



ATHLETE LEADERS AT WORK

Stories of Impact and Advice on Leadership
from athlete leaders Around the World





"Athletes need to understand that leadership comes with responsibility. Are you ready to take it on, or are you not ready to take it on? That's something someone just needs to understand first before thinking of becoming a leader."

Joel Kigozi Special Olympics Uganda

This book of stories is the result of work by many people around the world.

It was planned, researched, and written by Ben Haack, athlete leader from Special Olympics Australia, and Will Schermerhorn, a writer and editor from the United States. It was designed by Yaiguili Alvarado and partially illustrated by Aini Morazán.

These Special Olympics International staff members helped with coordination: Alyssa Cress, Pamela Herrera, Tiffany Lim, Rockie Zhao, Tracy Li, Kenia Padron, Tanyaradzwa Nzvengende, Noha Gaballah, and Cristina Rodriguez.

Special Olympics Program personnel helped to plan, coordinate, translate and facilitate the interviews.

ABOUT THESE STORIES

The first Special Olympics athlete leaders many people see are giving speeches. They are people with intellectual and developmental disabilities with the training and experience needed to confidently talk to a stadium full of people at a big Special Olympics Games.

They say powerful words. They are calm and poised. The audience cheers and claps. That can make it seem that Athlete Leadership is only for confident people with a talent for public speaking.

But guess what?

“Leadership is not just about talking,” says Daisy Nguni, an athlete leader with Special Olympics Zambia.

“It’s action-based. A person can be a leader without being a good speaker. An athlete can be a leader by just showing their skills and how dedicated they are in their work.”

These stories show HOW athletes lead. They show all the different ways that athletes CAN lead. As you will see, you don’t need to have a title to be a leader. You can be shy and still be a leader. These are things athletes learn through training and opportunities supported by our long-term partnership with Bank of America. That partnership has shown how standard courses of training unleash the unique strengths and personalities of our athletes as leaders.

“Being a leader means being responsible and independent. It’s about making decisions and setting a good example for others,” says Arwa Al-Shanfari, an athlete leader with Special Olympics Oman.

All of these stories are about Athlete Leadership at the Program level.

There are Special Olympics athlete leaders who lead at regional and global levels, but these stories are about the ones who thrive close to home.

In interviews, athlete leaders from all over the world shared what leadership means to them. Each offers advice for Special Olympics athletes who want to lead.

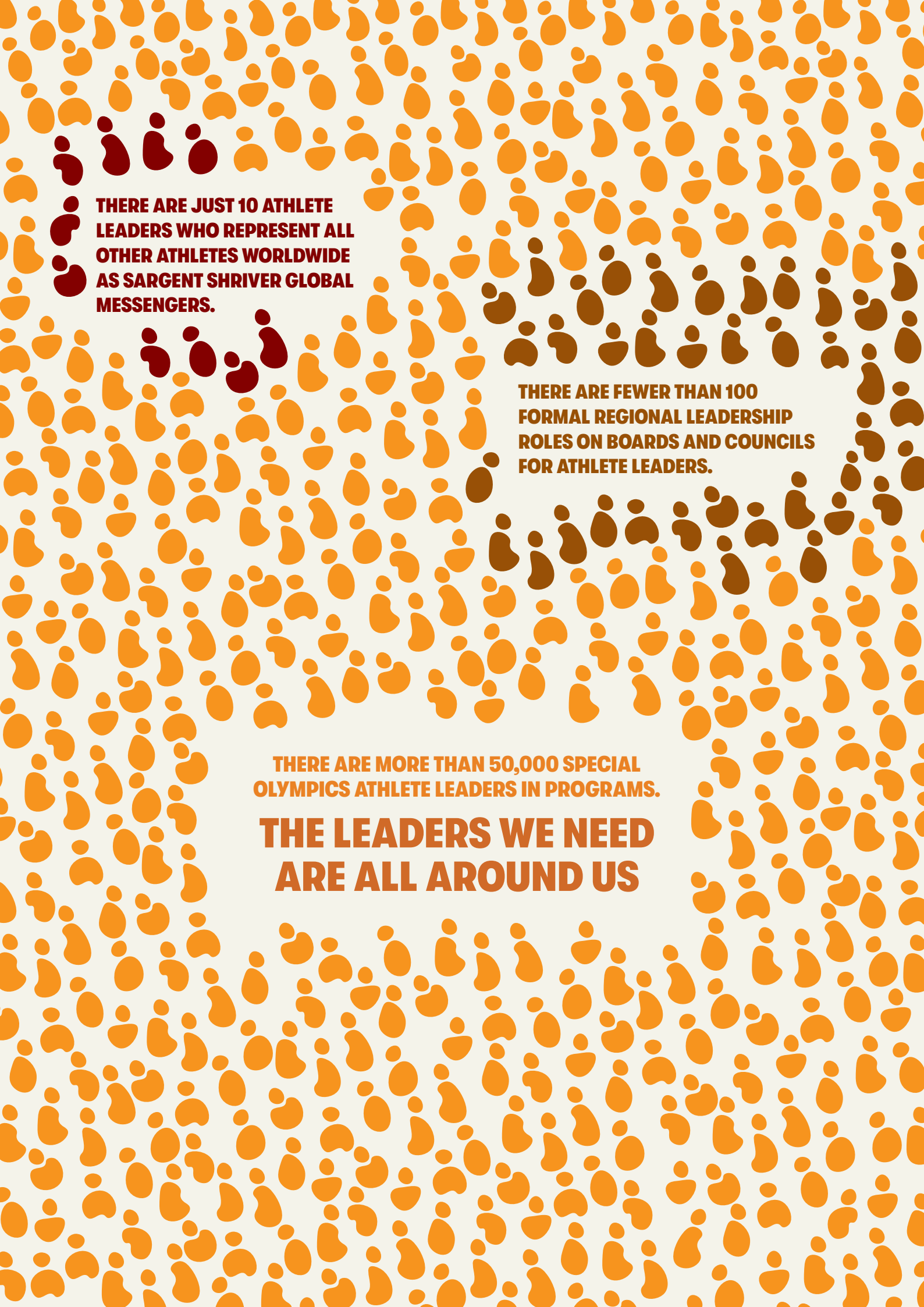
“The purpose and soul of Special Olympics is everyday programming, everyday training,” says Cristina Rodriguez, Director of Global Leadership Development for Special Olympics International.

