Novie Craven:

You are listening to Inclusion Revolution Radio. I'm your podcast host, Novie Craven. I am a Special Olympics D.C. 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 is interested in Special Olympics and the work that we do. New episodes premiere every other Friday at 10 a.m. Eastern Standard Time anywhere you get your podcasts.

You're listening to the ninth episode of season six of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. My name is Novie Craven. I'm your host for today's episode. Today, we'll be talking with Gerald MBalle and Rebecca Daou.

Gerald, a resettled refugee from Cameroon was introduced to Special Olympics in 2015. He now works in Italy as the first Special Olympics Unified with Refugees Advisor, developing the inclusive sports project and advocating for refugees and people with intellectual disabilities globally.

Rebecca is an executive administrator at the Lions International Foundation and has been with the foundation for over 20 years. She has served the foundation in various roles, including SightFirst coordinator for Africa and Middle East, division manager, and now administrative officer.

Under Rebecca's leadership, the Lions International Foundation has been a vital partner to Special Olympics since 2021. The foundation has provided Special Olympics athletes with range of services and support, including vision care, health, inclusive sports and community programs.

The “Mission: Inclusion” partnership has empowered Lions and Leos to volunteer at events worldwide, including the Opening Eyes program, which offers eye health screening in over 80 countries. The collaboration has grown into one of the most impactful global services platforms, benefiting athletes with intellectual disabilities with their families and communities from Middle East and Malaysia and beyond.

Welcome Gerald and Rebecca to the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. We are so excited to have you here today.

Gerald, can you share some more about your personal background and how it led you to advocate for refugees and individuals with intellectual disabilities?

Gerald Mballe:

Absolutely, yes, Novie, and thank you for having me. And yeah, I'm Gerald Mballe, and I am presently based in Italy. I'm passionate about sports, particularly football. And I love dancing and fashion in my free time. I was born and raised in Cameroon, a place that has deeply influenced who I am today. And I used to be a happy kid, attending school. I would love to play football around the village in my free time and helping my family and relatives in commercial activities.

And however, at a certain point in time, everything collapsed on violence and security, brutal bloodshed became part of my daily life. And since then, I have a similar story to millions of individuals out there displaced, escaping from horrific violence and climate change devastation and even more trying to create themselves a new life. I was trafficked at the very young age across Sahel through the Sahara Desert in Libya, surviving long nights on a dinghy in the middle of Mediterranean. Then ultimately settling in Italy as a refugee.

And I remember by then, like most refugee youths, I was scared and vulnerable, new languages, new cultures, new rule, weren't making things easy for me. And back then, I was provided with a guide to help me navigate the city. And he knew very much well that I loved football. So he decided to invite me to a local practice with a team, which I immediately accepted. I accepted an invitation to train with the football team of the local athletes of the Special Olympics in Turin without even knowing.

The first time I arrived at the field, my first thought at the practice session was it was something totally new. It was an experience that I've never seen in my country. People with intellectual disabilities in social settings playing, maybe they were hidden away by their families, but they accepted me and that was the beginning of my transformative journey.

So, I started playing Unified football both locally, nationally, as a Unified partner playing Unified football discipline. And little did I know that that endeavor will take me to the World Games in Abu Dhabi in 2019, representing Special Olympics Italy’s national Unified football team. And believe me, that was the most incredible thing I have ever witnessed.

Take a look at me today. I'm deeply committed in giving back through my involvement in Special Olympics today as the senior advisor of the Unified with Refugee program and trying to expand the reach of this program, trying to raise awareness about the impact of sport in the life of the most marginalized one.

And aside of that, I also serve on boards of organizations sharing the same commitment and serving the most marginalized demographics of this modern era. I'm a very proud recipient of numerous awards into the field of integrations with refugee through sport, and all these thanks to a community that welcomed me openhanded without taking into consideration my skin color, my religion, my ability. I am really deeply and very grateful and I owe a lot to the art of Special Olympics and that is how it started. And today I'm proudly part of this fantastic movement.

Novie Craven:

You could write a book about that. That definitely says a whole lot, because I'm just sitting here like, "Wow." So thank you so much for that.

