Panos Vazaios:

You are listening to Inclusion Revolution Radio. I'm your podcast host, Novie Craven. I am a Special Olympics DC athlete and a Special Olympics International employee.

On this podcast, I interview athletes, partners, ambassadors, employees and supporters of Special Olympics. This podcast is for anyone and everyone who's interested in Special Olympics and the work that we do. New episodes premiere every other Friday at 10:00 AM Eastern Standard Time anywhere you get your podcasts.

This episode is brought to you by Stavros Niarchos Foundation and is supported by Lions Clubs International Foundation. Since 2018, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation has supported Special Olympics to transform lives through inclusive programs in schools and communities around the world. As part of its commitment to continue inclusive development, the foundation launched a global campaign for inclusion, creating a historic commitment to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

You're listening to the 5th Episode of Season 6 of the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. My name is Novie Craven. I'm your host for today's episode. Today, we'll be talking with Panos Vazaios, Program Officer at Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and Shawn Ferguson, Chief Global Government Relations Officer at Special Olympics International.

We are thrilled to have these two incredible individuals on our show to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion, which was launched last June at the 2023 Special Olympics World Games in Berlin. Welcome, Panos and Shawn to the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. We are so excited to have you here today.

Participants:

Thank you for having us.

Thank you.

Novie Craven:

Panelists, can you share all of the ways that Stavros Niarchos Foundation supports Special Olympics and what your role is within that partnership?

Panos Vazaios:

Well, our partnership with Special Olympics International started back in 2018. We wanted to expand the reach and impact of inclusive education through Special Olympics programming. So, we supported the Play Unified: Learn Unified platform, which, as you already know, creates settings like Unified schools, sports clubs and community centers, where sports bring people together, beyond the playing field.

The aim of the grant was to reach thousands of students in 14 countries around the world, and we have seen the impact with many students reporting many positive experiences. We have also seen the effects up close here in Greece, where we've also supported Special Olympics Hellas in expanding their programming to 21 cities across the country. So, we do believe that young people can lead the way in fostering change across society and bridging generational divides.

So, after three years of collaboration, we have extended our partnership with Special Olympics International to also support the creation of the Leadership Network and the Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion.

Novie Craven:

Shawn, I'd love to hear more about your role with Special Olympics and how you were introduced in the organization.

Shawn Ferguson:

Great. Thank you, Novie. Very first, quickly, I'd like to say, though, hello to Panos. It's so great to see you again. And a huge thanks yet again to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for their support since, as Panos said, 2018 and their renewed commitment through the Play Unified: Live Unified platform, and specifically the Special Olympics Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion, which I have been working on for the last few years.

This is just really another demonstration of the legacy of Stavros Niarchos and his family, their care for the development of this world and for making it a better place, a more inclusive place. And so, I just want to say thank you to Panos, the whole organization and the Stavros Niarchos family for their support of what we're doing.

I currently serve as the Chief of Global Government Relations for Special Olympics International. And, as a part of that, I will be now leading and overseeing our work on the Special Olympics Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion, which is really revolutionary in the history of Special Olympics.

To me, this is truly the beginning of an actual global international government relations program. And it wouldn't be possible without the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. We've looked at it for a number of years, and we've done work with governments here and there, kind of piecemeal, but the vision of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and their support has allowed us to really get out there and really make progress with governments outside of the United States.

We're a very well-known U.S. nonprofit. But outside of the United States, we aren't always that well-known. And so, it takes the support of an organization like the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for us to get the word out and to have the credibility to go to governments and to be able to ask for their support. So, thank you so much for that.

I came to Special Olympics, now almost nine... over nine years ago, I should say. And I had worked in the U.S. government, I worked in the United States Senate and the US House of Representatives, I worked for a professional football team here in Washington. And I had decided that I was interested in moving into a different field. And I saw that Special Olympics was needing some assistance. I first started working for our Chairman, Timothy Shriver, as his Chief of Staff for a number of years.

