

## **Willowbrook INSPRA Distinguished Service Awards nomination**

It's an early Thursday morning at Willowbrook High School, and hundreds of students fill the gym, ready to greet a group of student-athletes who have qualified to compete at State. They hold up signs of "Congratulations!" and "Good luck!" as they erupt into a roar of cheers and applause while the athletes enter the room.

This might seem like a normal high school State sendoff celebration, but it was a very special day at Willowbrook. This was the scene when the school's Special Olympics Basketball Team qualified for State for the first time three years ago.

Willowbrook English teacher Tara Murphy has coached the Special Olympics Team for nine years and has been Head Coach for eight of those years. She said Willowbrook truly values blending special education and regular education students, but to see it in action firsthand was more than she ever could have imagined.

"To see those students embrace our Special Olympians and celebrate them the same way – if not more – they would any athlete was tremendous," Murphy said. "It showed the spirit of Willowbrook and the connection between the special education students and the regular education students."

And that connection starts each day in practice, when 12 regular education students volunteer as coaches for the Special Olympics Team, which consists of 23 students who participate in basketball, track and volleyball. It's those bonds that help build confidence and teamwork in the athletes, as well as leadership and mentor qualities in the student-coaches – skills that will help all of them succeed in life well beyond the walls of Willowbrook, Murphy said.

"We strive to make it a welcoming environment for everyone," Murphy said. "When you're part of the Special Olympics Team, you're family."

That's exactly how freshman Maria Gonzalez feels about being a member of the team.

"When I first came to Willowbrook, I was really shy and didn't have a lot of friends," Gonzalez said. "But because of Special Olympics, I got to meet a lot of new teachers and students. They're like your family more than just friends."

Murphy, along with Assistant Coach Tiffany Lamberty, focuses on communicating about the Special Olympics program with the community. They host an alumni game for former Special Olympians to return to Willowbrook, they've partnered with local restaurants to host fundraisers to support and promote Special Olympics and a community member donated the team's uniforms. The students also have been recognized through events such as being chosen to play at the United Center (where the Bulls play), attending a Bears training camp (where they were able to meet several of the players) and winning a Foot Locker shopping spree after Murphy nominated them for persevering through tough obstacles (they also got to participate in a Foot Locker-sponsored basketball game after that nomination).

But more important than those awards and special opportunities are the life experiences the students gain through working with the community. Lamberty said athletes on the track team are able to participate in an event hosted by Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA), where they are partnered with a "buddy" for the day. They also get the chance to compete in the Special Olympics Summer Games (State), the year's culminating event that takes place at Illinois State University. Last year, Isabella Iasillo (now a sophomore) attended the Summer Games with her teammates, and she said it was an opportunity of a lifetime she'll never forget.

“We stayed in the dorms and on campus, and I was able to experience what it would be like to stay at a college and to be a college student,” Iasillo said.

It’s those moments, Lamberty said, that form the core of Special Olympics.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Lamberty said. “These students deserve to have those types of opportunities and to be recognized – just like everyone else. That’s what Special Olympics is all about.”

Willowbrook Principal Dan Krause said the Special Olympics Team adds a wonderful aspect to the school’s athletic program.

“These students are tremendous athletes, and they truly exemplify what it means to be a Willowbrook Warrior,” Krause said. “We couldn’t be more proud of them.”