

In Memoriam: Mark Swiconek

One of Special Olympics' greatest and first athlete leaders, Mark Swiconek, passed away Monday, January 11, 2016. Words cannot express the esteem and gratitude countless people within Special Olympics had for Mark, and the impact he made on the movement.

His unflinching and tremendous grace, wisdom, humor, passion, and willingness to take on new challenges and push boundaries on behalf of Special Olympics made him a beloved and deeply revered leader of the movement. He was a blend of fun-loving athlete and colleague, mentor, and stately gentleman that could connect with and inspire people from all walks of life.

During his 35+ years as an athlete and leader of the Special Olympics movement, Mark witnessed and contributed to many phases of growth and change in the organization. He was not only a great arbitrator and historian, he had a gift for helping people understand the positive potential of change.

He lived and breathed Special Olympics and never lost sight of the significance it played in his own life and the lives of his fellow athletes around the world. Once when being interviewed, Mark was once asked, "what would your life be like without Special Olympics?" Mark replied, "it wouldn't be much of a life at all, it would only be existence."

Having participated in Special Olympics in Wyoming and Connecticut, Mark called Florida "home" for the past 20 or more years and participated in Special Olympics Hernando County.

When Mark was born, doctors said he was brain-damaged and probably would not live past 14. He proved them wrong. During his lifetime, Mark addressed hundreds upon hundreds of groups on behalf of Special Olympics, sharing the organization's mission. Though an accomplished athlete, Mark's lasting legacy will undoubtedly be his role as an advocate for his fellow athletes and as an ambassador for Special Olympics.

One of the many things that made Mark so exemplary was that he inspired countless athletes to step outside of their roles as athletes and take part in the leadership of Special Olympics.

Mark's greatest joy (other than competing) and the gift he gave to Special Olympics was his voice. Through his well-modulated persuasive and powerful tone, profound observations and words, and sweeping gestures, his presentations profoundly affected everyone who heard him speak. His audiences included heads of government, education, community leaders, Toastmasters, businesses, families and athletes.

With hard work, he progressed from his first training as an Athlete for Outreach in 1987 to serving as a reporter for a Hartford television station during the 1995 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Connecticut, to being chosen as one of the original twelve Sargent Shriver International Global Messengers in 1998.

Mark was also given the honor of introducing Special Olympics Founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, at the Opening Ceremony of the 1991 International Games, and he co-hosted the Opening Ceremony of the 1999 World Summer Games with Leslie Visser and Dan Jansen on ABC and was the speaker at the World Games Family Reception.

But Mark didn't stop there. He hosted three Special Olympics Florida televised programs on Florida's Sun Sports Network, as well as being the Master of Ceremonies for the unveiling of the Special Olympics US Postal Service stamp in 2000 that was featured in a video news release viewed by 12 million people. He shared his passion and talent with President and Mrs. Clinton and a host of celebrities and dignitaries during Special Olympics' 30th Anniversary Celebration of Special Olympics at the White House.

When Sargent Shriver, then Board Chairman of Special Olympics International, led the charge to bring Special Olympics to China, Mark was one of eight athletes chosen to speak to government and education dignitaries, bringing the positive image of what Special Olympics athletes can do.

Mark was inducted into the Special Olympics Hall of Fame in Connecticut and Florida, received the Florida Special Olympics Athlete of the Year from the Florida Sports Hall of Fame, and received the Spirit of Special Olympics Award from Special Olympics International. In addition, Mark competed in 19 events within 8 sports.

He was the recipient of many awards from his Toastmasters clubs, as well receiving the Outstanding Achievement Award by the Plainville Town Council. He also was a Eucharistic Minister at St. Francis Xavier Cabrini Catholic Church in Spring Hill, FL.

Mark Swiconek made as much of an impact on the worldwide movement as any athlete in its history. While he will be deeply missed by all who knew him, we are all indebted to him for what he selflessly and passionately gave to the Special Olympics movement.

For more of Mark's activities and achievements please see the following addendum.