Cristina says athlete leaders can start their journey by asking, “What impact I can make locally? How many lives I can change in my community, with my neighbors, in my workplace? How can I change things by sharing my voice, by saying what I think, and advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities?”



“True leadership is about everyday actions such as helping others, sharing ideas, and using your voice.”

Rachel Chircop Special Olympics Malta



**THERE ARE JUST 10 ATHLETE
LEADERS WHO REPRESENT ALL
OTHER ATHLETES WORLDWIDE
AS SARGENT SHRIVER GLOBAL
MESSENGERS.**

**THERE ARE FEWER THAN 100
FORMAL REGIONAL LEADERSHIP
ROLES ON BOARDS AND COUNCILS
FOR ATHLETE LEADERS.**

**THERE ARE MORE THAN 50,000 SPECIAL
OLYMPICS ATHLETE LEADERS IN PROGRAMS.**

**THE LEADERS WE NEED
ARE ALL AROUND US**

SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATHLETES LOVE SPORT.

But we also hear athletes say, 'I want a job. I need to develop skills. I want to be self-sufficient. I want to be independent.'

Athlete Leadership is Special Olympics' effort to partner with people with intellectual and development disabilities to lead our organization

The skills that athlete leaders learn through training set them up for leadership roles in their Special Olympics Programs, the organization's chapters at the local level.

Our Programs are highly understaffed. Developing athletes as leaders in Programs can help solve resource and leadership needs. That will happen when trained athlete leaders are given responsibility for tasks and roles where they can thrive.

With encouragement and mindful support, athlete leaders can help grow the work of Special Olympics at the local level.

That furthers our goal of assigning athletes responsibilities with goals and accountability. That kind of work equips them to be independent and thrive in other aspects of life

Program leaders: Look for the answer to some of your resource and leadership needs in the athletes who are all around you.

Athletes: It's up to you to step up. Tell your Program that you want to lead. Show what you can do to solve problems. Share what you'd like to do and who you want to be as a leader.

Read on and see what a wide array of options there are.



Being a Leader in your Program

Here is an overview of the advice and lessons from athletes who have created, pursued, and grown leadership roles in local Programs.

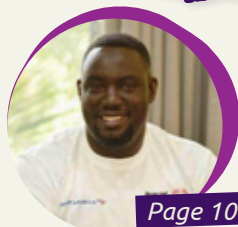
Athlete Representatives



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Celine Ramaekers
SO Belgium

"When you are on a board, feel confident. People want you to share your opinions."



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Joel Kigozi
SO Uganda

"Being an Athlete Leader can take courage. Being prepared helps you feel less nervous."



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Madeleine Perez
SO Venezuela

Even if you are not comfortable as a leader at first, you can learn to handle it with time and practice. 9



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Jerica Tan
SO Singapore

In leadership, being able to talk to people and make them feel comfortable is important. It's the first step to knowing how to help.



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Ian Kahalewai
SO Hawai'i

Athlete Leadership is more than sharing your opinions. It's about gathering and sharing the voices and opinions of athletes you represent.



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Ryan Smith
SO New Zealand

To represent the needs of athletes in your community, you need to seek, encourage, and listen to their voices.

Sports Leaders



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Daisy Nguni
SO Zambia

Leadership, like many things, can start with small responsibilities that grow into bigger ones.



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Nikilani Rojas
SO Hawai'i

Leadership training and experience can strengthen confidence in people who are shy.



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Man Bi
SO Pakistan

Lead others and grow your own confidence by sharing what you know about the sports you love.



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Patricia Mirembe
SO Uganda

Support young children who want to learn sport and swimming skills as a Young Athletes Coordinator.



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Josue Rosales
SO Guatemala

Every challenge in leadership is a chance to build skills, strengths, and your own confidence.

Health Messenger



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Mohammed Al-Hinai
SO Oman

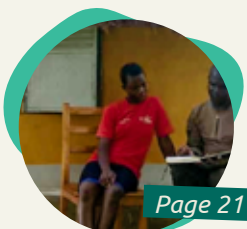
Learning about leadership is learning about yourself, too. You may find there is a leader inside you, waiting to be revealed.



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Rachel Chircop
SO Malta

Training and experience strengthen confidence in people who are new to leadership responsibilities.