One of the biggest reasons that I was interested in Special Olympics is that my family has a history of supporting people with disabilities. Both my mother, and her sister, and their mother all took care of people with disabilities throughout all of my life growing up. In fact, my mother just retired from doing that just a short time ago. And, so I was, as a kid, around other children and adults with disabilities. So, I was used to being around people that were different than me.

And knowing the mission of Special Olympics to bring about inclusion for all, I thought, "This seems like the right fit for me." And also, to honor those three women in my life that were so very important to me for all of their work, doing really, really hard work, taking care of people that often were profoundly disabled, is a way to show my respect for them and to be part of something bigger that can bring true inclusion for all.

Novie Craven:

So I'm sitting here in awe, definitely. I'm just amazed how that was put. Well said.

Shawn Ferguson:

Thank you. Thank you.

Novie Craven:

Panos, can you explain the main goals of the Special Olympics Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion and how SNF funding contributes to the objective?

Panos Vazaios:

First of all, it is an honor for all of us here at the SNF to be a part of this family. So, thank you, Shawn. Thank you, Novie. Thank you. Thanks to all the team behind Special Olympics International.

Well, the coalition is basically a multilateral effort engaging national governments to domestically finance the expansion of Special Olympics programming, the expansion of Special Olympics Unified Schools and Unified Sports platform. The aim is to integrate this work into government policy, aligning, of course, with the core tenets of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And, in addition, the Coalition provides the strong platform to contribute achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which is basically supporting this marginalized population.

Novie Craven:

Shawn, what is the Play Unified platform and how are you driving worldwide engagement?

Shawn Ferguson:

I think that the Play Unified platform is really the embodiment of Mrs. Shriver's vision when she started Camp Shriver in 1962, and then in 1968 when Special Olympics had our first World Games in Chicago. Play Unified: Live Unified is really what she wanted to see in this world. As you will hear her children, Tim, and Maria, and Mark, and others speak about her and her family experience, being so upset that her sister who had an intellectual disability was just left behind. There was nothing for her.

And I think that through this platform that originated with her, that her son, Tim Shriver, has so masterfully built over his last 25-plus years as chairman, we're really seeing what her vision was and what Tim's vision is coming to life through this platform. And I've got to say, without the support of Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Panos, and his colleagues, we wouldn't be where we're at today without that.

And I've been, like I said, with Special Olympics for nine-plus years. Our growth outside of the United States, building this platform and gaining real traction with governments, has never been like this before. This is something where we're seeing exponential growth. We're Special Olympics. We always want to grow bigger and faster all the time and we're doing the best we can. But we're making real progress and we're going to get there.

We have lofty goals. I think that that aligns Special Olympics with the Stavros Niarchos Foundation very well. They have lofty goals in a number of areas. And we're going to get there. And our partnership is really, truly making Mrs. Shriver and Tim Shriver's vision come to life across the globe.

Novie Craven:

Panelists, as we are now at the one-year anniversary of the Coalition, what has been accomplished so far and what does the Coalition hope to accomplish during this next year?

Panos Vazaios:

We had the pleasure of witnessing the launch of the Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion at the 2023 Special Olympics World Games in Berlin a year ago. So, together with then Greek Foreign Minister, Vassilis Kaskarelis, who was there representing the foundation, we were proud to see more than a dozen nations commit to the coalition's vision. These nations included Jamaica, Malta, Gibraltar, Iceland, I've written them down, Montenegro, Kenya, China, Mongolia, UAE, of course, Egypt, Panama, Seychelles, Ghana, and South Africa.

So, since 2023, we are proud to say that the Coalition has only expanded since then and more countries have joined. And we are excited to learn that the Coalition also is on track to engage some two million new youth participants of all abilities. So, the Coalition is, and continues to grow and thrive, and this sounds like a very promising start.

So, we just hope that this is the beginning of the advancement of inclusive new policies in sports, in education around the world. The scale is massive, but we know that Special Olympics never loses sight of the individual human connections and experience that are at the core of its work.

Novie Craven:

Panelists, what motivated SNF to support the Coalition?

