

Special Olympics helps enrich life for Sara and her friends; Competition for more than 3,200 begins Thursday at Ames

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Publication info: Des Moines Register [Des Moines, Iowa] 18 May 1999: S.1.

Maxwell, Ia. -Sara Cummings has so many shiny Special Olympics medals, she figures there must be more than a hundred. "Soccer," she started listing. "Swimming. Bowling. Roller skating. Basketball. Softball."

Her favorite Special Olympics moments, though, come from a different list. "Hanging out with my friends. We talk. Color. Listen to CDs." And laugh.

Sara has a delightful laugh. She has an abundance of all the qualities stamped on front of the Special Olympics medals: Skill. Courage. Sharing. Joy. Maybe that's no coincidence. Maybe Special Olympics helped bring them out in her.

Sara, 20, who was born with Down syndrome, has been participating in Special Olympics for as long as she can remember. She started when she was 8, entering a competition in which she threw a tennis ball. She missed a competition only when she had chicken pox. "But I went and sat in the car and watched," she said.

Sara is part of ACTIVE Lifestyles, which will have more than 100 participants from Story County in the state summer Special Olympics Thursday through Saturday in Ames. She is coached by Lisa Pedersen, who will coordinate things for the Story County group. "Sara is really a sweetheart," Pedersen said.

This year Sara will compete in four swimming events. She can list them: 50 back, 25 back, 100 freestyle, 25 freestyle. And she's on a unified soccer team, which has members who have disabilities and those who don't. Stephanie Sills, who is an assistant and companion for Sara, is on the team. "We learn how teams work, stuff like that," Sara said. "In soccer we need teamwork. Like with Stephanie, I have to set her up for a goal."

More than 3,200 entrants -from all 99 counties -will participate at Ames, helped by 1,000 volunteers. Cycling competition and opening ceremonies are Thursday at Iowa State's Jack Trice Stadium. Most events are Friday at different venues. The track and field competition is Saturday at Iowa State's rec building.

Sara can't wait to see her friends. "She has a million friends," Sills said. Sara starts listing them. Sills may be right. Her friends like the competition too, Sara said. "I have a lot of friends who have a lot of medals," she said.

Sara's two loves are Special Olympics and art. Her favorite high school course -she graduated last weekend -was art. At home, she has a container of markers big enough to roast a turkey, and spends time listening to the Dixie Chicks and coloring posters. She has a hobby, collecting pop bottle lids. She did some woodworking and made a flower pot. She attends a contemporary worship service at a church on Wednesdays, and likes to sing. She was in the school chorus and remembers an overnight trip she got to take with the group to Kansas City.

She has a busy, fulfilling life, and plans to keep it that way -with the help of Special Olympics. "I want to keep competing for the rest of my years," she said. How many medals would she have then? "Fifty hundred." And how many friends? Millions more.