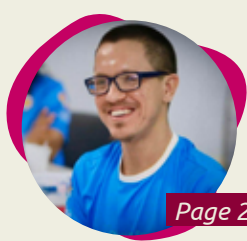


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Mary Wachango
SO Uganda

Even if you are nervous at first, practicing makes you confident as you learn new skills.

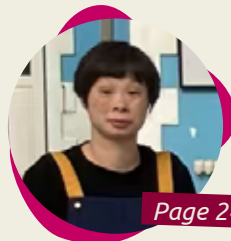
Athlete Facilitators



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Carlos Miro
SO Puerto Rico

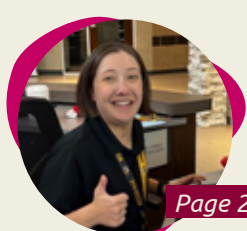
A motivated athlete leader can accomplish big things with the support of people around them.



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Lai Kuan Cheong
SO Macau

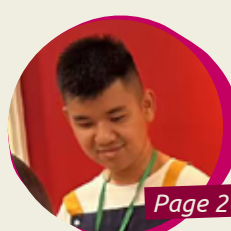
As you grow as a leader, you may find your life is richer and that you want to share what you have learned with others.



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Grace Davis
SO Missouri

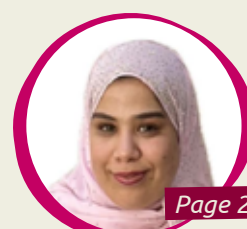
People may see your confidence and skills growing before you do. Trust that it's real.



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Pak Un Lau
SO Macau

Leadership is a process of continually learning and growing, and you can use your skills in many ways.



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Arwa Al-Shanfari
SO Oman

Find out what it takes to support your Program by learning to run competitions, trainings and meetings as a volunteer.

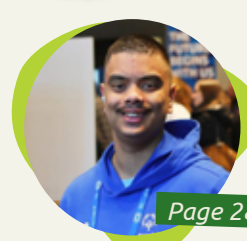


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Ashi Nagori
SO Bharat

Creative leaders can use their skills and interests to make leadership positions unique to them.

Storytellers



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Magnús Orri Arnarson
SO Iceland

Help tell the story of Special Olympics as a photographer and videographer with your smartphone.



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Edward Kastern
SO Wisconsin

Creating a space for athlete voices to be shared is a creative and important kind of leadership.



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Yuqi Zhong
SO China

You can use your talents to help your Program in many different ways.

Celine Ramaekers

Special Olympics Belgium

Representative on the Federation of Gymnastics of Flanders



"I am proud of daring to say what is on my mind. You need to have courage to really speak your mind."

Celine's advice

"Don't be afraid to use your voice and show them your talents. [Training] helped me to be less nervous because I'm prepared on a bunch of questions that I could get."

Celine is a Special Olympics gymnast. Her role as a leader grew gradually. She started by helping set up equipment for practices. Then she was asked to stay for the lessons and help demonstrate skills. "Then after a few months, they asked me, 'Do you really want to start teaching them as well?' And I did that."

At first, she was too nervous and shy to speak to people she didn't know. When she got training in Athlete Leadership, she became comfortable speaking to as many as 100 people at a time.

And then she was asked to be on a working group with GymFed, the Federation of Gymnastics of Flanders.

She was nervous again at first. She soon realized she was there because the members of the federation really wanted to hear what she had to say about Special Olympics gymnastics.

"I coach little kids, so I know quite a bit about it," Celine says. "At first, I didn't know what I wanted to say. The further along I got in those meetings, I saw they really wanted honest opinions. And that's when I really thought, 'Okay, right now is the time that I say what's really on my mind.'"



Madeleine Pérez

Special Olympics Venezuela

Past President of Program Athlete Leadership Council



"Athlete leaders need to be well-prepared to accomplish their goals. You can be prepared through training, being consistent, having discipline and putting in lots of effort."

Madeleine's advice

"Find a goal and go for the goal. And be sure to write it down."

First, there was the very happy moment when Madeleine was voted president of the Athlete Leadership Council for her Program.

"It took me by surprise. It was great news for me," Madeleine recalls.

And then, there was the first meeting she led as president.

"I was very nervous at first. My hands were sweating."

It took her some time to become comfortable with leading meetings.

"What I would do is that I would take five minutes. I would breathe, or I would go walk. And of course, practice was great. That would give me confidence, too," Madeleine says.

Madeleine also had responsibilities before and after the meetings.

"My biggest responsibility was to read all of the materials given to me and to listen to everyone that spoke. Then I would represent those words when I spoke."

As time passed, she became more comfortable. She realized that the athlete leaders who elected her already knew she could lead them.

"Now I know I am a good fit for the role," Madeleine says.

"To me, to be a leader is not just representing myself for the organization, but also our other athletes who have intellectual disabilities and hearing what they have to say, what they want to know, what they want to change in Special Olympics."

Ian Kahalewai Special Olympics Hawai'i

Ian Kahalewai { Special Olympics Hawai'i

Past President of Program Athlete Leadership Council



"I think leadership is one of the greatest aspects of Special Olympics because being a leader for the organization is a huge step forward."

Ian's advice

Go into Athlete Leadership with an open mind and just see what it's like. At first it will be scary. But as you keep going through it, it will get better.

Ian takes the responsibility of representing other athletes' needs and interests seriously.

When he was president of Special Olympics Hawai'i's Athlete Leadership Council, Ian worked with other ALC members on an online survey to discover what athletes in the Program wanted.

