

The Mother of the Special Olympics

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 12, 2009;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)

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AN APPRAISAL

The Mother of the *Special Olympics*

By RICHARD SANDOMIR

To Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who died Tuesday, people with intellectual disabilities were "our special friends."

Her friends, now in the millions, became the world's friends, through the *Special Olympics*. They became messengers in her campaign to alter the attitudes of skeptical, often callous people about the limits of their capabilities. She understood that mentally retarded children could excel at sports and life.

David Egan is one of her friends. He is 31 and has Down syndrome. A swimmer and soccer and basketball player in the *Special Olympics*, Egan works in the mailroom of Booz Allen Hamilton in Tysons Corner, Va.

"Her idea became a worldwide movement," Egan said the other day by phone from his home. "How good is that? For people with disabilities to

Eunice Kennedy Shriver touched the lives of the *Special Olympics* David Egan, with her at left, and Loretta Claiborne, at right.

be on center stage in front of the world? If it wasn't for Eunice, we wouldn't be here."

Where would they be?

"Probably in institutions, mostly," he said.

In his ambition and advocacy, Egan sounds Shriver-like. He represented the *Special Olympics* at an athletes congress in the Netherlands and sits on the board of the Down Syndrome Association of Northern Virginia.

"No matter what's been accomplished, there's a whole lot more to be done," he said.

Shriver offered a rare mixture of attributes: the influence of her wealthy family; the inspiration of her mentally retarded older sister, Rosemary; her intense and indefatigable drive; her easy access to celebrities; and her willingness to cajole donors and rich corporations for money to sustain the *Special Olympics*.

She was a unique sports executive, something like a commissioner, but also something like Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern *Olympics*. Last year, Sports Illustrat-

ed anointed her with its first Sportsman of the Year Legacy Award. But she was really a determined, hyper-driven, bipartisan volunteer in a cause that was as personal to her as anything that motivated her brothers; President John F. Kennedy, and the senators Robert and Edward.

Evidence of her influential activism can be found in the portrait of her (with four *Special Olympics* and a Best Buddies ambassador) that was installed earlier this year at the National Portrait Gallery. It is the first portrait commissioned by the museum of someone who was not a president or a first lady.

Susan Saint James, the actress and a *Special Olympics* volunteer for the past 37 years, said: "She never gave less, never lowered her standards or lowered her ideals. She lived like that and expected you to. Once, we were in Jamaica and we were out in some sports facility that was sort of frightening. But she was out there making Spam sandwiches and handing out the medals. She was a full-service vol-

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From First Sports Page

unteer. She did very few things in a ball gown."

At the Special Olympics' World Summer Games in 1987 in South Bend, Ind., she remembered, Shriver was typically engaged, impressing the president of the University of Notre Dame.

"I think maybe it was Father Hesburgh," she recalled, "who said, 'Wow, I think a tornado just came through.'"

Perhaps it was a clear vision of the future, or simply hope, that enabled Shriver to nurture the Special Olympics from fairly modest beginnings at the first World Games in Chicago in the summer of 1968. A thousand athletes competed there — a tiny fraction of the 1.5 million mentally retarded children in the United States, she told the small crowd, "who live in communities where

there are no games, no exercise, no competition."

Four years later in Los Angeles, 2,500 competed; by 1983, there were 4,000. By 1995, in New Haven, there were 7,000, and by 2007, about 7,500 participated in Shanghai. Eventually, the World Winter Games were added. The organization serves 3.1 million athletes in 175 countries and in 2007 took in revenue of \$79.9 million.

"She was always thinking about what to do next," said Bobby Doyle, the executive director of the Special Olympics of Arkansas. "We did a program one time, and she did everything with our athletes. But she wanted to know why we didn't have more; she wanted us to do more, to do another sport, to make it better."

Loretta Claiborne was born partly blind and mildly retarded. She loved running but did not compete on her high school team because she was told, "You're a retard."

Her first encounter with Shriver, in 1972, came after a race in which another runner ran into her lane and clipped her. A coach brought her to Shriver, who was sitting in the grass.

"I was really upset, and crying," she said. "This older woman shook my hand and said I did a good job."

Thinking about Shriver's gesture and words, Claiborne still sounds amazed. "How could this lady care about me?" she recalled saying to herself. "No one cares about retards. Why would



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Eunice Kennedy Shriver, swimming in 1964 with mentally challenged children, started a movement that went worldwide.

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EUNICE KENNEDY SHRIVER DIES

A sister of President John F. Kennedy and two United States senators was 88. Page A23.

she care about me when society doesn't care? It's God's blessing. This is a woman for God."

Claiborne, now in her 50s, is a marathoner and the first Special Olympics athlete on its board of directors. "Physically, she will pass," Claiborne said last Friday after Shriver's family reported that she was critically ill. "But mentally and spiritually, she's

here and her kids are replicas of her."

Indeed, Shriver's four sons, including Timothy, the chairman of the Special Olympics, work in charities; her daughter, Maria, is the first lady of California and is an advocate for Alzheimer's disease sufferers, among them her father, R. Sargent.

"Miss Shriver laid a foundation that will go a long time," Bobby Doyle said. "Timothy will do a good job to see this goes on. This program is pretty imbedded in the world, because of her. The world will miss Mrs Shriver."