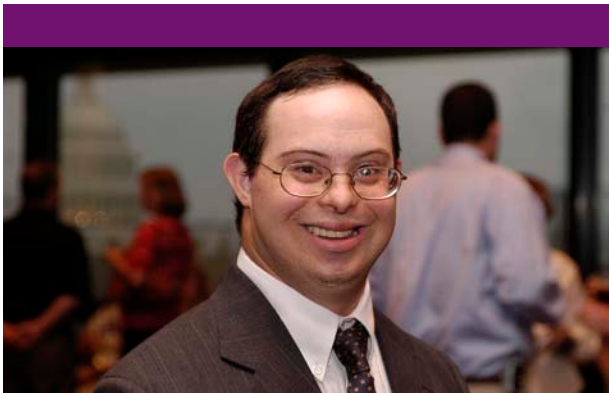


Life's Greatest Lessons

by Victoria Colette Reynolds

While learning about life from his mother, David Egan taught her life's greatest lessons



David Egan is a Special Olympics Virginia athlete and Global Messenger. (Photos: Courtesy of the Egan family)

Along with parenthood comes great opportunity to teach one's children. Instruction begins during the formative years and continues as they encounter various life lessons. But in the process of teaching and coaxing one's offspring to be the best they can be, parents learn important lessons from their own children.

As the mother of a child born with Down syndrome, Kathleen Egan says she's learned life's greatest lessons from her son, David. That's a strong statement, considering Kathleen has a Ph.D. in educational psychology, and her husband, John, is a physicist.

"David taught me to value people as they are. He taught me to see beyond social expectations—IQ, appearances, etc.—and he taught our family that although having high expectations is good, it is more important to give it one's best than being the best," she explains.

"We are a competitive family, but it is not about winning only, rather, about exploring new possibilities and extending oneself to new goals in life."

Kathleen says she's amazed by the goals that David, now 30, has set and accomplished for himself. David, who has won countless medals and awards, says Special Olympics is a great source of inspiration. "Special Olympics taught me to excel, to set a goal, to play on the team and to build confidence. It changed my life."

A Special Olympics athlete since elementary school, David has participated in soccer, basketball, ice skating, softball and swimming, with an expertise

in the 100-meter individual medley swimming race. As an eager advocate for people with disabilities, he is a Global Messenger for Special Olympics Virginia (USA) and through the years has served the movement in various leadership capacities, meriting copious awards and recognitions.

Since 1998, David has worked in the distribution center at the McLean Campus of at Booz Allen Hamilton, a global strategy and technology consulting firm. David attributes that success to lessons learned from his mentors in life.

"All through my journey, there were very special people: teachers, mentors and coaches who made a difference in my life. They helped me overcome obstacles and prepared me for success on the job," he says. "In my personal experience, every one of these individuals helped me gain confidence, build social skills, independence and pride in my work."

From Kathleen's perspective, her son is unstoppable in his endeavors to succeed because he sees himself as in charge of his attitude and his life.

David credits that to lessons he's learned in life. "It is with family, school and community that the ball got rolling," he says. "I must have learned then that I was in charge of my attitude, and that I am in charge of my life."



David at work in the distribution center of Booz Allen Hamilton (McLean Campus).

Kathleen says David demonstrates initiative and is not afraid to take risks or share his thoughts in public. “David has a sense of mission and feels it is his responsibility to make things happen,” she says.

In addition to his job and his involvement in Special Olympics, David serves on the Board of Directors of the Northern Virginia Down Syndrome Society. Last year, at the 9th World Down Syndrome Congress, held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, he gave a presentation about why employers should hire people with intellectual disabilities—and how to help them succeed on the job. He accompanied his presentation with a video entitled “LAUNCH: Successful careers for Adults with Down Syndrome,” produced by The National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) at Booz Allen Hamilton.

A self-advocate at the national level, David speaks at various fundraising events and has lobbied within the House and Senate to raise awareness, and to promote the image and contributions of people with intellectual disabilities. David also penned the foreword to *Simple Successes*, by Rachelle Zola.