Using a Google Forms survey, the Hawai'i ALC learned that athletes were concerned about having "healthier food and officiating rules changes" after athletes were disqualified during competition. At big competitions, they wanted a sensory room, "a place where it was really quiet so they could get away from all the action and just have a place to relax and just enjoy themselves."

"I'm not only helping myself, but also my fellow athletes as well. Getting to know their ideas and opinions and what they want to see change in Special Olympics and just giving them the chance to speak out and just hearing their ideas and opinions."

Joel Kigozi { Special Olympics Uganda

Representative on the Program Board of Directors



"Leadership means decision-making. It means being confident when you're talking to people. It means sacrifice for the good of the rest."

Joel's advice

"Leadership is a responsibility to others, not to your own self. Not being selfish, not being self-centered. You have to understand that."

Some things about being an athlete representative make Joel nervous. In parts of Uganda, people speak languages he does not know. Part of his job is to go to those places to represent the athletes in Special Olympics Uganda.

"At times, you might feel shy when you go to areas you have never been to in your life. You will feel shy in a place where you don't speak the language. But you have a message to be shared," Joel says.

Even so, he says, "I'm excited to go to places I haven't been to. I make a lot of preparation of what I'm going to say to them in a new region." Even with preparation, there are uncertainties, he says. "You don't know how people will welcome your message. ... It takes a lot of courage," he adds.

He says he gets his courage from supportive people at his Program. Joel does his part to support others: "As the athlete representative on the board, I have always encouraged the youth, telling them, 'Today it's me. Tomorrow it's going to be you when I'm not there.' I always encourage them to be themselves and to climb up and take up these roles."

Jerica Tan

Special Olympics Singapore

Athlete Leadership Trainer and Public Speaker



"Being a leader actually makes me change myself. I am really trying to change myself by helping others and learning from others."

Jerica's advice

"When you are nervous about speaking, face forward. Think in your brain. And just go for it."



"Being a leader doesn't mean only leading," says Jerica. "I've learned that, as an athlete, leadership is about helping."

Jerica has made an impression on coaches, fellow athletes and others because of her willingness to help. Jerica says she sees leadership as "showing people how to go through difficulties and leading them in their hard times. For example, if they could not solve problems, I will try to guide them through in solving their problems."

Jerica loves to try new things, and her drive to learn and help has transformed her, says Su Yin Tay, Senior Manager for Volunteers, Communications, and Partnerships for Special Olympics Singapore.

"The person that she is right now, she's almost a different person, very much more confident," Su Yin says. "She's one athlete who's always looking out for other people. Not just the fellow athletes, but also for her coaches, too. She makes sure that everybody's well taken care of."

I put smiles on other people's faces by presenting their ideas and the challenges they face on to the rest. That makes them feel good. It makes them feel that someone else is caring. That brings them smiles and hope.

Joel Kigozi | Special Olympics Uganda

Ryan Smith

{ **Special Olympics New Zealand**

Athlete Representative on the Program Board of Trustees



"I have seen so many other people become athlete leaders and quite successful. And I wanted to follow in their footsteps."

Ryan's advice

"Act as a conduit for the athletes' voice, their concerns, what they would like to see, change or improve."

Ryan has become a skillful and accomplished leader, exactly the kind he aspired to be when he first thought about Athlete Leadership.

"I've been a keen observer of other athlete leaders before me as examples of what good athlete leader behavior looks like," Ryan says. Some athlete leaders had clear strengths, he says, but didn't consider the needs of others in the community.

"So, I've always been trying to see what I can do that helps others rather than just me. How do I spread the opportunities and share them with others as opposed to having it be centered on me?"

His approach has earned him the role as athlete representative on his Program's Board of Trustees. Before each meeting, Ryan reviews the meeting materials. He comes with questions to ask.

Ryan's community focus helped bring Te Reo Māori—the language spoken in Tirau—onto the back of Special Olympics New Zealand's medals. He says the idea came directly from the athletes.

"Being on the Board of Trustees has allowed me to help work behind the scenes, giving in-depth knowledge of what the athletes feel and think on the ground level."



Special Olympics New Zealand's medals have words in Te Reo Māori—the language spoken in Tīrau—onto the back of medals.

Daisy Nguni

Special Olympics Zambia

Sports Equipment Organizer and Fitness Captain



"Athletes should not be shy in terms of asking if they want to be a leader. You're supposed to come out and say, 'I want to be a leader.' And you should believe in yourself and see that you are capable as well."

Daisy's advice

"Take up leadership roles as small as they are. Be open to any role that is there that is available because leadership is not just in the field, but it's everywhere."

Daisy is a busy athlete leader now, and it started with a small, important job she got as a volunteer.

Special Olympics Zambia had trouble getting enough people to staff sports events, Daisy says.

"I was a volunteer, and I was passionate about what I do. I have so much energy and skill. The executive thought it was wise for me to be given a leadership role," Daisy recalls.

Her job comes with a lot of responsibility.

"I am in charge of the equipment at Special Olympics Zambia," Daisy says. She handles jerseys of all colors, pennants, footballs, basketballs, bocce balls, tall cones, short cones, mats, banners used for branding, and the equipment used for the Motor Activities Training Program.

"I make sure that they are clean and organized at the Special Olympics headquarters here in Lusaka," Daisy says. "I feel great taking up the leadership role as an equipment organizer. I love it so much. And, I am doing that job so that I can also inspire other people who would want to take up leadership roles in Special Olympics."



