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Preparing for Summer Camp Away

Many emotions arise when a child leaves for camp.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE CONNECTION

Julie Kaminski remembers the language from her desperate letters to her parents: “I love you. I want to come home now!” She recalls penning a dramatic plea to be rescued from residential summer camp more than 40 years ago. Today, Kaminski is preparing for her daughter’s first camp experience away from home this summer.

“Looking back, I can see how going away to camp helped me become more self-sufficient, self-confident, self-reliant and taught me how to get along with so many different kinds of people,” said Kaminski, a local mother of two children.

“Of course I didn’t think that at the time. I was extremely homesick even though it was my idea to go to sleep away camp in the first place.”

A child’s first residential summer camp experience can be fraught with emotions that run the gamut from excitement to terror. While glee at the thought of a summer filled with sports, swimming, crafts and new-found friendships can be the dominant feeling, the thought of an extended period of time away from home can cause sadness and anxiety for both parents and their children.

An American Camp Association study showed that 96 percent of children who attend sleep away camps experience homesickness at some point during their stay. While these emotions are normal, parents can help children tame the pre-camp jitters. The life-long lessons gained from such camps make it worth the effort.

“Becoming comfortable with your child being away at summer camp, perhaps the first extended separation you have had, is a matter of trust,” said David Kaplan, Ph.D. of the American Counseling Association in Alexandria, Va.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Summer camp experiences can help children become self-confident and self-reliant.

“Trusting your child that they can handle themselves without your supervision. Trusting that they can handle relationships with other children. Trusting that they can get up in the morning, take a shower, wash their clothes, and change their sheets without your prodding.”

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT homesickness is normal and many campers experience it, can help children accept and cope with their emotions.

“Expecting to miss home and feel somewhat anxious helps children feel less surprised and overwhelmed when it occurs,” said Barbara Meehan, Ph.D. executive director, Counseling and Psychological Services, George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

A child’s apprehension can be eased when parents share their own camp experiences,

particularly positive memories.

“Don’t let your child get caught up in your own anxiety about leaving for camp,” said Linda McKenna Gulyn, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Marymount University in Arlington, Va. “Kids sometimes worry about the parents they left behind. Be positive, but not sad that your child is leaving.”

Meehan says that developing a few self-soothing activities like playing outdoors or reading is one strategy for helping children deal with feelings of missing home. Identifying people with whom young campers can share their emotions is another means for dealing with homesickness.

“Talking to a camp counselor and even peers can help ease the difficult feelings and often they will learn they are not alone,” said Meehan.

Encouraging a child to make friends and become involved in camp activities will put

the focus on the positive aspects of camp. Packing letters and stamped envelopes and developing a plan for letter exchange can help a child feel connected to their families.

“Isolating and avoiding what feels hard can often worsen anxiety and homesickness,” said Meehan. “Remind your child they are stronger than they feel in the moment and that engaging in camp activities can be helpful.”

There are times however when a child might not be ready for residential camps. The American Camp Association reports that while most cases of homesickness subside, there are cases — if a child is not eating or sleeping, for example — when it could be time to seek help. “Consult with camp professionals about resources if your child’s anxiety worsens or persists,” said Meehan.

Camps&Schools●Notes

Paralympic Sports Team Seeking Players

The Fairfax Falcons Paralympic Sports team, a Fairfax County Neighborhood and Recreation Services Therapeutic Recreation program, is recruiting new players. The team provides a variety of sports experiences to athletes with physical disabilities impacting their lower extremities ages 4 1/2 to 18 (or high school graduation). Not all athletes use wheelchairs for everyday use. Some athletes are ambulatory and only use a wheelchair for sports. Their primary sport is wheelchair basketball, which runs late August through April. In the spring, they

offer a variety of sports including floor hockey, track, field, fishing, rugby, golf, and football. For more information, email fairfaxfalcons@gmail.com.

Summer at Massanutten

Each year, Massanutten Military Academy offers a five-week intensive summer school program, an opportunity for students to get ahead in their learning, make up for bad or failing grades, or increase their knowledge and participation in their JROTC leadership skills. Massanutten Military Academy offers the safety of a structured learning environment, as well as the fun of a summer camp through a combination of classroom time and weekend activities. The program is offered June 27-Aug. 1, 2015.

Credit for academic courses is transferable to the student’s current school. JROTC leadership credit equals one high school course credit.

