

Coach of the Season Spring 2017

Russell Fay - *Unified Bowling*

ECLC of New Jersey is a school for children and young adults with special needs that serves close to 200 individuals at its Chatham location. While the school offers interscholastic sports opportunities for its students, only a small percentage participate in them. Recognizing the benefits of participation in sports, special education teacher Russell Fay wanted to get more students engaged in athletic training, competition and the other physical and social aspects of sport.

As luck would have it, Fay didn't have to search for long. He contacted Special Olympics New Jersey and immediately learned about the Play Unified School Partnership program. Around the same time, a student at Chatham High School reached out to Special Olympics New Jersey for potential sports programs to implement at school. The Play Unified School Partnership assists schools with implementing sustainable inclusive sports, youth leadership, education and social programs that build self-confidence in students and foster communities of acceptance. It wasn't long before ECLC of New Jersey and Chatham High School, two miles from each other, started a Play Unified Schools program together.

Two years into the program, Fay has proven himself to be a dedicated Play Unified Club adviser and coach for Unified soccer, bowling and basketball. While Fay is proud of his teams' success at state competitions, he is most impressed by the confidence and increased understanding the Play Unified club and Unified Sports program have instilled in the students. Fay has even seen personal and professional change in himself since the inception of the program. Constantly working to make the program its best, Fay has become a strong communicator, expert planner and happier individual through the interactions that stem from the Unified program.

Although skill development and precision are important components of his bowling training, Fay's main focus is on having fun. His bowling practices combine both training and social aspects, as teammates encourage each other and are often found talking to team members across lanes. "The friendships built at practice are visible during competitions, as the team is not focused on winning but working together, having fun and achieving their best while engaged in competition," he shares. He even hopes to eventually expand the program to include more out of sport activities such as art, cooking and chorus. While the club already has approximately 130 active members, Fay always looks to include more students with a wide range of interests to further build on the friendships forged on the court, alley and field.

While Fay credits the success of the program to his co-adviser and club members, as well as the support of administrators, staff and families, Fay's crucial part in the success of the program doesn't go unnoticed. Coordinating between the two schools as well as the students' other obligations, he works hard to ensure as many members, other students and staff can attend Unified practices and events. Despite the difficulties schools might face starting a Unified program, Fay firmly believes in its benefits and hopes to inspire other partnerships between schools to see new and more sustainable Unified programs.

For his commitment, initiative and enthusiasm, Special Olympics New Jersey is honored to name Russell Fay as the 2017 Spring Coach of the Season.

Written by: Christina Dzwonczyk