Josue Rosales { Special Olympics Guatemala

Coaching Assistant



"Athlete Leadership has taught me to be humble, to be responsible, and to help Special Olympics Guatemala in every way I can."

Josue's advice

"I always say to fall in love with the process, fall in love with your sport, fall in love with Special Olympics."

Josue has overcome challenges in his life. When he was young, people made fun of him because he talked with a stutter.

"I didn't talk much, I would just say hello, good morning, good afternoon, and good night. I wouldn't be with my friends because they would make fun of me."

Then, his father taught him to swim.

"Before I learned how to swim, I thought I couldn't do things. I would say, 'I can't do it,' and I would leave it at that. Since I learned how to swim, I said, 'If I could learn how to swim, I can learn other things.'"

He has learned about swimming, badminton and other sports. He has learned how to be an assistant coach. He has learned to talk confidently with people one-on-one and in big groups. But maybe the most important thing he has learned is to love challenges.

"I have persevered in my role as a leader to set an example for my peers. I learned through my mistakes. I keep going," Josue says.

Man Bi { Special Olympics Pakistan

Coaching Assistant



"Athlete Leadership brings many responsibilities at the same time. It is not only to speak or give instructions all the time. It's giving and assisting."

Man Bi's advice

"Everyone around us should understand us, how we feel, and how we can thrive. Only then will we get the confidence to express ourselves. Small steps like these will allow us to overcome our fears and get the confidence that we can do anything."

Man Bi was introduced to Special Olympics through Unified Sports.

"I loved the combination of opposites, the way athletes and Unified partners were equal on the court. It gave me motivation."

Even so, Man says, "I was not able to believe in myself."

That changed when she got hearing aids during the 2023 Special Olympics World Games in Berlin. Before, she couldn't hear her family, friends or teachers. People around her thought she was not able to speak. But hearing people clearly allowed her to learn to speak clearly, and that boosted her confidence.

Now, she is learning to become a fitness captain.

"I'm proud to be a leader whenever I am given instructions by the coach, or the Program leader gives me a task," Man says. "When other athletes follow me, it gives me a happy feeling that I have achieved something."

Nikilani Rojas

{ Special Olympics Hawai'i
Team Captain



"We athletes try our best. We all try very hard, all of us. We want people to know that all our athletes have a voice."



Nikilani's advice

"Never give up. Keep trying your best."

Nikilani is someone who wants to make things happen and then makes them happen.

Like many new athlete leaders, she felt shy about speaking up and a little uncomfortable with giving directions to a group.

"I worked very hard in trying to overcome that," she says.

She had been a swimmer for Special Olympics Hawai'i when she talked to her swim coach about becoming a team captain. She had to be certified as a swim coach first, she was told, so she trained and did that.

Team Captain Nikilani has made things happen for her Program. She formed an Athlete Leadership Council on her island of Maui. Her Program leaders were impressed. They selected Nikilani for an assignment for Special Olympics North America Region Conference in Indiana in 2025.

Nikilani's job there was to lead morning exercises to get people warmed up and ready for the day. She practiced high knees and heel digs at home for a full month before the conference. When it was her turn to direct the exercises, she did it confidently.

"I get to show I'm an example of what being a leader is all about, showing what our athletes can do."



Patricia Mirembe

Special Olympics Uganda

Young Athletes Coordinator and Swim Instructor



"I learned the qualities of a good leader: determination, courage, being supportive, being empathetic, being kind and caring."

Patricia's advice

"If you want to become a leader, start small when helping others. Believe in yourself. Work hard."

Patricia's job as Young Athletes Coordinator is to encourage children with and without intellectual disabilities to learn and participate in the activities.

"I encourage athletes all to learn from one another," Patricia says.

Patricia's mentor saw her at her school in Uganda and encouraged her to go through leadership training.

"I support my fellow athletes when they're training in sports. I learned time management. I support younger athletes when they're training in swimming."

"I feel good and happy because I am interacting and supporting my fellow athletes," Patricia says. She gives talks about health and hygiene.

Patricia is a good swimmer. She loves to help athletes learn to swim. She can demonstrate many swimming strokes: butterfly, side stroke, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle.

Part of her role was talking to bigger, older children. That made her nervous at first, but not anymore.

"I believed in myself. I got advice from my mentor and my teachers."

Now, she has a year of experience, and her confidence shines through.

"I feel happy when I can help my fellow athletes."

"A leader is someone who guides and leads his or her teammates in sports in any kind of events. Followers should not take me as a boss. I am a helping person, a collaborator."

Man Bi | Special Olympics Pakistan

Leadership is Responsibility

"Being a leader means to be responsible. You have to own up to your own word. If you say you are going to do something, you have to do it. You have to be there for people."

Grace Davis, *Special Olympics Missouri*

"To be a leader, you must be determined and hardworking, and you must take a stand and fight for inclusion."

Ashi Nagori, *Special Olympics Bharat*

"True leadership is about everyday actions such as helping others, sharing ideas, and using your voice."

Rachel Chircop, *Special Olympics Malta*

"As a leader, I know I have more responsibility to take care of others and train other athletes to be leaders as well."