STEM CAMP Massanutten offers STEM Summer Camp, two two-week camps running from June 29-July 10 and July 20-31, open to students grades 7-12. This summer camp offers students the chance to explore the many facets of STEM education including hands-on experiences. Upon completion of the STEM Summer Camp, students will receive a certification of completion. Massanutten Military Academy offers the safety of a structured learning environment, as well as the fun of a summer camp through a combination of classroom time and activities. Visit www.militaryschool.com/summer-school-2015.asp.

Diverse Camps Offer Summer Fun

BY STEVE HIBBARD
THE CONNECTION

Scores of local camps in Northern Virginia that offer many opportunities for summer fun and learning. Here is a sampling of diverse camps that range from art to theater to field trips to swimming, tennis and music. There's even a camp for aspiring musicians who want to form a band.

ROAM Rock Camp

ROAM Rock Camp gives children the opportunity to build communication skills and confidence through the language of music. The camps are designed to focus on why each participant wants to be in a band, why they love music and what they want to get out of it. The goal is to create an environment or band that children will thrive in. They will hand select each member to create a group that best fits their age and experience. During the camp, groups will learn three to four of their favorite songs or even write songs if they wish. At the end of the week they will record the group and give them a CD to take home to show off their progress.

"The best thing about these camps is that we are able to show these young musicians from first-hand experience how to be players and performers. I wish I had something like this when I was growing up," said John Patrick, owner/director, who is the former co-founder of the national touring act Virginia Coalition.

Camps are offered from June 1 to Aug. 28. To register, contact ROAM to let them know every week your child would be available to do a camp. Deadline for registration is June 1.

Contact info: Rock of Ages Music, 114 E. Del Ray Ave., Alexandria VA 22301; call 703-838-2130. Email Roam.rockofagesmusic@gmail.com.

Burgundy Farm

Burgundy Farm offers two summer camps: a day camp at the 25-acre Alexandria campus in eight week-long sessions, and a sleep-away camp in three sessions at Burgundy Center for Wildlife Studies in Capon Bridge, W.Va. Both camps are great options for children excited about learning in the outdoors with dedicated counselors. Day campers swim every day, and programs include sports, science and performing and visual arts. Sleep-away camp provides a mix of structure and freedom, fostering a respect to the natural world through greater knowledge of nature and self.

"At Burgundy Farm Summer Day Camp, our campers enjoy all the benefits of a sleep-away camp with the convenience of a day camp, including swimming, animal encounters, nature exploration, forming strong bonds and friendships with other campers and counselors, and the opportunity to build self-esteem and confidence in a fun and



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Campers enjoy the rock climbing wall at Burke Racquet and Swim Club's Sports Camp.

friendly environment," said Hugh Squire, director of auxiliary services.

Burgundy Farm Summer Day Camp is located on the Alexandria campus of Burgundy Farm Country Day School, 3700 Burgundy Road, Alexandria. Lower and upper divisions, grouped by age and interest, for children ages 3-years-8-months to 12 years old. Camp runs Monday, June 15-Friday, Aug. 7. Register at www.burgundyfarm.org/summer-programs. Contact Hugh Squire at hugh@burgundyfarm.org or 703-842-0480.

Burgundy Center for Wildlife Studies Camp is located within 500 acres in a secluded valley near Capon Bridge, W.Va. Overnight junior session (age 8-10) for one week in August - currently waitlist only; senior sessions (11-15) for two weeks in June, July or August; adult weekend (21+) in July. Register at www.burgundycenter.org. Contact Michele McCabe at michelem@burgundyfarm.org or 703-842-0470.

Burke Racquet and Swim

Burke Racquet and Swim Sport Camp has been a hidden treasure in Burke for more than 27 years. Tucked behind the Kaiser Permanente Building in Burke, the indoor camp is the ideal setting for children who want to do a variety of sports. It offers swimming, tennis, and rock climbing daily. It also offers Zumba, soccer and camp games.

All of the Sports Camp staff has been back



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

The Girls Junior Elite enjoy soccer camp at the Soccer Academy at E.C. Lawrence Park in Centreville and Patriot Park in Fairfax this summer.

ground checked through Fairfax County; they are CPR/AED trained.

The camp offers full day (\$280 per week) and half day mornings or afternoons (\$180 per week). There is before and after camp care for working parents. The first week of camp begins June 22 and goes through Aug. 28. Call Burke Racquet and Swim Club at 703-250-1299.