In Lieu of Flowers, the family has requested donations be sent to:
Special Olympics Florida – Hernando County
9611 Commercial Way
Weeki Wachee, FL 34613

Mark Swiconek was a Special Olympics Athlete and Leader for 35 years
Bristol Toastmasters, Bristol, Ct (1982)
Bristol Toastmaster of the Year (1984 & 1985)
Great Plains Toastmasters, Plainville, Ct (1984)
Attended first Regional Certification Workshop for Special Olympics USA Athletes for Outreach Training (1987)
Awarded James Bracken Outstanding Special Olympics Athlete Award (1988)
Plainville Town Council Proclamation for Outstanding Achievement (1988)
McDonald's Spirit of Life Award (1988)
Special Olympics Connecticut (SOCT) Board of Directors (1989 -1997)
Connecticut Governors Council on Mental Retardation (1990 -1994)
Speaker at celebration honoring Rose Kennedy's 100th birthday (1990)
Special Olympics World Games Board of Directors (1990-1995)
Introduced Eunice Kennedy Shriver during opening ceremonies 1991 Special Olympics International Games, Minneapolis-St Paul
Member, Team Connecticut – 1991 World Games, Minneapolis, St Paul, Traditional Softball Team
Keynote Speaker 1992 Special Olympics Intl. (SOI) Law Enforcement Torch Run Conference, Tampa
World Games Bid Committee 1992
Plainville ARC Panthers Basketball & Track Team
Emcee, Salute to Sponsors dinner at SOI 1993 Leadership Conference 25th Anniversary Celebration, FL
First athlete to keynote at Sports Celebrity Festival for Canada Special Olympics Toronto, Ontario, Canada (1993)
Emcee, Opening Banquet for 1994 SOI Leadership conference, New Haven, CT
World Games Speakers Bureau (1994-1995)
World Games Speakers Bureau Advisory Committee (1994-1995)
News Reporter for Hartford TV station covering World Games (1995)
SOI Spirit of Special Olympics Award (1995)
Reporter, World Winter Games Toronto (1997)
Pathfinders Toastmasters, Casper, Wyoming (1997 to 1998)
Employed at Oak Hill Hospital for 18 years (1998)
Member of 30th Anniversary Inaugural Class of Sargent Shriver International Global Messengers (1998)
Invited to the White House to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Special Olympics with President and Mrs. Clinton (1998)
Co-hosted the Opening Ceremonies of the 1999 World Summer Games in North Carolina, along with Leslie Visser and Dan Jansen, broadcast on ABC television
Speaker at the World Games Family Reception 1999
Nature Coast Orators Toastmasters (1999 to present)
Co-hosted 1999 Opening and Closing Ceremonies of Indoor Games, Special Olympics Florida (SOFL)
Inducted into SOCT Hall of Fame in 1999
First athlete appointed to the Special Olympics Florida Program Advisory Committee (1999-2007)

Hosted three Special Olympics Florida televised programs, all broadcast to more than 6 million cable households on Florida's Sun Sports network, 2000
Master of Ceremonies for unveiling of Special Olympics USPS stamp, 2000
Emcee, Opening Ceremonies Summer Games 2000 and 2002, Special Olympics Florida SOFL State Conference Committee (2000-2010)
Emcee, Breakfast of Champions, 2003
Emcee, First Annual Special Olympics Florida Gala in 2003 and co-emcee for four additional Galas in 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2009
Inducted into Special Olympics Florida Hall of Fame (2004)
Attended 4 Special Olympics Florida Athlete Congresses (2006, 2007, 2008, 2013)
Certified as Special Olympics Bocce Coach (2009)
SOFL State wide public relations committee (2000- 2007)
Special Olympics Hernando County Input Council, first chairperson (2009 to present)
Became a Trainer for Special Olympics Athlete Leadership Global Messenger Course
Inspirational speaker for dedication ceremony of Special Olympics Florida's first building (2011)
Elected the first Chair of the Special Olympics Florida State Athlete Input Council (2013-2015)
Keynote Speaker, 2013 International Law Enforcement Torch Run Conference
Facilitator for Healthy Athletes Healthy Habits, Sun Safety (2015)
Winner of many Gold, Silver and Bronze medals in 3 different states and international competition which included: basketball, softball, long jump, 50 meter run, 400, 800, 1500 meter walk, and relays, bowling, horseshoes, bocce, aquatics- breaststroke, freestyle, relay; cross country skiing, 500 & 1000 meters.

Additional Volunteer Activities:

Eucharistic Minister, St Francis Xavier Cabrini Catholic Church, Spring Hill, FL
Brought Communion on his day off to patients at Oak Hill Hospital as a Eucharistic Minister
International Toastmaster