

EMILY HAS COMPETED ALL OVER THE WORLD

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lions handed out province-wide, Emily doesn't even have bragging rights in her own home. That's because her mom, Debbie, was also presented with a medallion award in the builder category, for "a person who exemplifies leadership, dedication, perseverance and impact as a leader within the Special Olympics movement."

Debbie Boycott was looking for sporting opportunities for Emily, who was already involved in swimming. Emily enjoyed music and dancing, and her mom thought gymnastics might be a good way to combine the two. However, there were no Special Olympics gymnastics programs available. Not letting that deter her, she started one, the Oakville Butterflies.

"I wanted her to have the chance to meet friends like our other kids did, and stay fit," Debbie said.

Rhythmic gymnastics soon took off as an official Special Olympics sport. The Oakville club spawned the Georgetown Sunflowers, where Emily now coaches, and a former Butterflies volunteer started a club in Newmarket.

Boycott, who has run workshops for fledgling clubs from the Maritimes to the Yukon, said other sports organizations play an important part in Special Olympics programs. The Butterflies received help from gym clubs in Oakville and Burlington to choreograph routines and lend their facility for practices.

"Curling is getting popular now (in Special Olympics), but curling couldn't exist without the curling clubs opening up to them," Boycott said. "They come on board, give them some ice time, then they start helping them. The whole club gets behind the team, and that's what you want. It's a step toward inclusiveness."

But it starts with someone taking that initial step to provide the opportunity for the athletes. Then you need the athletes to embrace those opportunities and take full advantage of them.

The Boycotts have done both.

"It has been an adventure I never would have predicted," Debbie said. "I would have never have thought there would have been so many amazing opportunities."

Emily has had the chance to compete in Shanghai, Athens, London and Los Angeles.

"I like the travel," says Emily, who has retired from rhythmic gymnastics but is now looking to qualify for nationals in swimming, "and I like being with my friends."

Emily isn't the only one who has benefited from her involvement with Special Olympics, though.

"We've met lifelong friends through Special Olympics," Debbie says.

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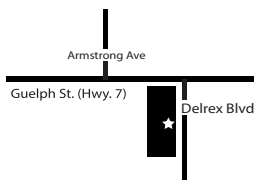
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