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**Massachusetts students selected as Special Olympics US Youth Ambassadors**

Sydney Meininger of Nashoba Regional High School and Elyse Whittemore from Auburn High School are 2019 Unified Champion Schools US Youth Ambassadors

MARLBOROUGH, Mass. - Two Massachusetts students have been selected as part of the 2019 Class of Unified Champion Schools US Youth Ambassadors. Sydney Meininger and Elyse Whittemore have been selected to be a part of the Special Olympics Youth Ambassador program along with 10 other young adults with and without intellectual disabilities from across the United States. These passionate leaders will receive training, speak at events and conferences, as well as explore topics that will inspire new ideas to promote inclusion.

Unified Champion Schools is a Special Olympics initiative which encourages inclusive programming in schools and Unified opportunities for all students. The term “Unified” refers to activities that involve individuals with and without intellectual disabilities, working and playing side-by-side. Over 150 Massachusetts schools currently participate in Unified Champion Schools programming, offering Unified sports such as basketball, track & field or bocce.

Both Sydney, who is currently in the transition program at Nashoba Regional High School and Elyse, a senior at Auburn High School, will be traveling to San Diego in February for leadership training with other Youth Ambassadors. Ali Deluca, a special education teacher at Auburn High School, will be attending with the pair as a mentor.

Sydney and Elyse are members of the Special Olympics Massachusetts Youth Activation Council, a committee of students with and without disabilities from across Massachusetts who meet once a month to discuss and explore how they can make their schools and communities more inclusive.

Elyse Whittemore has been involved in the Special Olympics movement for five years, and has been working with individuals with various disabilities since elementary school. As a student at Auburn High School, Elyse is a Unified partner on the school's Unified Track & Field team, and president of the student council.

When Auburn High School was honored as a National Banner School for its outstanding dedication to inclusion for all students, Elyse spoke at the pep rally on the importance of Unified sports.

"It was great to see Unified sports honored while the entire student body cheered for them," she said. "It was amazing to be a part of this assembly and help plan the recognition of all our Unified athletes' hard work. The support the entire school gave was truly heartwarming to see."

Elyse credits her passion for inclusion to the great example her parents set.

"Inclusion is important to me because people of ANY type of ability should feel welcomed in their school and community. I was exposed to people of all different abilities at very young age. Being able to watch the way my parents interacted with their students inspired me to want to work with all students, especially those with different abilities," she said.

She is not exactly sure what her major will be in college, but plans to one day earn a Master's degree, join the Peace Corps, and go into a profession that works with children and adults with disabilities.

Sydney Meininger has been involved with the Special Olympics movement for eight years as an athlete, volunteer and Youth Activation Committee member. She graduated from Nashoba Regional High School in 2018 and is currently in the school's transition program. Sydney plays soccer, basketball and Unified track & field. She enjoys sharing her Special Olympics story and looks forward to more opportunities to speak publicly.

Sydney is passionate about Unified sports because it has made it possible for her to feel included at her school and in her community, regardless of her disability.

"Inclusion is important to me because I have a disability and can still be able to play sports through Special Olympics and Unified Champion Schools. I get to do it with a lot of my friends. It makes me feel very included to be a part of a school sports team," she said. "I have been involved in my high school unified track team since I was a freshman and I love it because I get to be involved in a school sport even though I have a disability, but it makes me feel like I am involved like any other athlete on a team. Even though I may not be good at everything, I am still thankful to be an athlete on the team. We are all very supportive of each other, we may not win every meet but we put in our best effort every day a practice."

Sydney hopes that being a US Youth Ambassador will give her the opportunity to bring Unified sports programming to even more students and schools.

"Inclusion is important to me to promote in my community because there are kids that want to play a team sport in the community, but it is hard because of their disability.

They can play on a unified sports team which makes them feel involved and included," she said.

### **About Unified Champion Schools in Massachusetts:**

There are currently over 150 schools in Massachusetts that participate Unified Champion School programming. This includes elementary, middle and high schools as well as colleges and universities. These are schools that offer Unified sports programs to students of all abilities, provide inclusive youth leadership opportunities and whole school engagement activities around inclusion and acceptance.

### **About Special Olympics Massachusetts:**

Special Olympics Massachusetts (SOMA) provides year-round sports training, athletic competition and other related programming for over 12,500 athletes with intellectual disabilities throughout the state at nearly 300 events per year. Locally, over 600 athletes take part in Special Olympics programming and are able to do this at no cost. Through the power of sport, our movement transforms the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. It also unites everyone by fostering a sense of community and building a civil society. For more information visit <http://www.SpecialOlympicsMA.org>

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