Lai Kuan "Sally" Cheong, *Special Olympics Macau*

"Leading means I try to step forward, as in people having trouble, I will completely go help them. "

Jerica Tan, *Special Olympics Singapore*

"Be engaged, be present. Because if you're not engaged and present, then you're not a true leader."

Edward Kastern, *Special Olympics Wisconsin*



Mohamed Al-Hinai

{ **Special Olympics Oman**
Athlete Representative and Health Messenger



"I talk to athletes, ask them what they need, and then share their opinions during meetings. I make sure their voices are heard and considered."

Mohamed's advice

"Say yes to the opportunity to lead. Don't worry if you're shy or unsure. Everyone starts somewhere. The important thing is to try."

One of the most important moments in Mohamed's leadership journey came in 2019.

Mohamed was part of the Oman delegation as an assistant volleyball coach at the Special Olympics World Games in Abu Dhabi.

"Being a coach was a huge responsibility," Mohamed says. "I wasn't just giving instructions—I was guiding, motivating, and caring for the team. That made me realize that I'm not just an athlete. I can be a mentor, a leader."

Mohamed has continued growing as a leader. He's a member of the Special Olympics Oman Athlete Leadership Council. He is a Health Messenger, too, representing the health needs and interests of athletes. This role required public speaking, outreach, and collaboration with medical professionals, coaches, and families.

"As a Health Messenger, I talk about how athletes can stay healthy—not just physically, but mentally too," he says. He speaks at events, encourages athletes to get regular checkups, and has helped with awareness campaigns. Leadership has changed the way he sees himself.

"It makes me feel confident and proud. I feel like I can contribute something important and make a difference."

Rachel Chircop

{ **Special Olympics Malta**
Health Messenger



"I want to help others let their abilities shine. I want to help them reach for their dreams and show the world that we are capable — that we can make things happen."

Rachel's advice

"Believe in yourself and believe that your voice matters. Believe that you can make a difference. And know that you will always find support in Special Olympics."

Rachel's first impressions of Athlete Leadership were speakers at Regional events and World Games. She thought maybe Athlete Leadership was not for her because she was shy.

"However, over time I learned that leadership is also local," Rachel says. "As a Health Messenger, I teach other athletes new communication skills, and about being healthy, building self-confidence, encouraging others, making sure that everybody is involved."

Rachel helps people who are still in school to "deal with the problems they are having. For example, if at school a person struggles to make friends, we help them on how to make friends, helping them to build social skills."

"I encourage [athletes] by giving opportunities beyond sports — coaching, office work, fundraising, event planning, storytelling, even social media. I invite them to serve on committees and boards because that is where decisions are made. I provide training in leadership, health, and communication skills to prepare athletes for new roles.

"And I ask about their interests, so we can create opportunities that match their skills and passions."

"Being a leader means standing beside other athletes, guiding them, and supporting them. I learned how to help and represent my fellow athletes, especially those who may not be able to express themselves."

Mohamed Al-Hanai | Special Olympics Oman

Mary Wachengo

Special Olympics Uganda
Health Advocate and Trainer



"I am encouraging others to become leaders by being an example and being kind."

Mary's advice

"If you want to be a leader, you have to be active and confident. You become confident by practicing."

Becoming a Health Messenger wasn't easy at first for Mary. She was nervous, and, "At first I didn't know anything about health."

She learned to teach other athletes important things about health through training and attending workshops.

"I am teaching my fellow athletes how to maintain hygiene, like washing, bathing, brushing their teeth, and eating a balanced diet."

She's now an expert: "I feel confident and proud."

Mary says she learned the courage to speak in front of other athletes through practicing.

Now she sees people are doing what she taught them to do. She sees them doing things like washing their hands and being careful about what they eat.

"That makes me feel proud and great."



Carlos Miro

Special Olympics Puerto Rico
Leadership Training and Activities Facilitator



"I saw lots of athletes with a lot of skills and capabilities. And we wanted to give them an opportunity like I had."

Carlos's advice

"I think all countries should implement Athlete Leadership because it's a great program, and you're giving athletes different opportunities and different experiences that they might not get otherwise."

Not too long ago, Special Olympics Puerto Rico didn't have an official Athlete Leadership program.

That changed after Carlos took part in the Special Olympics Latin America Athlete Congress in Paraguay in 2024. He returned to Puerto Rico with the official Athlete Leadership curriculum and a strong desire to share it. He proposed setting up an Athlete Leadership program to his Program's National Director, who agreed it was a great idea.

It took several months to explain the program to his fellow athletes and to get them and their families comfortable with the idea.

"We were looking for athletes that had that desire and capability to deliver the message of inclusion, of being really involved," Carlos says.

Carlos had learned the power of persistence, so he and his mentor, Armando Muñoz, kept pushing and pushing. Carlos finally simply scheduled an event and told interested athletes, "You must be there. Here's the time. Here's the place."

That strategy worked. Now, the Athlete Leadership program in Puerto Rico is growing. Carlos and Armando are planning new trainings and activities.

"We want to grow the group of athlete leaders. There's a lot of athletes with the potential to speak and bring the message of inclusion and having a healthy lifestyle."

"Athletes can lead by reminding other athletes that their voices and their ideas are valuable and that leadership can come in many forms, such as helping teammates, suggesting new ideas, as well as being a role model."

Rachel Chircop | Special Olympics Malta

Grace Davis { Special Olympics Missouri

Receptionist at Program Headquarters



"I'm proud that I have coworkers who trust me and who want me on their team, and that I can contribute to the overall success of Special Olympics Missouri."

