Special Olympics Youth Leadership Experience

Elise Calanni | May 2018

Every four years, a different US city takes the stage to host the Special Olympics USA Games. This July, Seattle, Washington has the honors.

The 2018 Special Olympics USA Games will be held in Seattle from July 1 to 6, hosting more than 4,000 athletes representing every state and the District of Columbia. Like every USA Games, the athletes will be a part of countless stories of perseverance, leadership, and glory as they compete in 14 summer events. However, this year, there are more than just athletes representing their state delegations.

This year’s USA Games will host the very first Youth Leadership Experience, organized by Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools and sponsored by Hasbro. High school students from 36 states were invited by Unified Champion Schools to attend the Games and be part of their state delegation as a Unified pair – one student with intellectual disabilities and one without. Along with a mentor from their state, these Unified pairs will experience the USA Games as an immersive opportunity for these youth leaders to learn more about Special Olympics competitions, Unified Sports, and inclusive programming for all ages.

Though the USA Games have yet to begin, these Unified pairs are already hard at work connecting with their delegations. As part of their unique experience at the Games, the young leaders were invited to complete activation challenges as a way to work with their state delegation before going to Seattle. One of these challenges was to act as a Hasbro BE FEARLESS BE KIND Reporter. BE FEARLESS BE KIND is Hasbro’s signature philanthropic initiative to inspire youth to have the empathy and compassion to stand up, be inclusive and make a difference in the world – perfectly aligning with the values of Special Olympics. As BE FEARLESS BE KIND Reporters, the Youth Leadership Experience participants will be tracking stories of kindness, strength, and perseverance of the USA Games athletes and their delegations.

In fact, they have already gotten started! Many of the Unified pairs have already connected with athletes from their state delegations, interviewing them about their training and preparation for the USA Games. Such is the case for Thomas Day and Federico Romero, the Unified pair from Special Olympics Indiana. Thomas and Federico spent time with Team Indiana during training, and had the opportunity to interview David Paul, a powerlifting athlete and Indiana’s 2015 Athlete of the Year.
Other pairs, too, have immersed themselves in team training for the USA Games and have connected with athletes. Special Olympics Arkansas Unified pair Kacey King and Bailey Cunningham sat down with track athlete Kari Lott and asked her about what inclusion means to her. As a gold medalist, Kari knows firsthand what it means to be fearless. Hannah Harrison and Marina Shaker from Special Olympics Florida interviewed two athletes from their delegation, Caleb Kiersted and Curtis Fischer, who compete in golf and paddleboarding, respectively.

These connections the Youth Leadership Experience pairs have made are just the beginning – the USA Games haven’t even started yet! This event will be a unique experience for these youth leaders to view the true scope of Special Olympics. For many, this is their first time attending the USA Games, or even leaving their state! The Youth Leadership Experience will not only be an incredible opportunity for the youth leaders, but also to Special Olympics supporters and Games spectators, for the stories that the Unified pairs will bring into the spotlight will be an opportunity for the movement to meet and appreciate more Special Olympics athletes competing in the Games.

To follow these stories, look for the following hashtags on Twitter throughout the month of June and during the USA Games July 1-6, and follow @SONorthAmerica and @Hasbro:

- #BeFearlessBeKind
- #RiseWithUs
- #YLE2018

To read the stories mentioned above, follow the links below!

Resources:

SO Indiana Unified Pair meets David Paul
SO Arkansas Unified Pair Interview with Kari Lott
SO Florida Unified Pair meet Caleb and Curtis

https://www.specialolympics.org/unified-champion-schools/

Elise Calanni
Communications and Content Creation Intern, Unified Champion Schools
Elise Calanni is currently a Communications and Content Creation Intern for Unified Champion Schools, the youth engagement and activation strategy that promotes school communities where all young people, as well as adult leaders, become agents of change. The program currently is in 46 states and more than 5,500 schools and reaching 3.4 million students each year with messages and activities that promote inclusive youth leadership and social inclusion.