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FEATURES**
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A Decade of Soaring

By Diana Ades

What were you doing in 2001? Well in 2001, Levine Jewish Community Center's Assistant Executive Director Barry Schumer and Special Olympics Volunteer Expert Bob Bower were conspiring to put together a summer program for Special Olympic athletes. Mecklenburg County's Special Olympic office had limited summer programs for their athletes so Bowler recruited Schumer, and with the Levine JCC's resources, Camp SOAR (Special Olympics Athletic Retreat) was born.

Camp SOAR started with 54 athletes ranging in ages from 15 to 60 with approximately 40 volunteers, mostly from our Jewish community. Lunch was PB&J and the athletes "ate it up." But for the first year, PB&J was all Camp SOAR could afford. Bowler went to all his friends and former business associates and literally pleaded for donations.

Fast forward ten years and "never say no Bob" (as he is affectionately called by the Steering Committee) succeeds again. Everyone Bowler asks for assistance never disappoints. This year Bowler received donations from many corporations like Family Dollar, Nabisco, Lance, Harris Teeter, and the Charlotte Knights, just to name a few. And Compass Group provides lunch for Camp SOAR every year, even as the number of athletes and volunteers grows.

What started as a three-day camp has expanded to its current five-day format to accommodate

the growing demand. Monday and Tuesday are for athletes ages 26 years plus and Wednesday and Thursday are for the younger athletes from 10-25 years old. On Friday, the camp combines both sessions into one grand finale with an indoor carnival and dance.

As interest and the number of athletes have grown, so has the number of volunteers that are needed. This summer, in Camp SOAR's 10th year, there were approximately 275 volunteers and 300 athletes. Camp SOAR now takes over the Levine JCC for the whole week, and the entire Levine JCC staff welcomes the athletes with open arms.

This may be the one of the reasons the rate of return on volunteers is so high. One volunteer summed up his experience best, "I now realize how blessed we are and I have learned so much about appreciating life through these amazing individuals."

In addition to the many volunteers from the Jewish community, high school students from Charlotte Catholic, Charlotte Christian, Charlotte Latin, Myers Park, Providence, East Meck, and Ardrey Kell are now participating. The Charlotte Soccer Academy and Mecklenburg Aquatic Club participate as volunteer coaches and leaders. And many families have made volunteering at Camp SOAR a family tradition as siblings and parents volunteer together.

The celebrities just keep "showing up" at Camp SOAR. Dell Curry, Muggsy Bogues, Andrea Stinson and David

Thompson are just a few basketball greats that donate their time. And the "big" celebrities like Sir Purr, Chubby Checker, Lynx, and Homer all make an appearance.

Seventy year old "never say no Bob" cannot turn any athlete away and his passion and enthusiasm are contagious. Although the campers are both young and older, their various disabilities never stop them from making new friends and sharing their athletic and artistic accomplishments with all.

And after a decade, let's not forget the other selfless man that makes Camp SOAR a tremendous success ... Barry Schumer. Staffing and logistics come together under Schumer's leadership. Even when it rains, he is ready with a back-up plan. Camp SOAR is a labor of love for Schumer, and his planning for the 11th year of Camp SOAR will have started by the time you read this article.

The Steering Committee wanted to make this 10th year a special celebration by honoring Bowler and the athletes. Schumer, Steering Committee member Al Tinson and I worked with Elsa Safir and Eddie Gluck of the

LJCC and put together a presentation that was shared by the athletes on the final day of camp.

With Bowler's family, and the athletes and volunteers, Levine JCC CEO Phil Berman presented Bob with a Proclamation from Mayor Anthony Fox proclaiming that Friday, June 18 was officially Bob Bowler and Camp SOAR day.

Schumer then presented Bowler with a beautifully framed collage consisting of pictures from the past ten years of Camp SOAR. And the grand finale was a wonderful video capturing the past decade.

For the first time in ten years, Bowler was speechless. It was obvious that the athletes have so much love in their hearts for Bowler.

The past ten years can best be summed up by an athlete that has participated in Camp year after year. Kim Jones said, "The moment I walked into the Levine JCC ... I could feel love in the walls. I feel that everyone played their part ... we learn about each



Having fun at Camp SOAR year after year.

other every day in so many ways."

Jones compares Camp SOAR to a tree that keeps growing. "It's like Bob and his family are the trunk and we, the athletes and volunteers are the branches and leaves." And she writes, "When you know people that are so passionate about what they do and so rich in their faith, you can't help but rejoice."

The volunteers from the Jewish Community should be extremely proud of what they have helped accomplish and the lasting memory they have helped create for the athletes. Don't be left out next year...do a mitzvah and volunteer for Camp SOAR. To learn more, to volunteer or to donate money, please contact Barry Schumer at 704-944-6744. ☆

Hugh McColl, Jr. to Present 2010 Echo Award Against Indifference to Sandra and Leon Levine

Special Guest Elie Wiesel Will Conduct On-Stage Dialogue; Premiere of Documentary "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel"

Tuesday, September 21, 6-9 PM, Knight Theatre

The Echo Foundation will award its 2010 Echo Award



Leon and Sandra Levine

Against Indifference to Sandra and Leon Levine at a special event on September 21 at Knight Theatre. Presenting the award to the Levines will be Hugh McColl, Jr., former chairman and CEO of Bank of America.

Included in the evening's program will be the premiere of "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel," a 56-minute documentary produced during Dr. Wiesel's 2007 visit to Charlotte with the Echo Foundation. Dr. Wiesel will also participate in an on-stage dialogue at the Knight Theatre. Following the presentation of the 2010 Echo Award Against Indifference to the Sandra and Leon Levine, there will be a Patron's Reception.



Hugh McColl, Jr.

Patron tickets (\$250) or general admission tickets (\$65) are available, as well as a large range of patron or corporate sponsorships, by calling 704-347-3844, or visiting www.echofoundation.org. ☆

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