Gerald Mballe:

Thank you, Novie. I'll try to write a book. I'll take that into consideration.

Novie Craven:

Rebecca, I'm interested in learning more about how the partnership between Lions International and Special Olympics originated and with your role within it.

Rebecca Daou:

Sure. Well first of all, thank you so much, Novie, for hosting and for this invitation to participate today. I'm really excited. So, Lions Clubs International Foundation, we have a really long history of supporting initiatives to help those that are most vulnerable. Lions was founded on that premise over 100 years ago and our foundation started over 50 years ago.

I think we're very well known worldwide for our work with the visually impaired, preventing avoidable blindness. And that's kind of how things started back in 2001, or even before that, there was a Lion member, Dr. Paul Berman, in New Jersey who was a Lion and volunteered, and then also worked with Special Olympics, and had the idea as well as some others of, "Why don't we marry this? And I'm working for these two organizations." Similarly, that was also happening in places like Hong Kong with one of our past international presidents that a lot of Lions members were already working as volunteers at different Special Olympics events.

And so then in 2001, we started formal partnership. It was really focused mostly on the Opening Eyes program at that time, providing the vision screenings to athletes. And then the partnership just grew from there and has continued to grow as we all know. We definitely do all sorts of health screening activities.

But in terms of my role, when the partnership first started in 2001, I wasn't as actively involved in managing that particular grant or partnership. But as my role has kind of changed in the foundation, I became more involved and really have had the opportunity to attend some World Games. We have every year at our convention, this past year it was in Melbourne, and there was Zumba dancing and table tennis. We've done bocce ball.

Novie Craven:

Maybe we can get together, all three of us can get together and play it. Definitely, that'd great.

Rebecca Daou:

That would be fun. Yeah, definitely.

Novie Craven:

Gerald, how is your experience with inclusion in Italy different from your experience with the inclusion in your home country of Cameroon?

Gerald Mballe:

Inclusion over here in Italy, in my host country, is definitely more organized than the one that I witnessed when I was back home. And the word inclusion itself became a wake-up call to me, because of the fact that it is a well-established concept and present in almost all aspects, like in education, school, and workplace, and even in media. Everything over here overseas is well-structured, more opportunities for inclusive values, giving you a strong sense of belonging into different communities and different groups. And different types of trainings to promote understanding, acceptance, public awareness campaigns, good and advanced infrastructure to support inclusive practice, facility of movement to access training locations, public transportation are well organized.

It is also very well digitalized. We have witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic digital platform promoting sport to people everywhere, people who are keeping fit and active connecting through the use of social media.

Totally different from my experience back home, as I have said. Now I have a clear and a good vision and a good understanding that when I was home, even though I used to enjoy sport in general with different groups of people in different teams, however, there was still a backward gender role or attitude towards disability in specific that influenced the way on how inclusion was perceived. There was definitely a limited infrastructure capability to contain good activities, limited access to inclusive practices, most particularly in remote and underserved areas.

And for example, people with intellectual disabilities are still facing challenges in access in sports, education, and employment due to lack of accessibility and facilities or maybe sustained activities. This is due to several reasons, mainly economical inequalities, which was and is still a significant area to proper inclusion in many developing countries. Poverty is still barrier and also the influence of traditional belief in certain conditions.

So yeah, it was really, really different. I had opportunity to benefit of a well-structured, well-organized access to sport initiatives over here overseas than the one that I had back home in my country. And now I see much more things developing. We have Special Olympics in Cameroon trying their best to raise awareness about the inclusion, the social integration, and giving opportunities to people with intellectual disabilities and without for them to thrive and to see their talents and their abilities.

Novie Craven:

Definitely. Well said. Gerald, tell me more about the Unified with Refugees program and why it's so important for the Special Olympics movement.

Gerald Mballe:

Yeah, so the Unified with Refugees program is an inclusive sport platform that engages both Special Olympics athletes with their refugee peers of all ability, namely youth. It is a platform that true inclusive sport intends to support the millions of individuals out there on the move right now looking to create themselves a new life, some of them with developmental disabilities and some of them without.