Grace's advice

"Don't be afraid to take risks. A lot of people are going to be there for you. No matter the struggle, you can do it."

Confidence is a work in progress for Grace, and she has earned every bit of the confidence she has.

Grace is the receptionist at the Special Olympics Missouri headquarters office. She greets people as they enter, she answers phone calls, and she does some sports-related data entry. She's also taking Athlete Leadership training courses.

Grace has accomplished a lot, but she still wonders if she can handle new challenges when they come up in her classes, says her mentor, Kayla Hull.

"There might be a certain class she goes to, and she's like, 'I can't do this.' But by the end of it, she's accomplished that project," Kayla says.

"Sometimes, I really do just have to remind myself to take one step at a time," Grace says.

The growth in Grace's confidence is clear "in the work she's doing, how she interacts with staff and people coming into the building, just how she holds herself," Kayla says. "People look up to her."

Arwa Al-Shanfari { Special Olympics Oman

Active Volunteer at Program Events



"I choose activities that I enjoy, like helping during events. I believe other athletes should try volunteering—it builds their skills."

Arwa's advice

"Don't think leadership is only for certain people. You just have to care, and you have to try. That's enough."

"When I first joined, I didn't think I could be a leader. I was quiet. I didn't see myself as someone who could stand in front of others," Arwa says.

Today, Arwa supports almost every event held by Special Olympics Oman—welcoming athletes, helping with logistics, and mentoring newcomers. Athlete Leadership training and the encouragement and support of her Program built her confidence and independence.

"I handle tasks myself, like preparing my materials for meetings and organizing small activities. This helps me become a better leader," Arwa says.

She especially wants to encourage female athletes to take on leadership roles.

"Sometimes girls are scared to lead," Arwa says. "I tell them, if I can do it, so can you."

Lai Kuan “Sally” Cheong

Special Olympics Macau

Leadership Training and Activities Facilitator



“Leadership is a kind of pressure, but the pressure comes from responsibility. It’s a pressure that motivates me.”

Sally’s advice

“You need to work hard because opportunities will come to people who work hard. It’s that way for everyone, not just people with IDD.”

Growing as an athlete leader in Macau has improved Sally’s life in ways she didn’t expect. She was well into her role as a mentor when she paused to think about how her life has changed.

“Over time, I gradually realized that I felt happier and more confident. I had more of a sense of accomplishment. I feel I am more mature now and I have more friends.”

Sally started as a fundraiser at public markets in Macau. The Program has athletes greet people passing by. They sold fresh cookies and Special Olympics-branded cups, coasters, keychains, bookmarks and totes.

“I learned how to solve problems by myself in some cases, which is a great thing to learn,” Sally says. Over time, she became very good at public speaking. Now, she’s in demand as a speaker at all kinds of events. Sally accomplished many things, and she decided to help welcome new athletes.

“I wanted to become a mentor because I want to share. That’s just my instinct. I also want to pass on my experience to new athletes,” Sally says. “I want to give back to others and to support new athletes. I got support, and I want to support other people now.”



Pak Un “Paco” Lau

Special Olympics Macau
Leadership Trainer and Activities Facilitator



"I feel I know myself better. Leadership gives me lot more opportunities to learn different skills."

Paco's advice

"When Programs have athletes who are good speakers, don't go to them all the time. Give opportunities to new athletes, as well. Experienced athlete leaders like me are happy to give these shining roles to athletes who haven't been seen as much."

Finding a job in Macau can be hard, Paco says, but he has an advantage over many others because of Special Olympics Athlete Leadership training.

"I can use leadership skills for job hunting. Because of my leadership skills, it's better when I go through interviews," Paco says. "A lot of athletes face the same challenges. It's hard for them to find a job. But I have leadership skills and certificates and experience. Those help me to be a better, stronger candidate in job hunting."

Paco has a noticeable sense of confidence now.

It wasn't that way at first. His first role was as a fundraiser selling foods and gifts to people at a big marketplace in Macau. That was a challenge for Paco because he tends to be quiet and reserved around people he doesn't know. His memory isn't good, Paco says, so that was something Special Olympics Macau staff helped him with.

"Leadership to me is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity," Paco says. "It's a challenge because leadership is a hard skill to master, but it's also an opportunity for me to grow."

Being a leader takes a lot of communication, and that's one of my biggest challenges because I am introverted. I know I need to pick out key points in what I am hearing and those key points let me help others.

Pak Un “Paco” Lau | Special Olympics Macau

Ashi Nagori

Special Olympics Bharat
Leadership Training and Activities Facilitator



"I feel empowered that I can bring change and create a unified society. When we discuss ideas and conduct events, I feel confident and empowered."

Ashi's advice

"Because of Athlete Leadership training sessions, I am more confident, and I know how to speak better."



Ashi has found great ways to bring schoolchildren with and without intellectual disabilities together in her town.

"From childhood, I have loved puzzles," Ashi says. Now, she is planning a Unified jigsaw puzzle competition for children from 10 nearby schools, as many as 100 children.

Ashi and her Unified partner lead schoolchildren in a variety of sports and activities. Jigsaw puzzles is one. Another is yoga. Ashi has learned enough about yoga to guide schoolchildren through the sessions.