Soccer Academy Inc.

The Soccer Academy offers a wide range of innovative, state-of-the-art programs that meet the interests and playing abilities of all players and teams. It caters to individuals and teams of all ages. All residential camps include a goalkeeping camp. Day camps include E.C. Lawrence Park in Centreville and Patriot Park for ages 5-14. Residential Camps at University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg and Randolph Macon Academy, Front Royal, for ages 9-18. Visit www.soccer-academy.com for camp locations, costs, dates and times. Call 703-393-7961 or email soccer@soccer-academy.com.

Kenwood Summer Day Camp

Kenwood Summer Day Camp makes it their mission to provide campers with new experiences and lasting friendships each summer. "Whether it's watching a baseball game, riding a roller coaster, or seeing knights joust from the front row, we take pride in giving them these opportunities and watching them share it with their new friends," said Justin Elcano, camp director.

Kenwood Summer Day campers can go on daily field trips to exciting destinations including water parks, mini golf, roller skating, amusement parks and more. Campers also have a wide variety of activities to keep them entertained while they are on campus. There is a large wooded playground that is home to many kickball, capture the flag, and basketball games. They have five themed rooms that hold arts and crafts, video games,



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

FCPA Camps and the Rec-PAC Program camps take place all over the county.

board games, ping pong, air hockey, and movies.

Kenwood summer day camp is open to children who have completed kindergarten through 8th grade. Camp starts June 15 and goes through Sept. 2. Visit the website to find a calendar with a schedule for each week at www.camp.kenwoodschool.com. Call 703-256-4711 or email camp@kenwoodschool.com.

Metropolitan School of the Arts

Metropolitan School of the Arts offer pre-professional summer dance, music theater and acting camps. It also offers a wide variety of youth summer camps where students can explore and learn many facets of the performing and visual arts, including mini camps for the youngest students, ages 3-5, youth camps for students in grades 1-6, and intensives for students age 8 and up. Private summer music lessons are also available for piano, voice, guitar, violin and drums.

"MSA summer camps are the perfect way to try something new and a great way to keep young bodies active and develop new friendships," said Melissa Dobbs, president of Metropolitan School of the Arts in Lorton and Alexandria. "Whether your child is passionate about the performing arts or just looking to have some fun, MSA camps offer creative programs for all skill levels."

The Lorton campus is at 9601 Ox Road, Lorton, and the Alexandria Campus is at 5775 Barclay Road, Kingstowne, Va. Call 703-339-0444 or visit www.metropolitanarts.org.

Langley School Summer Studio

The Langley School Summer Studio features more than 70 classes that allow for the personal, social, and intellectual growth of each camper in preschool to 8th grade. Innovative and engaging academic and STEM programs stimulate with math adventures,

robots, and Raspberry Pi. Exploration abounds as campers take exciting field trips to become field scientists who investigate the Chesapeake Bay, cyclists who traverse local mountain bike terrain, and magicians who create illusions. The spotlight also shines on experiences that get campers "in the studio" with a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer or the lead choreographer and dancer for MC Hammer.

"Each year, we look to add to our diverse roster of classes while growing the perennial favorites to ensure The Langley School Summer Studio offers the best possible experience for our campers," said Director of Auxiliary Programs Jennafer Curran. "Whether taking part in one of many field trips, exploring a new interest like soccer or dance, or refining math or reading skills, our campers develop academically, socially, and emotionally ... and have a great time in the process."

The Langley School Summer Studio will run in six weekly sessions from June 15 - July 31, for students in preschool to grade 8. Classes are held at The Langley School in McLean, and take advantage of the 9.2-acre campus, featuring a wooded nature area, state-of-the-art athletic center, artificial turf field, computer labs, and age-appropriate playgrounds. Visit www.langley.school.org/summerstudio for details or to register online. Call 703-356-1920 or email summer@langley.school.org.

Bishop Ireton Camp

Bishop Ireton High School offers campers the opportunity to participate in sports and/or theater while developing individual and group skills and fostering a love of the activity. It offer boys camps (baseball, basketball, lacrosse and football); girls camps (basketball, lacrosse and volleyball); and coed camps (soccer, theater). Age ranges for the camps are rising 1st graders to rising seniors depending on the camp. The 17 camp sessions are conducted by the school's coaches or teachers and assisted by student counselors. Lunch is provided for full day camps by the cafeteria at no extra cost.