Considered by many as a leader and an advocate for others with disabilities, David says his “platform” is based on the impetus of Special Olympics.

“Sometimes people with disabilities are made to feel they’re not important enough or that they can’t contribute in meaningful ways. But I experienced inclusion from day one!” David exclaims. “That made all the difference in my social skills and my ability to interact and express myself.”

Admittedly, his family’s competitive nature is also a driving force.

“Every parent has expectations of their child and in my family, when it comes to winning and losing, we’re very determined,” he laughs. “And maybe because I have a disability, I feel I have to prove myself a little more.”



David has competed in aquatics, basketball, football (soccer), ice skating and softball, but his specialty is the 100-meter individual medley.



The Egan family (from left) parents Kathleen and John, and siblings Miranda, Marc, Teresa and David.



(From left) David with Special Olympics Chairman Timothy Shriver and John Moreau, a member of the Special Olympics Virginia Board of Directors.

In David’s own words: “Down syndrome isn’t an obstacle.”

As a child, I used to ask my mother, “When will I get rid of this Down syndrome thing?” She would say, “It is something that stays with you all your life but it does not stop you from having dreams and being successful.”

My disability does not get in the way when I take the bus to work, when I sign my paycheck, when I train and compete in Special Olympics, and when I have fun with family and friends. The Down syndrome thing is not an obstacle when I learn and work. I think of all the things that I can do.

I enjoy being involved in the community as a leader and an advocate, taking away the stigma of intellectual disability and promoting awareness that we are capable, working people. We may have limitations but we are useful. We may have handicaps but we have abilities. We have a place in the workforce: we serve, we contribute, we are reliable, caring, consistent and predictable.

Those among us with Down syndrome can lead normal lives with the help and support of family and community. We are able to learn if taught with patience. We are able to succeed if given the right motivation and placed in an accepting environment that helps us thrive.

We give it our best. And we dare to dream.

Garth Brooks: The Good Guy in the Black Hat

by Donna Ham



Garth Brooks greets Special Olympics Oklahoma athlete Chris Kopecky. (Photo: Teresa Vance)

The first day of Special Olympics Oklahoma (USA) Summer Games is always a day filled with excitement and anticipation for everyone. However, the excitement level in the host city of Stillwater went beyond all expectations when legendary country music star Garth Brooks surprised everyone by walking onto the bocce field during competition.

John Seals, Special Olympics Oklahoma Area Services and Sports Director, met Brooks when their daughters played on the same football (soccer) team. Seals asked him to come see a Special Olympics event and Brooks took him up on the offer. “When Garth first arrived and walked toward the bocce event,” said Seals, “people would stop and turn, following him with their gazes. You could see them whispering. As we got nearer to the field, you could see they weren’t just guessing anymore, they were certain it was Garth and the crowds started forming. The athletes love Garth and were awestruck as he greeted them. Many coaches and parents later told me that meeting Garth was the highlight of the entire Summer Games for their athletes.”

Brooks signed autographs, shook hands, hugged, posed for photos and handed out awards for more

than five hours. “It seemed as if he just couldn’t say no to any athlete,” said Seals.

In an open letter to Brooks, Michelle Husband, parent of athlete Chris Kopecky, wrote, “My son, a junior, just returned from the Special Olympics event in Stillwater, which he has attended every year since he was in grade school. When he got off the bus he ran to me, waving in the air, not the silver medal he’d won, but the Special Olympics name card he wore around his neck. He was laughing and shouting, ‘Mom, Mom, just look at this ... look at what I got!’ I looked at the writing on the back of the card and could see the first part of the sentence: ‘Chris—Good show!’ But not having my glasses on, I couldn’t make out the rest. I asked Chris what it said, to which he replied, ‘Garth Brooks! And Mom, they took a picture of us and he was wearing his black hat and yellow boots!’”

Garth Brooks made an impression of a lifetime for hundreds of Special Olympics Oklahoma athletes. Who says good guys only wear white hats?