenshan Special Education School, and the Taipei School of Special Education occurred over my winter break on December 27th, 2010. The first meeting I asked all of the programs what they hoped to achieve and what they needed in order to achieve them. Each program had their own agenda; the Special Education Schools targeted their programs as an extracurricular activity for students, while the Paralympics was eager to train international athletes. The schools found it difficult to secure coaches, while the Paralympics lacked volunteers in helping out with the different events. I saw a potential deal in this situation, since the Special Olympics has a large pool of long term volunteers, there was then a mutual benefit in sharing resources; while at the same time the Paralympics had the coaches that the Special Education Schools So direly needed; furthermore, the Special Education Schools had the funding that the Special Olympics Program needed for expansion. Although it was clear that the benefits of cooperation were significant, the problem was finding a model that all 3 programs were willing to accept. After that meeting, I started working on models that the different coaches and heads were willing to accept; the first 2 months were entirely useless, none of the programs were willing to compromise, and discussions often led to more dissatisfaction than gains. However, 3 weeks ago, I asked all the project heads to submit their own models that they felt would work; and I started to work around their ideas incorporating them together the best I could. The current model being discussed is a centrally shared budget, while coach choices would be reviewed by the Special Educations, and all Special Olympic volunteers would be shared between the three programs. Furthermore, project managers would be agreed upon by all 4 programs and other details that go on for a full page. I feel that the currently discussed model has a strong chance to be accepted, and if dialogues can reach a consensus by June, the joint program may launch in early August.

I’ve also submitted an unsuccessful bid to accompany my athlete to Athens for this year’s Special Olympics game. The verdict was result of a nationality conflict, seeing that they felt it was inappropriate to have an American citizen representing the Chinese Taipei team.

The Action Plan didn’t work out as I have originally planned; in fact the whole project is targeted at children with intellectual disabilities. But I feel that I have made the best decision to pursue service in helping people with special needs. It’s the satisfaction of making a difference that drives me; by seeing the gradual improvements in the students, it kept me moving forward against all currents. I’ve found myself as someone who has found a purpose in benefitting others, that’s willing to keep working as long as the cause was right. The project has changed my ideas towards the special needs community, but furthermore, it has deterred me from underestimating the human potential. I have found purpose in service, and my service has benefited others. No matter how small of difference, at least I know I have helped my community; and by that, I feel that I have achieved the goal for my action plan.