"Last year we had nearly 600

SEE PAGE 6

LearningRx-Fairfax Offers Day of Fun Brain-related Competitions

To raise awareness about the brain's ability to change at any age, LearningRx brain training centers across the United States are holding a Brain OlympicsRx event. The local cognitive skills center, LearningRx Fairfax, will be holding its event on Saturday, May 23, from noon to 4 p.m.

For every person that participates in our Brain Olympics, LearningRx-Fairfax will donate \$10 to Brain Injury Services.

The free event will be an entertaining but low-pressure environment to flex mental muscles with a day of cognitive competitions, including: The Brain Bee - a backwords spelling bee; The Deckathlon - speed sorting specially designed cards; Noggin Art - complete art tasks on your head; Memory Marathon - how many words can you remember? Tangramathon - recreate the tangram formations; Speed Stack Cups - fastest time to create the pattern wins; Memory Math Sprint - a fun multi-tasking math challenge.

Other events will include designing a flag, fueling up on healthy

brain foods, learning about the cool capabilities of the brain and more.

The Brain OlympicsRx event is open to children and adults of all ages (seniors welcome) and abilities, and all games, snacks and prizes are free. Walk-ins are welcome but pre-registration is requested to help facilitate planning.

"These aren't academic exercises, they're cognitive fun," says LearningRx Fairfax Center Director, Rebecca Oliver. "We know that during the summer the average student loses approximately 2.6 months of grade-level equivalency in math computation skills and overall, teachers typically spend four weeks re-teaching or reviewing materials that students have forgotten over summer break. The Brain OlympicsRx event is a free and family-oriented event to help kids learn ways to fight this 'Summer Slide.'"

To learn more about the event or to register, call 703-995-9945.

LearningRx Fairfax is a local, cognitive skills training center that specializes in treating learning struggles.

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www.PotomacAcademy.org (Summer Programs) Ph: 703-993-9889

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Diverse Camps Offer Summer Fun

FROM PAGE 5

campers attend one of our sports or theater camps. The camps are a great way for youngsters to get to know us and for our coaches and theater teachers to get to know them," said Peter Hamer, summer camp director.

The camp brochure and sign up form can be found under the athletics tab at www.bishopireton.org. Contact Peter Hamer at hamp@bishopireton.org or 703-212-5190.

Park Authority and Rec-PAC

The Fairfax County Park Authority offers more than 1,400 summer day camp options at 100 locations plus the six-week theme-based summer Rec-PAC programs at nearly 50 elementary schools every summer.

Camps are held at RECenters, historic sites, lakefront parks and schools and offer a variety of camp titles. Both camps and Rec-PAC offer children a chance to have fun, build friendships and have a safe and rewarding summer experience. The Rec-PAC program runs June 29 through Aug. 6 from 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. daily and is open to children in Fairfax County who are rising first graders through those who finished sixth grade.

Registration begins April 27 online at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/recpac. There is an \$8 discount per week for those who register before June 12. Partial scholarships are available for those who qualify through free and reduced lunch program. The large summer camp program begins early June with camps for preschoolers and later in June for school age campers.

From crafts and games to high-tech and high adventure, the Park Authority has something for everyone. Many camps offer swimming at RECenters each day as well as extended care for working parents. Sports enthusiasts can choose from an array of skill-development camps, including



PHOTO COURTESY OF GLENN COOK

Students enjoy summer camps at Metropolitan School of the Arts in Lorton and Alexandria; musical theatre camps are just one of the many camps offered.

British soccer, basketball, football, baseball, cheerleading, archery, lacrosse or extreme sports programs. Enjoy the outdoors? Then check out the boating, fishing and biking camps. Specialty camps such as Young Chef's Cooking, Chess, Geocaching and Girls Leadership allow for exploring new interests or developing a new skill. There is also an array of STEM programs that stimulate cognitive development and enhance critical thinking. The search and browse options on the website (www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/camps) make it easy to narrow choices by location, age of children, type of camp and week of summer or check out the 2015 Summer Camp Guide.

For more information about Rec-PAC or camps, call 703-222-4664 Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Children participate in Field Day at Kenwood Summer Day Camp in Annandale.

Centreville Dance Academy

Summer Camp at Centreville Dance Academy is a great way for a child to experience dance in a fun and safe atmosphere. It offers a Princess Party Camp, Broadway Bound Camp, Glitz & Glam Camp, and Me & My Doll Camp. Dancers will enjoy pretending to be their favorite characters, dressing up, and creating fun crafts. On the final day of camp there will be an in-studio performance for family and friends.