So, it is just like an invitation from the athletes of Special Olympics inviting another marginalized group to come and team up together and engage in Unified Sports activities. And we currently have active programming across Europe, Asia, Africa. I personally consider it like a movement that really goes beyond sport. So, it is important for Special Olympics who was already globally advocating by promoting values like social inclusion, unified protection, helping people to access the rights to provide an invitation to this demographic with intellectual differences to play and enjoy the benefit that comes with the practice of sport.

At the end of the day, both disability inclusion and refugee inclusion are all anchored in the human right framework that emphasizes equality and non-discrimination. It's only when you come closer now you realize the impact and just as it did in my case, from a shy asylum seeker dying in his own desperation in an emergency refugee center to becoming the senior advisor of Special Olympics Unified with Refugees program. So it's important that many refugees of all abilities benefit from this just as it was in my case.

Novie Craven:

Well said. Rebecca, what has been one of your favorite experience in working with Special Olympics?

Rebecca Daou:

A couple things. One, Gerald, you just said, and I made a note, because I thought, "Yeah, that's right. I think that too." It's also about the journey of your own self-discovery.

Another thing you mentioned is the global opportunities, and both from an organizational perspective, both for Special Olympics and Lions International, those two organizations, us coming together and really focusing, initially, on one small aspect of health, vision health, and then how it's just grown. And the opportunities that we've given each other as organizations and the people who are in our organizations to work together to really try to make change throughout the world, whatever that is. And the fact that those are global movements and you can see those results.

So I think even though that might not be defined as an experience, maybe more bigger picture results driven, that is something that probably 20 years ago I don't know or would've thought would be something that I would answer to this question.

Novie Craven:

Gerald, can you share a successful story of one of your closest rapports that you developed?

Gerald Mballe:

There are a lot, Novie. And the story that comes to my mind right now is a story of Sasha. Sasha and his mother fled Ukraine to escape war. Sasha, who has autism and struggling with communication, experienced positive transformation after joining our national program in Slovakia in the Dream Day Activity Center run by Eva that I'm going to give shout out here for great work she is doing.

During the Ukraine invasion we implemented a series of events. And in one of our events, we welcomed Sasha. And the participation of Sasha to inclusive physical activities significantly helped his development and helped Sasha thrive, improving his discipline, his listening skills, and his love to be part of a team. And this activity also led to his mother finding a new job. Practicing Unified Sports was like a possibility for both to have the opportunity to create a new life for themselves.

And like Sasha, there is Ali and there are many others that just like me getting involved with the Special Olympics have new hope and giving opportunities to settle and be part of a larger community that promotes acceptance, as I earlier said.

In fact, over the past years, we have been implementing events that has impacted over 10,000 refugees, including youths with and without intellectual disabilities. People fleeing from Ukraine were impacted by our program that we organized in reception centers and community centers across Europe in collaboration with UN refugee agency reception centers, professional schools, and municipalities across Europe.

And I would like to highlight the fact that all these events that we have implemented over the past year will have not been possible without the long-term global generous and financial support of the Lions Clubs International.

So, Rebecca, I won't miss this opportunity to express gratitude, and thank you, all, what you're doing for people who need it the most. And thank you for making both financial, physical by mobilizing your volunteers to our events around the globe. It really means a lot to us. And, Rebecca, take this like an indirect request to be part of the Lions family.

Rebecca Daou:

Thank you.

Novie Craven:

Rebecca, how does Lions International provide global support to refugees and why are their services more critical than ever before?

Rebecca Daou:

Sure. Well, I think one great way, which Gerald just articulated beautifully was how we work together with Special Olympics in this field. We have 1.4 million members throughout the world who are members of clubs, and those clubs can decide what they want to do. So, in many areas where there are refugees, those clubs on their own have done a lot of different activities, and those can kind of range everything from providing food or certain clubs run medical clinics and everyone is welcome there. Integrated language classes, we have a social and emotional learning program called Lions Quest that's been adapted in different areas for refugees as well. So, it really is a lot of different activities throughout the world.

And I think in terms of more critical now than ever is just because of what we're seeing, Gerald's already talked about many of the reasons that people are forced to leave their home, whether it be war, whether it be natural disasters. And so our motto is we serve and we commit to helping people where and when they need us. Regardless of what's going on or how they got there, we really want to meet those needs. And so just in general, our organization is committed to helping those in the most vulnerable situations. And so refugees, obviously, are part of that.

