



Dear friends:

I hear frequently that most people have no idea how important and global the Special Olympics movement has become. For many, we're still just a nice track meet every once in a while for a small group of people with special needs.

They just couldn't be more wrong!

We've just tallied our numbers from the end of 2006, and our amazing growth is continuing: we're now a movement of more than 2.5 million athletes! Last year alone, there were over 21,000 Special Olympics competitions in more than 165 countries around the world! And our health, family support, education and advocacy work—all centered on the catalytic power of sport—are increasing everywhere. All this is because we have come to trust our athletes. They're not a "cause." They're the leaders of the world's largest movement of acceptance and dignity.

Sometimes, I think of Special Olympics as the world's most important classroom where our athletes are the teachers. Consider some of the lessons of recent months:

- In Kansas, USA, more than 1,000 national high school student leaders ran a daylong Special Olympics competition and, at the same time, held a

Special Olympics Youth Summit. When Leonard Flowers, a star of *The Ringer*, led them all in a massive "towel dance," he taught that enthusiasm and fun can be a means to a new understanding of everyone's gifts. And believe me, Leonard is gifted!

- In Owerri, Nigeria, when Lions Clubs District Governor Chief Chugani organized a local Medfest®, the athletes arrived by the hundreds to play and to get the care they deserved. The athletes taught the health-care volunteers how vitally important this work is.
- And in Manila, the Philippines, Anton Silos practices his bowling three times per week as he prepares for World Games competition. When I arrived to be a fan of Special Olympics athletes there and in Singapore and Indonesia, I met him at the Lanes where he casually bowled a 238 (I cannot mention how bad my score was!!). Anton taught everyone there never to underestimate the value of practice and dedication in pursuit of a goal. And never underestimate the athletes of Special Olympics!

We've still got a big challenge: to educate millions, dare I say billions, of people around the world to the power of our movement; to invite them to become athletes and Unified Sports® partners, coaches, volunteers and fans; to create thousands more local competitions so that every person in our movement has a chance to win; to challenge the world to think and feel differently about difference. It's a big challenge and might seem overwhelming at times.

But it isn't overwhelming if we remember the example of athletes like Thomas Gathu (page 17). He is a talented athlete and a coach. Gathu is coaching Special Olympics Kenya athletes in preparation for the 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games. He's a teacher worth listening to and an inspiration worth following. He's one of the millions of reasons why it's easy to say: Be a fan of Special Olympics!

Chairman, Special Olympics