"Summer camp is a great way to expose your child to all that dance has to offer. Dance camp is a wonderful place to build lasting memories and relationships with the CDA teachers and new friends. We love seeing the dancers grow each year," said Kathy Taylor, owner/director.

Princess Party Camp offers The Little Mermaid from July 6-10; Frozen from July 27-

31; Princess Ballerina from Aug. 3-7; and Frozen from Aug. 17-21.

Broadway Bound Camp is July 13-17. Glitz & Glam is July 20-24 and Aug. 10-14. Me and My Doll is June 29-July 13.

Register on the website through the Parent Portal. Centreville Dance Academy is located at 14215-G Centreville Square, Centreville. Visit www.centrevilledance.com, call 703-815-3125 or email office@centrevilledance.com.

SummerTimes

St. Stephen's & St. Agnes SummerTimes programs offers campers ages 3-18 an enjoyable and enriching experience with programs designed to stimulate curiosity and creativity, develop talents, and encourage exploration and personal growth. Most of the camp directors are SSSAS teachers and coaches, supported by alumni and students. Operating on three campuses with state-of-the-art facilities in the heart of Alexandria, the camp strives to inspire campers all summer long.

"At SummerTimes, your child will have the opportunity to see new sights in Washington, D.C., to expand artistic horizons in an art or filmmaking camp, learn about computer programming or jewelry making, challenge their abilities in one of our many sports camps, try their hand in TechPlay, or participate in a variety of fun activities in our traditional Day Camp. We pride ourselves on offering camps that will spark an interest in your camper, and will encourage them to create and try new things on their own in a safe and nurturing place," said Jim Supple, Director of Summer Programs.

St. Stephen's & St. Agnes summer programs run from June 15-Aug. 14, offering nine weeks with a variety of camps. With more than 145 different camp sessions to choose from, there is something for campers of every age. Visit www.summertimes.org to view camp offerings, pricing, registration procedures and more. Email summerprograms@sssas.org or call 703-212-2777.



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lost (adj): 1. unable to find the way. 2. not appreciated or understood. 3. no longer owned or known

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SPECIAL CONNECTIONS CALENDAR
Advertising Deadlines are the previous Thursday unless noted.

MAY
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5/20/2015.....A+ Camps & Schools, Proms, Summer Planning
Memorial Day is May 25
5/27/2015.....Summer Fun, Food, Arts & Entertainment


JUNE
6/3/2015.....Wellbeing
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• Call Backs (invitation only) May 20

Audition Location
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Audition Requirements
• No prepared monologues. Reading material provided by director.
• Prepare 32 bars of music to sing. Bring sheet music only (be prepared to sing scales). Piano accompanist available for all auditions.
Piano also available for private accompanist.
• Performers will be taught a dance during the auditions.
Wear appropriate clothing and shoes

Performances
Chantilly High School, July 24 thru August 2, 2015

Audition Registration & More Information Thealliancetheatre.org

Summer Fun for Adults

The region offers a wide range of programs for adults.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE CONNECTION

Summer fun is no longer reserved for children. Whether one's interests lie in exploring nature and hiking in the woods or immersed in history, art and literature on a university campus, the region abounds with warm weather opportunities.

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at George Mason University offers its members a chance to satisfy their intellectual and cultural curiosities. Want to read and discuss the "Iliad" or play Symphony No. 5 on the piano? Classes in Homer's writings or classical music are available in Fairfax, Reston and Sterling, Va. \$375 gives members access to more than 400 trips, courses and clubs ranging from memoir writing to French cooking.

"This summer you can get outside with OLLI trips to the National Gallery of Art, the Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens,

and The Franciscan Monastery," said Jennifer Disano, OLLI executive director.

From oil painting to soap making, Arlington County is offering a diverse smatter of classes for adults. "We have a smorgasbord of programs and really cool classes where you can learn about nature or go on hikes," said Susan Kalish, a spokeswoman for the county.

Potomac residents who want to distinguish an amethyst from an iolite are in luck this summer. A gemology class is among the most popular adult classes at the Potomac Community Recreation Center.

"We've got a host of different programs from tai chi, yoga and karate," said Peter Selikowitz, the center's executive director. "There's even a laughter fitness class which is a fun way to reduce stress."

