



## Special Olympics is a Catalyst for Change

*Timothy Shriver, Chairman*

**A**nyone who's ever been involved in a training program, a team or a field of competition knows that sports can change everything—from shaping the body to changing our attitudes and influencing our mindset. For decades, we've seen the effects firsthand at Special Olympics. As athletes have fun and develop physical fitness, they find acceptance, become confident and aspire to greatness in other aspects of their lives. As families cheer their loved ones, they experience more pride and support. As others get involved—becoming volunteers, coaches and donors—their actions change their lives and the lives of others in extraordinary ways.

For example, in Liechtenstein, Claudia Meile thought AthleteConnect would be a good way to change how her peers thought about people like her brother, Andreas—a Special Olympics athlete who was preparing for the 2006 European Youth Games. The informational meeting she organized at her school attracted some 200 students (ages 14-17), who listened to presentations by Special Olympics athletes, coaches and parents. Deeply moved by what they heard, the students signed on as Special Olympics volunteers and partners.

In El Salvador, Special Olympics Global Messenger Nino Durler was a leading advocate for his country's bid to host the first Latin America Regional Games. Addressing the national media and government officials, Durler confidently declared that the Games would “have a positive impact upon all of society in El Salvador and in Latin America.” Inspired, El Salvador's President Elias Antonio Saca González participated in a national strategy to develop Special Olympics Programs in all major communities across El Salvador, and to promote a change in attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities. And his wife, El Salvador's First Lady Ana Ligia Mixco Sol de Saca served as Chair of the Games. Also moved, Panama's First Lady Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos—a new Special Olympics International Board Member—launched a national campaign advocating programs of inclusion. And Dominican Republic's First Lady Margarita Cedeno de Fernandez is promoting a national public health program for all citizens.

In Spirit magazine, you read countless more chronicles of how Special Olympics athletes, families and volunteers are powerful catalysts for change in their communities and countries. (See “Fueling the Economy,” p.14, and “Crossing the Divide,” p. 28) From personal, social and professional change for athletes and families, to improved government policies applicable to sport, health, education or legal protection on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities, these examples prove a simple point: Special Olympics is a catalyst in creating change and a more accepting, compassionate world.

Let's continue to grow our movement, one athlete and one attitude at a time.