Puzzles and yoga are just part of what Ashi does as an athlete leader. She and her Unified partner go to schools to present Athlete Leadership training. The first step for Ashi and her partner is to meet with the school principal to make sure the principal understands and supports the training.

"We saw Ashi has potential as a speaker," says Aditi Yadav, an intern working with Special Olympics Bharat. "She's a quite a good, quick learner, as well as a good athlete."

"I feel empowered that I can bring change and create a unified society," Ashi says. "When we discuss ideas and conduct events, I feel confident and empowered."



Magnús Orri Arnarson

Special Olympics Iceland

Photographer, Videographer and Video Editor



"I have been working very hard and have a passion for photography and making these photos to market Special Olympics in a good way and telling the stories that people don't know about."

Magnús's advice

"You have to post your photos. If you take photos and people never see a post, you only have the photo on your phone, and you're not doing something with it."

Magnús was always using his smartphone to make films and take photos of his friends and family. The national director of Special Olympics Iceland, Anna Karolina, saw his films and asked him to make a promotional video for the World Games in Abu Dhabi.

"It made me feel great because the people inside Special Olympics were open to have me take more photos and more videos."

SO Iceland National Director Anna Karolina "pushes people to pursue their dreams and do more," says Magnús's mentor, Jón Bergsveinsson. Encouragement "was the key to everything," Jón says.

"I make videos and photographs of athletes and tournaments and competitions," Magnús says. "I make promotional videos and photos of the competitions and post them on social media."

Magnús made all of his films with his smartphone at first.

"Your phone is a good camera," and easy to use, he says. "Start with smiling faces and people giving high fives," he said. "I always get closer when I am taking photos. ... I am just capturing the moment of what they are doing, when people are smiling or when people are talking."

"A leader helps transmit the message of inclusion of all the athletes and the families. It's a title and a commitment. You have to give the message to everyone."

Madeleine Perez
Special Olympics Venezuela

Edward Kastern { Special Olympics Wisconsin

Co-host of the Podcast "Athlete Voice"



"I've learned to be more patient with myself because I learned things don't happen overnight. I learned not to be so hard on myself."

Edward's advice

"You never know what skills you have until you take that chance to open up some doors for your dreams."

"We put the athlete in the hot seat."

That's how Edward describes the "Athlete Voice" podcast he co-hosts.

"I just ask the hardest questions to the athletes about their lives. We really get to know that athlete and how they're doing."

Edward and his co-host Addie Teeters make sure to look beyond the cities of Wisconsin to feature athletes living among farms, fields and forests. Addie is vice president of marketing communications for Special Olympics Wisconsin.

Growing up was hard for Edward. He has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair to get around. As a child, he was bullied, he says.

"I was tipped over, spun around, just made fun of."

And now he is an athlete leader sharing the stories of dozens of Special Olympics athletes. Many of them were bullied in school, too. Edward makes them stars of the podcast. He wants them to feel included the way he does.

"A lot of people with intellectual disabilities, they don't get a chance to get their voice heard. And I wanted to be that catalyst."

Yuqi Zhong { Special Olympics China

Artist, Video Editor, and Public Speaker



"When I talked about my own artwork, I had the chance to speak. Later I became more and more active as a speaker."

Yuqi's advice

"If you have talent, the first thing is to try not to be timid. Be proactive and take initiative."

Yuqi brings boldness to art, speaking, and leadership.

During a charity sale, Yuqi wanted to attract people to buy things to raise money for his Program.

"My fellow athletes were speaking quietly. I was calling out loudly, again and again. Even when there were no customers nearby, I still did my best to pull people over." Leaders at Yuqi's Program noticed his energetic spirit. They also noticed he loved to draw. Now, Yuqi makes beautiful artworks for items the Program sells: tote bags, red gift envelopes, and boxes for the delicious, seasonal treat called mooncakes.

He also helps his Program tell its story by editing videos for social media.

Yuqi developed his public speaking skills by explaining his artworks to Program staff. He became very good at it. Yuqi has served as host for several big events.

As an athlete leader, Yuqi sees that other athletes have talents and abilities but don't have confidence to pursue them. "They are afraid inside. They don't dare to be the first to step up and show what they can do," he says.

"I want to be the first to step up and volunteer," he says. "I actively embrace everything in our activities."

GETTING STARTED WITH ATHLETE LEADERSHIP

Many Athlete Leadership learning materials are available on the Special Olympics Resources website at this address:



resources.specialolympics.org/AL

You'll find an overview of Athlete Leadership that covers the three guiding principles of the program. Learn how education and awareness, training, and leadership positions combine to make Athlete Leadership work. There's a downloadable overview of the Leadership and Skills training curriculum, too.

There's a collection of basic and advanced training modules for athlete leaders, too. Look for the handbooks on advocacy, communication, handling disappointment, healthy relationships, and setting goals.



"Being a leader doesn't mean only leading. To me, being a leader is to show people how to go through difficulties and to lead them in their hard times. I try to guide them in solving their problems."

Jerica Tan Special Olympics Singapore

"Athlete Leadership is worth it. We get opportunities, and those opportunities are worth the work and the weight. Helping others gives you joy, and it's fun."

Madeleine Perez Special Olympics Venezuela

"It makes me feel confident and proud. I feel like I can contribute something important and make a difference."

Mohamed Al-Hanai Special Olympics Oman



**THANK YOU, BANK OF AMERICA, FOR
THE ONGOING SUPPORT TO ATHLETE
LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMING.**