For those wanting to learn how to avoid internet scams, Marymount University has teamed up with City of Falls Church to present "Living Better with the Internet." The series of five classes is designed for seniors and will be held at the Falls Church Community Center this summer. "The best news of all is that the classes are free," said Odette Shults, a spokeswoman for the University.

Educators say that an uptick in interest among adults, particularly seniors, has led



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Many organizations offer summer fun and educational programs for adults.

to a diverse offering of learning opportunities. "There is an absolute trend and evidence-based research is driving the trend," said Andrew Carle of George Mason University. "Adult activities are being reinvented. What used to be arts and crafts and

now their being called wellness and enrichment and address the physical, cognitive, social and spiritual needs of adults. We're seeing people being given more choices on how to improve their lives rather than just giving them activities."

Play Unified

BY RICK JEFFREY
PRESIDENT, SPECIAL OLYMPICS VIRGINIA

In my 20-plus years in Special Olympics I still, on occasion, make the same mistake. I miss the boat. I underestimate the abilities either cognitive or physical of our Special Olympics athletes; athletes with intellectual disabilities. But by continually making this mistake, I, in essence, pretty much make them like everyone else; just another person, available to be judged and limited by what we see or what we think we see. You see, the limitations that all of us place on each other determine how we perceive each other, treat each other, like each other, fear each other, raise each other up or marginalize each other.

Ask most coaches out there and they will tell you that the biggest limitations on any student athlete are the ones coaches place upon them, among which might be too slow, not big enough or not tough enough. It might not be much different in the classroom where teachers might see a student as too lazy, too distracted or not interested. And these are just student athletes in any sport, in any classroom, at any high school in Virginia.

Now compound that with Down syndrome, autism or an undiagnosed disability resulting in a student's inability to keep up with peers. In most cases, the limitations in a school environment, an environment that moves all too fast, are enormous. And even in schools with wonderful inclusive classroom environments, the opportunity to



interact and really build friendships and relationships remains limited.

These students with intellectual disabilities are, in most cases, not receiving an opportunity to really participate in sports; an activity that, at its heart, teaches teamwork, trust and communication; an activity that at its core promotes competency, credibility and caring; the building blocks of human relationships. Sports and sports teams are probably more conducive to building relationships and creating friendships than possibly any other school activity. Plus throw in the opportunity to "wear the colors" and represent your school and you create an emotional bond that may be the most inclusive opportunity for any student.

IMAGINE A PARTNERSHIP between Special Olympics and high schools throughout Virginia. Imagine the opportunity for a student with an intellectual (or any) dis-



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ability to play alongside his or her peers without disabilities in a Unified Sports team environment; to rely on each other, to communicate with each other, to believe in each other, to become Champions Together.

Imagine no more because Champions Together is here. In fact, it's right here in Fairfax at Robinson Secondary School and Robert E. Lee High School – and in 22 other high schools in Virginia.

This partnership with the Virginia High School League is aimed at bringing together youth with and without disabilities to build the first unified generation, a generation where youth will build upon the friendships and life lessons learned through sports and the Special Olympics movement so, later in life, they will not be afraid to live, work and THRIVE alongside their peers with different ability levels.

Champions Together high schools will form inclusive track and field teams this spring that will compete against other local high schools. Other components of the program include an inclusive student-led leadership team that will organize an awareness event to promote respect and inclusion, and promote philanthropy to support the future of the program.

AT SPECIAL OLYMPICS, we dedicate ourselves each day to building communities more respectful in their conduct, more inclusive in their makeup, more unified in their fabric. And each day the Virginia High School League is promoting education, leadership, sportsmanship, character and citizenship for students by establishing and maintaining high standards for school activities and competitions.

A new, young, energetic base of athletes and volunteers, which could include the sons or daughters of many reading this op-ed piece, will eventually transition from the schools into our communities and help Special Olympics Virginia and the Virginia High School League continue to achieve our missions.

The Champions Together program is new, and as it develops, we will learn a lot about how to build it, refine it and make it the best that it can be for everyone. And do you know who we will learn this from? We will learn it from our young people with and without disabilities who, through their participation and their ownership of this inclusive program, will prove to us that they are the future.

Let's Play Unified!

Rick Jeffrey has been the President of Special Olympics Virginia since 2000. He has served on many national and international committees for Special Olympics, and is currently serving on the United States Leadership Council where he is chair of the Sports Committee.