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Kiwanis hosts Special Games for county students

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Photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/Bay Area News Group/May 15, 2015 Gustavo Pina, a student at Westmont High School, celebrates receiving a second place ribbon in the "Steeplechase" event at the Kiwanis Special Games. Students from all Santa Clara County participated in the 26th Annual Kiwanis Special Games, held at De Anza College, on May 15

Hundreds of educators, Kiwanis members and supporters cheered on special needs students from schools all across Santa Clara County during the 37th annual Kiwanis Special Games held at De Anza College May 15.

Students from 60 schools in the region gather each year to have fun in 18 athletic events. Nearly 600 Kiwanis members helped organize and monitor the event that caters to students of various abilities.

"Nobody is turned away from participation," said Kiwanis Division 34 lieutenant governor Chris Torres.

Torres, a San Jose resident, said he has attended the Special Games since he was in his high school's Key Club.

Students from Cupertino High School along with other schools such as Willow Glen Elementary and Branham High School participated in a "parade of schools" around the stadium's track.

Some students were shy, but Kiwanis members of all ages were clapping and cheering as the students took their turn around the track. S.J. Sharkie, the San Jose Sharks mascot, was there to give high fives to each athlete.

"Just to see the excitement on their faces is enough," Torres said.

The Special Games started in 1979 by two adaptive physical education teachers and Walter Chronert, a Los Altos Kiwanian.

Since the beginning of the games, the Kiwanis Club of California, Nevada and Hawaii Divisions 12 and 34 have dedicated efforts to providing special needs students with direction and support.

This year's games saw nearly 1,000 participants take to De Anza's stadium, according to Torres.

"I've been attending for 20 years now. I have a couple of cousins that are special needs and have been to the games before. That's helped with my passion for the games," Torres said.

Passion and encouragement were two necessities at the May 15 event.

Karen Iott an adaptive physical education teacher for the Campbell Union School District shared that her passion for the Special Games and students will continue well after she retires. This year's games were Iott's last as she is heading into retirement after 34 years of teaching.

"I hope to continue to see my kiddos," Iott said.

Attendance at the Special Games has risen from when Iott and two students in wheelchairs attended in the early 2000s. This year 62 special needs students from the Campbell Union School District participated, and athletes came from a total of 60 area schools.

Iott and many other educators explained the Special Games are a very special day and heavily anticipated day for students.

"We're so happy there's an event for everyone. Our kids need to be part of what everyone else is doing," said Cupertino High School special education teacher Zahra Salari.

Salari added that her students practiced for two months to prepare for their respective Special Games events.

"Their favorite thing is to get those ribbons," Salari said.

Ribbons are awarded for first through third place, and to participants who give a "best effort."

"They love running the 20- and 50-yard dash. It feels like they're running [in] the Olympics," Iott said.

For more information, visit k-sg.org.