# From Siloed to Celebrated:
# The Tragedy & Triumph Behind Special Olympics

Transcript of Interview with Smithsonian Curator Jane Rogers

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Q: First, could you tell us a little more about the development of the Special Olympics exhibit at the Smithsonian?

In 2015, Special Olympics International was preparing for the 50th Anniversary of Special Olympics in 2018. They came to the museum to discuss possible object donations of archival and 3D objects from their organization but also from Special Olympics athletes. With the donation of objects, the museum had the opportunity to create an exhibit case about Special Olympics athletes and the beginnings of the organization. We timed the exhibition to coincide with the 50th anniversary and opened the exhibit on Eunice Shriver's birthday. The case was not so much a 'celebration' of the anniversary but rather a telling of the history of Shriver's motivation for creating Special Olympics and the effect the participation in sports has had on the athletes and their families.

Q: How do new exhibits come about at the Smithsonian?

Exhibits are usually proposed by curators, archivists or the director and assistant directors of the museum. They can be based on current events, special events, anniversaries, current research topics or sometimes topics explored just for fun. Once a curator comes up with an exhibit idea it is then proposed to a larger body of colleagues that flesh out the idea, make suggestions, comments and give final approval for the exhibit. Exhibits are also based on the available space in the museum. We have larger, more permanent exhibits that only have objects rotated out every couple of years and then there are smaller galleries or exhibit cases (like we used for Special Olympics) that are changed every year to 18 months. Competition for these cases is high among those curators who like to work on these smaller, more detailed exhibits.

Q: Were you involved in the decision to curate and bring this exhibit about? If so, can you say a few things about that process?

Yes, I was involved in bringing the exhibit to fruition along with curators, Katherine Ott and Ken Cohen. Ms. Ott is the curator who works in the field of disability and Mr. Cohen happened to be a coach for a Special Olympics soccer team a few years ago and brought his first-hand knowledge to the team. My work as a curator in the sports collection and having collected a few Special Olympics objects in the past brought me into the exhibit team. I had also recently completed an exhibit case on adaptive sports and was happy fir the opportunity to collect more material from Special Olympics. Because the objects collected were going to be included in the sports collection, I became the lead curator for collecting within the Special Olympics community. Collecting of objects began with a trip to Special Olympics headquarters to hand pick what objects told the story of the movement, its impact on the athletes and on society's perceptions of the intellectually disabled. I was also given many athlete contacts from members of the SO organization to contact and collect from – my primary goal as sports curator was to build the SO collections through the athlete's stories which reflected back to the organization. I also contacted some of the counselors from the original Camp Shriver who were more than happy to discuss their experience with the camp and to donate objects they had kept all these years. The three curators met and discussed the theme for the case which we centered on segregation in sport as well as in society. Curating the subject of disabilities can be tricky as the subjects often promote sympathy due to their 'disability' which is something we wanted to avoid. Not using certain descriptors in the exhibit was key to promoting a well- balanced narrative, describing the athlete's athletic abilities and contributions rather than their 'triumph over tragedy' appeal. Special Olympic athletes are very capable and don't think of themselves as

being different, just as adaptive athletes are athletes, period. Once we had the theme and picked out the appropriate objects, the three curators split up the label writing duties and met a few times to discuss. Once the writing was done, an editor made final edits and then labels were sent to production for fabrication. Once that was complete we installed the exhibit components which consist of labels, podiums, mounts, brackets and graphics. The objects were then installed, and the case was complete.

Q: Since, unfortunately, we are not able to view the exhibit in D.C. prior to National History Day, beyond what is available on the Smithsonian website and in your blog, do you have access to other text or pictures from the exhibit that we could see?

A: I can get you the exhibit script and photographs but not until I get back to work from the furlough. Everything is on my work computers and I am not allowed to access any of those from home during the government shutdown.

Q: While working on the exhibit, what documents or artifacts did you collect or view that were particularly inspiring or moved you? Why?