Panos Vazaios:

So, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation supports organizations that make a key difference in the world around them. We collaborate with organizations that demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency and innovation. And we are proud to serve as global partners of the Special Olympics movement, of this movement.

So, through programs, such as Play Unified: Learn Unified, and of course the Coalition for Inclusion, Special Olympics is helping to impact the lives of not only Special Olympics' athletes, but individuals with or without intellectual disabilities regardless of age, ethnicity, financial status or disability. So, this is the motivation for us.

Novie Craven:

Shawn, how does Special Olympics coordinate with other key global and civic stakeholders, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization within the Coalition?

Shawn Ferguson:

Thanks, Novie. Yes. We're very proud that we are, not only with our main partner, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, SNF, we are also working with a number of other entities, multilaterals. With UNFPA, we're very active in the Balkans, supporting gender equity through inclusive sport. UNHCR is working with Special Olympics to integrate refugees, refugee youth, both with and without intellectual disabilities, in refugee camps and refugee centers. This is something I'm particularly proud of that David Evangelista, the head of our Europe Eurasia Region has led.

You think of persons with intellectual disabilities, you're often left out, left behind. There's a lot of challenges. To have that challenge on top of them being refugee, being forced out of your home or have to flee, I just think it's so amazing that, through the Stavros Niarchos Foundation support, we've been able to work with UNHCR to really engage these youth that are away from their homes, in a foreign land, often scared, without anything, to play sport, to interact with each other. I mean, I think of times when I'm not feeling quite great, to play sports with my friends is what can help a lot. Imagine the uplift that that would be for youth that are refugees.

Lions Clubs International Foundation is supporting our work. They've been a longtime supporter, largely in our health area. But they too have joined up and are augmenting the Stavros Niarchos Foundation support of our work on the Global Coalition. We also have H&M Move and Foundation Botnar, private sector supporters that have also added their support to our work.

So, we're really growing our support, not just with governments, but also outside with UN agencies. Again, David Evangelista from Europe Eurasia, along with Ambassador Luis Gallegos, a former board member of ours, just met with the Secretary General of the United Nations and presented to him about the Global Coalition. And again, without the support of Stavros Niarchos Foundation, that's something we wouldn't be able to do. This gives us a credibility to be able to sit in front of the Secretary General of the United Nations and say, "This is what we're doing, and we want your support and your help in building out. Partner up with SNF and Special Olympics and help us move the ball forward even further."

So, yeah, we're really proud of the advances we're making in that area as well.

Novie Craven:

Panos, what long-term impact does SNF hope to see as a result of its support with the Coalition?

Panos Vazaios:

The Global Leadership Coalition for Inclusion will sustain high-level national and regional government engagement, we know that, to expand the impact and reach of Special Olympics inclusive programming. We are proud to be part of this initiative and to support Special Olympics in taking it to the next level. We all at the foundation, we are strong believers in public, private partnerships and collaborations across civil society to promote the common good.

We are delighted to see Special Olympics expand the programming, Play Unified: Learn Unified platforms, and initiate to an even wider, global audience by launching the Coalition for Inclusion. And we proudly support this effort, which brings together key actors, stakeholders, particularly national governments, into the fold.

So, the last systemic change must come, as Special Olympics believes, from within. And that is an issue that requires urgent action.

Novie Craven:

Shawn, what are the benefits of having a diverse group of members, including governments, corporations and the civil society in the Coalition?

Shawn Ferguson:

Thanks, Novie. As Panos said, systemic change, this is something that is a vision of both the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and Special Olympics, systemic change. And their support that's allowing us to get in front of governments, and work with governments, our local programs all across the globe, forming partnerships with them is really, I think, moving us in the direction of systemic change. Obviously, we're focused on our Play Unified: Live Unified education-focused work. But I really, truly believe that this has an opportunity to spread beyond that and really, truly grow society as a whole into a more inclusive and welcoming thing.

