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Northeastern Student receives grant to grow inclusive programs in Boston Public Schools

Northeastern student Kaylie DeCosmo is the recipient of a \$2,000 Special Olympics Youth Innovation grant to bring inclusive programs to Boston Public Schools

BOSTON, Mass. - Kaylie DeCosmo has a goal to grow Unified programming in Boston Public Schools, and with the help of Special Olympics, she's going to make it a reality.

A native of Derry, New Hampshire and a Health Science (Pre-Med track) student at Northeastern University, Kaylie was recently awarded a \$2,000 Special Olympics Youth Innovation Grant to develop her project. She is among 142 students globally to receive this round of Youth Innovation Grants, funding 84 projects. According to Special Olympics International, "This diverse cohort of youth leaders represent 53 countries and span all seven regions of the global Special Olympics movement."

Kaylie is a founding member of Northeastern University's Special Olympics Club. The student organization is less than a year old, but already has 115 members who meet every other week on campus.

"For the past 3 years we have held an event that involves two high school Special Olympics basketball teams coming and playing at Northeastern University. This gives the athletes the opportunity to come and play at a division 1 school, which an enormous crowd and gives them the opportunity to be in the spotlight for the day. We invite our varsity basketball teams to come and hang out by the benches, play in a few competitions, and cheer on the athletes," she said. "All of the money raised at the event goes back to the teams who participate. This event has been very successful in the past and we look forward to hosting it for the 4th year this year."

Over the next six months, Kaylie and the Special Olympics club will be working with schools in the Boston Public Schools system and raising money for Special Olympics athletes in Massachusetts. Students will organize inclusive sports and physical education opportunities at the schools.

"This year, since the club has been started, we have been able to expand upon what we do. A program has been developed to work with Boston Public Schools, enforcing inclusion and giving students the chance to have time in their day for physical activity," she said.

Currently there are about 10 Northeastern students consistently working with the schools, but the goal is to increase that number tremendously.

"We also plan to make a more developed plan for the development of sports skills and the inclusion of all students, of all abilities, throughout this project. I cannot wait to see this project take off soaring in the near future," she said.

Kaylie has been involved with Special Olympics for eight years. Her inspiration for this project came from her past work as a volunteer basketball coach for Special Olympics and as a member of the "Just Like Us" club at her high school, Pinkerton Academy. Her sister has a learning disability and has worked hard as an athlete for most of her life playing hockey, gymnastics, soccer, softball and track. She is now on the Varsity hockey team at Pinkerton Academy.

"She has never been the best on the team, but she always tries hard, loves to play, and is always happy to be there and feel accepted," Kaylie said of her sister. "This year making the high school varsity team was a huge accomplishment for her, she couldn't believe it and was so proud of herself! She has loved being able to take part in, be welcomed and included in a high school sport she loves and has worked hard at playing her whole life! Our family is a huge hockey family. I grew up playing as well as my dad and it makes me proud to see her accomplish something so remarkable and something that I have seen her work at for 13 going on 14 years now. She has a lot to be proud of!"

Considering all of her past experiences, Kaylie knew she wanted to be a part of bringing Unified programming to Boston. Special Olympics Massachusetts' Urban Schools Initiative Manager Talia Gabriel has been doing extensive work over the past year in Boston, connecting with schools and bringing programs to communities that have not had Special Olympics programs before.

"Once I heard about the Boston Public Schools and realized the difference that could be made with the creation of this project, I was determined to make it happen," she said. "Sports has been a huge part of my life and something I have a strong love for, so being able to incorporate sports into also making a difference is just truly amazing. Going to the schools and seeing how happy the students are, how much they enjoy it, and seeing the students so hard working and determined to complete the exercises, learning new skills, and better old ones makes it so rewarding and an amazing experience, and it is only the start!"

Through this project, and the development of other activities at Northeastern University, Kaylie is determined to see her school become a Unified Champion school, a distinction given by Special Olympics to schools that offer Unified sports and inclusive programming. Kaylie is in the 4th year of her five-year program at Northeastern and plans to stay at the school for her Master's degree before going to medical school.

"I cannot wait to continue this work with the Boston Public schools, spreading inclusion, working with students on different skills and providing with them an opportunity that they would not have had. I am so excited to get more of the Northeastern community and out club involved over further development of this project."

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>

More about Special Olympics Youth Innovation Grants: <https://www.specialolympics.org/about/press-releases/special-olympics-announces-second-round-of-youth-innovation-grants>

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