A: I collected many archival documents and a few objects from the Camp Shriver counselors which were really special – personal letters from the campers to the counselors thanking them for their help at the camp and also letters from Eunice Shriver thanking the counselors for their dedication to the campers. Arts and crafts objects they made at the camp and awards they were given were also collected. Meeting the athletes and collecting from them was an awesome experience. I really had to convince Loretta Claiborne that her objects belonged at the museum, giving her a personal tour of our storage area. She didn't want to part with any of her objects until she saw Althea Gibson's tennis outfit and trophies she had won at Wimbledon –

Claiborne's mom had always admired Gibson so that was the turning point for Claiborne. Ricardo Thornton took a few months to find the objects he donated but he finally found everything and was happy to donate. My trip to North Carolina to visit the parents of Marty Sheets, a Special Olympics athlete who had passed away, was one of the highlights of my dealings with the Special Olympics community. Marty's parents were very welcoming and so proud of what Marty had accomplished during his life – Marty was one of the pioneering athletes of SO attending the 1968 games and participating for over 30 years, winning over 250 medals in 5 different sports. The Sheets let me peruse scrapbooks, photographs, medals, equipment, uniforms, archival documents, handbooks and awards and take whatever I thought the museum needed. It was a great opportunity to collect many different types of medals and uniforms demonstrating the changes and innovations made throughout the years. Due to the generosity of the Sheets, his objects are the cornerstone of our Special Olympics collection.

Q: During your research, did you find stories about Eunice Kennedy Shriver or Rosemary Kennedy that were particularly impactful?

Eunice Shriver was a formidable woman so most stories about her are impactful. I like the ones about her starting up Camp Shriver and just wanting these kids to be kids and experience life without limits. As you know, the camp provided inner city, mentally challenged kids the opportunity to learn how to swim, canoe, ride horses, play games, sing songs and not be judged. The photographs of her interacting with the kids and teaching them to swim or playing games with them are really great – those are the kind of objects that show the real person – providing more impact than a story. Even though Rosemary was the catalyst behind Shriver's desire to work with mentally challenged people, especially kids, we did not really focus on Rosemary Kennedy for the exhibit. The only object we were able to collect referring to her was her funeral

program which makes a powerful statement on its own. The exhibit was less about the early beginnings of eugenics as your project discusses. That history is great to include but in a small exhibit such as this we had to focus exclusively on one aspect of Special Olympics history, there was not enough room in the case to touch on the topics that you do.

Q: What were the most significant impressions you had about how individuals with intellectual disabilities were treated prior to the first Special Olympics?

A: Probably the fact that many kids were separated from their families and put into institutions because that is what was recommended by doctors at the time. As you stated in your research, there was a feeling that these kids could not learn or would ever be productive members of society because of their disabilities. The segregation happening within society was also happening within sports and Special Olympics was created to fight against this separation, offering participation for all and the opportunity to compete at whatever level possible. One of the athletes we collected from, Ricardo Thornton, met his wife at one of these institutions. They had to sue the DC government for the right to get married and move out of the institution – which they did. They both had jobs, raised a child and are now grandparents. Thornton says his participation in Special Olympics made all the difference – it gave him confidence to fight the system and live the way he knew he could. He speaks at Special Olympics functions regularly and still competes in athletic competitions. Loretta Claiborne also attributes her participation in SO to her success in life. Claiborne is an ambassador for Special Olympics, knows 5 languages, is a black belt in karate and is still competing in her 50s.

Q: While conducting your research on the first few years of the Special Olympics, what were the most significant impacts of this organization on the athlete's lives?

A: One of the programs Special Olympics provides at the local and national level are free medical screenings for hearing, vision, dental and general well-being which many athletes do not have ready access to. SO also provides a sense of community among athletes and their families, allowing camaraderie and shared experiences, building networks across the country. I think the opportunity to participate is also one of the significant impacts made by SO in the early years. Before SO there were not many places for kids or adults with disabilities to become involved in group activities, such as competing in sports. Contributing builds self-esteem, in anyone, and that is a main message of SO.