Novie Craven:

Gerald, in what way do you think Special Olympics programs can further support refugees youth worldwide?

Gerald Mballe:

That's a good question, Novie. I think Special Olympics is massively doing a lot already around the globe. I strongly believe another way in which Special Olympics can raise for the support of refugees by using this very massive global platform to continue to raise awareness about the challenges faced by refugees with intellectual differences, and when it comes to inclusion and the positive impact of sport. And mobilize maybe its massive platform to support and provide resources to reach out to programs everywhere around the globe, to facilitate the participation of volunteers from other organizations into our events around the globe. Also train refugees and local community members to become coaches and leaders, empowering them to sustain and expand their knowledge into providing and implementing Unified Sport programs within their communities.

And I believe we can also work with governments and international organizations just like we are already doing with the Lions Clubs International in Milano to advocate for policies that recognize the world of sport in improving physical and mental well-being, and also fostering social inclusion and social integration of people on the margin. Thank you, Novie.

Novie Craven:

Rebecca, how do you see the impact of Lions International with Special Olympics partnership growing in the years to come?

Rebecca Daou:

We've done so much, but there's always opportunity to do more. Even the little bit of time we've had today, we've talked about some situations where there's programs that are starting maybe in places where there was never a program, but that might just be in the capital city or in certain larger cities. And there's these other vast areas that we haven't reached.

We talked also about how we've just grown from doing vision screenings to Mission: Inclusion. My friend David Evangelista always liked to say the first service club to welcome Special Olympic athletes and their families as members of our organization. That's very important. So I think there's so much potential on a wide variety of fronts. Some of the stuff that we've done in schools through Unified Sports, our Leos members who are always very active, in particular in our convention with Special Olympics and out in field.

So the more that we can grow those programs globally and really make sure that, yeah, there might be a presence in country X, but what does that presence look like? Can we make it so that anyone who wants or needs the opportunity has the opportunity to participate? So that's what I'd personally like to see. And I think that just engages our athletes, engages families, our Lions Clubs volunteers, Special Olympics volunteers. The more opportunity that everybody has to unite and work together the better.

Novie Craven:

Gerald, what does inclusion mean to you?

Gerald Mballe:

I've always considered inclusion to be a craft of becoming a better human being by accepting differences regardless of ability, religion, background and identity, creating an environment where everyone can feel respected, valued and being able to participate fully into the society. That is how I see it. Inclusion is taking the bold steps to better connect with our fellow humans, and it's an essential component in a world full of hate and discrimination as we are living now. I believe inclusion is the only element that really challenges us to reconsider and to redefine ourselves in the world we live in.

And yeah, this is a quotation from David Evangelista, by the way, and that I will read here, the brain behind the Unified with Refugees program. So it is a process that will require continuous effort and commitment from everyone, creating a society where everyone can thrive. In my case, when life gives you nothing but pain, dislocation, and the need to run for your life, fear, hatred and exclusion, the only way, and the only words that I can use to define this terms are those both.

Rebecca Daou:

Probably everyone has some sort of a memory or a current experience where they just feel loved. Whether it's walking into your door after a long trip, whether it was a hug from grandma or your mom, or whatever it might be. I think most humans would have something that they could identify as kind of like, "Gosh, I feel love. My heart's full. I'm content. I'm happy at this moment." And I think inclusion is, you always feel that. You walk into a room and you immediately feel that from the people in the room, and you want everybody to feel that. So that's of what I was thinking about. How would I, from a very of emotional feeling perspective, define inclusion and what it means to me.

Novie Craven:

Amazing answer. Thank you Gerald and Rebecca for joining today's episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. Your work shines a light on the continued need for global support of our most vulnerable communities. I'm inspired by your friendliest dedication to the movement. Thank you so much, both of you. I cannot thank you enough for sitting down with me and talking about how the Lions International Foundation has been a big part of Special Olympics. Thank you so much.

Rebecca Daou:

Thank you, Novie.

Gerald Mballe:

Thank you, Novie. Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Rebecca Daou:

Yes, for sure. Great experience. Thank you.

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.