And so, when you have this diversity of supporters coming together, I think you're seeing it happen. That diversity is moving us towards systemic change. People will sometimes think, "Special Olympics, you're just a sports organization." No, no, it is. We are rooted in sport. We're very proud of that and that is our focus today. But the vision of Mrs. Shriver, way back from 1962, was that people coming together, and interacting with each other, and seeing that difference is okay. Difference is okay. We're all different, but it's no reason to exclude anyone.

I think that when you see a government supporting our work, Stavros Niarchos Foundation supporting our work, it gives us the credibility and it gets people thinking, "Oh, you know what? We're seeing inclusion there. It works and it's good. It's a good thing." And so, I think that the variety of supporters, the private, the philanthropic groups, the UN agencies, and the others, I think are really bringing us closer to where we're starting to move the needle on systemic change.

Novie Craven:

Panos and Shawn, what does inclusion mean to you?

Panos Vazaios:

That's a very nice question. So, inclusion means creating a safe environment where everyone feels included and provided with the support they need to try to the best of their ability without certain limitations being a restrictive factor. Special Olympics always reminds us at SNF that, while making a change in our communities is serious business, it can also be joyful. It can be fun. So, in a divided era, this approach demonstrates the determination to focus on what unite us rather than what sets us apart. So, at its core, it embodies a beautiful simple idea that a world where all people are included is a better, more fulfilling place for everyone.

Shawn Ferguson:

Beautiful answer, Panos. It's a tough to follow you, and maybe I should have gone first. I would say, I think every one of us, no matter who we are, we've felt excluded at some point in our life. And then, I think of when it's happened to me, I'm sure for Panos and Novie, obviously we've all felt it. But then you think of people that have been just excluded across the board because of their intellectual disability or their differences. And it's something that I think is an urgent... It's an urgent thing that we address and that...

Inclusion will come about, as Panos so beautifully said, when people see that differences are dividing us and they don't need to be. We're all more alike than we're different no matter where we live. And I've been blessed to be able to travel to quite a few different nations as part of the work on the Coalition and other things. The thing that I'm always struck by is people are very similar, whether you're in Africa, Asia, the United States, Greece. No matter your religion, your ethnicity, people want to feel safe. They want to have security in a home and a job and they want their families to be well.

And this is something that I think our partnership, I hope and pray, we're going to be able to do together through our advancement of the Play Unified: Live Unified platform with the Global Coalition and also the Stavros Niarchos Foundation is supporting our thought leadership work, also that our Global Youth Engagement program department has been leading. All of these things, getting credibility with governments, our thought leadership events where our chairman or athletes like you, Novie, are speaking in front of these very prestigious groups, like the Brookings Institution, changes mindsets. And it makes people think, "We aren't all that different."

And this division, that I think the world is starving to break the division, that we see it here in the United States, we see it amongst nations and whatnot. I think people can see the example that Special Olympics athletes are showing that inclusion is really the better way to go. And I think that inclusion is something that we'll see grow, this partnership is going to help it grow, and it's urgent.

We're moving as fast as we can, but we need to always do more and move faster. I think that would be Mrs. Shriver's message to us if she were here. This is great, but you got more to do. And we do. But we've made a lot of strides because of the Niarchos Foundation and we're going to do more. We're going to do great things. And I think the cause of inclusion is going to be advanced significantly because of our work together.

Novie Craven:

Thank you, Panos and Shawn, for joining today's episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. Your steadfast leadership in fostering global relationships, and the connection that will benefit individuals with intellectual disabilities for years to come, is truly remarkable. I'm honored to have you both on the show today, and I hope we continue to chip in this important cause. I cannot thank you both enough for sitting down and talking to me about this Coalition. It means a whole lot to me, but also definitely means a whole lot to other athletes. So, thank you so much and we'll continue this all together.

Shawn Ferguson:

Thank you, Novie.

Panos Vazaios:

Thank you, Novie.

Shawn Ferguson:

And thank you, Panos.

Panos Vazaios:

Thank you, Shawn.

Novie Craven:

Thank you for listening to Inclusion Revolution Radio. Don't forget to subscribe. Tune in again in two weeks for a new episode.