Q: Madeleine and I particularly enjoy personal interviews because they tell the story from an individual perspective. Did you conduct any interviews or meet anyone involved in the Special Olympics that particularly shifted how you thought about and created your exhibit? If so, who did you interview and what was the impact on your exhibit?

A: I did conduct interviews with the camp counselors from Camp Shriver and the athletes we collected from and their families. I agree that the personal stories of the donors are what brings the objects to life and without that personal experience it's just another object. Speaking with the donors and finding out as much as I can about the objects and the events associated with that object are one of the best parts of my job. I think we had a grasp on the subject before we started our interviews so our perspective didn't really shift. I think the interviews cemented our theories about the segregation in both sports and society and we were able to convey the cause and effect of Special Olympics on the athletes and their participation in sports. As I discussed in an earlier question, the athletes, their families and the Camp counselors were the best interviews and really told the narrative in a personal and effective way.

Q: Looking out further, in your opinion, what do you see as the most significant long-term impacts of the Special Olympics (e.g. public policy, scope of impact, etc.)?

In my opinion, the long-term impacts seem to be the transformation of the public's perception of people with intellectual disabilities. The ability of these athletes to compete, engage, participate and excel in the field of sports and in the everyday aspect of their lives is proof that SO works and has made significant strides in our cultural narrative. Of course, public policy, such as the ADA, has had significant influence on the increasing acceptance and participation of athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities through sports on the global stage including Special Olympics and Paralympics organizations.

Q: If you wanted people to take away a couple of main points from your exhibit, what would they be?

As a sports curator I want people to realize that sports is a catalyst for societal change. Through organizations like Special Olympics we can see that participation in sports can unify athletes of all ages, at any level, giving them the opportunity to compete. And also that these athletes, while intellectually challenged, do not want special treatment, sympathy or pity.

Q: Is there anyone else you recommend us talking to? Or, are there any other sources that you would recommend us reading or reviewing?

A: You can contact Katherine Ott if you would like but I do not have her personal email so you would have to wait until the furlough is over to contact her. Once we go back I can get you her information if you'd like to contact her. You might want to speak with Kate McKenna – she works with Special Olympics International and was a great help to us while pulling together the exhibit. Again, I can't get her contact info until I am back at work but you might be able to look

her up through their website. As far as other sources I think you have done a great job researching your subject and using appropriate sources.

Q: As you were researching the founding of Special Olympics, did you come across stories of people or entities that were somehow opposed to the creation of Special Olympics itself or to shedding light on those with intellectual disabilities? We have been so focused on highlighting the power and impact of Special Olympics, that we may have not given time to an opposition component, even if it is minor.

A: I did not find any one person or any organizations that was opposed to the creation of the Special Olympics and what they were trying to do with those with special needs, but I did find that some did not think the Special Olympics would work. And it was no one in particular or no one entity that I came across, but there was a feeling from many of those in attendance at the first Games in 1968 that these kids would not be able to swim or compete as an able-bodied athlete would. There were many under currents of "these kind of people" cannot function in this capacity – as functioning, performing athletes. I think the intellectually disabled were pigeon holed in that mental institution mind set for so long that it took parents and advocates like Mrs. Kennedy, to change the public mind set. So, to answer your question – no I didn't find direct opposition, but I did find indirect assumptions that were made, which then needed challenging by advocates for the intellectually disabled.

Q: Do you recall any stories or artifacts that speak to the international scope of Special Olympics?

A: I was collecting objects that told the story of Special Olympics through the documents and objects that were offered to the museum, which happened to be primarily, a National story with

international undertones. The early history is centered in the U.S and as the organization grew so did its scope worldwide but to date we have very few International Objects as the athletes we focused on were more a national or home town story. We do have a medal from Games that were held in Europe which was given to us by the Special Olympics Organization. And a soccer ball that was used at the 2011 Special Olympics World Games in Athens was given by one of our curators who was a coach for that team. I have attached a small image of both in case you want add them to the web site.