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Energetic champion for the disabled

by Colman McCarthy



Eunice Kennedy Shriver (AP Photo)

Editor's Note: This is a column written by Coleman McCarthy in 2007. We offer it again today as a tribute to Eunice Kennedy Shriver who died today.

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Whenever I've been with Eunice Kennedy Shriver, I've always come away thinking, "I must become a better person."

A similar thought may have entered the minds of some of the tens of thousands who gathered from Oct. 2 to 11 in Shanghai, China, for the Special Olympics World Summer Games. Some 7,500 athletes with intellectual disabilities from 160 nations competed in 23 sports.

The event could really have been called the Eunice Shriver World Games. For 40 years she has traveled the planet, to every continent except Antarctica, doing the hard labor of rousing governments, schools, corporations, volunteers and families to include "the special people" in all parts of life.

She did that in her Massachusetts childhood as the sister of the mentally disabled Rosemary Kennedy, and in the 1960s when she persuaded -- browbeat, some say -- her brother President John F. Kennedy to get

on the legislative ball regarding the intellectually handicapped. She set out to prove, and eventually did, that the confidence Special Olympians gain through sports could be transferred to their academic and working lives, including acquiring marketable skills in the service industries.

What began in the spring of 1962, when Eunice Shriver invited a few children with Down syndrome to meet and compete on her front lawn, is now the world's largest sports program, one involving several million athletes and coaches. A 1994 poll taken by the Chronicle of Philanthropy said that the Special Olympics ranked first as the nation's most credible nonprofit venture, well ahead of the Girl Scouts, the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross.



Eunice Shriver left for Shanghai in late September. I have

to think that all kinds of observers told her not to go, saying, "You're 87. You had a stroke in July and doctors said you would never speak again. You've been hospitalized twice in critical condition. You've had two severe car crashes. You've grown old and now it's time to get sedentary."

Similar cautions have been thrown at Eunice Shriver for decades: "You can't do much about retardation. It's a genetic or prenatal defect for which early intervention or education -- much less winning medals in the 100-yard dash -- won't help."

"Baloney," she barked. Or, in more stately language, as she said in a White House dinner in honor of her 85th birthday two years ago: "Let us not forget that we have miles to go to overturn the prejudice and oppression facing the world's 180 million citizens with intellectual disabilities. ... As we go forward, all of us, may our numbers increase in this noble battle. May you overturn ignorance. May you challenge indifference at every turn. And may you find great joy in the new daylight of the great athletes of the Special Olympics."

I came to know Eunice Shriver in the mid-1960s when I worked for her husband, Sargent Shriver. To describe him the word "ebullient" was invented. Maybe I've missed the others, but I can't think of any other couple whose works of mercy and rescue for almost a half century have uplifted the lives of more people in more parts of the world.

For Sargent Shriver, it was the Peace Corps, Head Start, Legal Services, Job Corps, Foster Grandparents, Upward Bound -- all programs he started and then protected as Republicans in Congress and the White House attacked them. For Eunice Shriver, her lasting achievement was not only to give the mentally disabled the chance they deserve but to completely reverse the negative thinking of mental health experts about retardation.

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More work is ahead. Timothy Shriver, who has succeeded his mother as the head of Special Olympics, tells of a recent Gallup poll in which 62 percent of Americans said they don't want their child to be in a school with a retarded child.

I don't know whether that's true in China, but after the Shanghai games, those ideas may be changing.

Colman McCarthy teaches peace studies at colleges and schools in the Washington area.

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