



Kenny Wittmann of St. Brigid's School dribbles down the court, closely monitored by his teammate Alyssa Lumanna of St. Catherine and her mentor partner, Michelle Seedhouse. The three were participating in the Halton Catholic District School Board's Hoops For All Special Olympics, hosted by St. Catherine of Alexandria for all of Halton's Catholic schools.

Photo by Ted Brown

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Hoops for All includes everyone in the fun

EAMONN MAHER
 Staff Writer

Not even the energetic Toronto Raptors' mascot could take the spotlight away from some enthusiastic young athletes at a basketball game in Georgetown last Thursday afternoon.

Eighty-six special-needs children from several Halton Catholic District School Board schools took part in the third-annual 'Hoops For All' Special Olympics game of hoops at St. Catherine of Alexandria School in Georgetown. Organizers kept score, but the real purpose of the contest was to make sure all athletes received equal playing time, which was quite a challenge considering the large number of players on each squad.

The game between The Halton Raptors and The Halton Raptor Busters, which always ends in a tie, was an opportunity for the students to have fun, be part of a team and demonstrate the board's philosophy of "inclusive education." Each Special Olympian was paired up with a mentor athlete— someone within a school who is recognized as a student leader— and they spent quality time together on and off the court.

As well as the benefit of physical exercise, the game serves as a confidence-builder for the Special Olympians and helps them gain acceptance amongst their classmates.

The gym erupted in cheers when St. Catherine of Alexandria's own Alyssa Lumanna wheeled out onto the court with her mentor, Michelle Seedhouse, pushing her chair.

"I'm leaving it all up to Michelle. She does the hard work. I just need to get the ball in the basket," said Alyssa, a Grade 7 student, who has cerebral palsy. "I have known Michelle since kindergarten and she's my best friend. We do cross-country running and play volleyball together also."

Alyssa's mother, Sandie, has noticed the difference in her daughter's self-confidence, sociability and improvement in her schoolwork because of her involvement with athletics.

"She's really loving school this year," said Lumanna. "Having the other kids' support is really nice. She can pick up the phone if she gets stuck with her homework and ask, 'Michelle, I need your help.' It's been amazing."

Tracey Newman, an educational assistant at St. Catherine of Alexandria, said that initially Alyssa's fear of being hit in the head with the basketball was causing her to hesitate, but after that, the 12-year-old's strength and dexterity has grown to the point where she's taken up another sport— wrestling.

"One of the challenges for any special-needs child is to have the same involvement that every other child has the ability to do," Newman explained. "Her classmates are fantastic for including Alyssa with whatever they're doing and when she's included in everyone else's activities, it reflects in the rest of her school load."

Held in the south end of the Halton region in the first two editions of Hoops For All, this year's event was shifted north by organizers and a crowded, loud gymnasium greeted the athletes.

(Eamonn Maher can be reached at emaher@independentfreepress.com)

GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION

On April 14 at 1 pm
 Christ's Journey to the Cross at Calvary will be re-enacted in downtown Georgetown

You are then invited to observe a dramatic conclusion at 1:30 outside MAPLE AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

