



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

## A HELPING HAND AT SPECIAL GAMES

Above, Tren Hernandez, 6, of Dorsa Elementary School in San Jose, competes Friday in the flag relay at the Kiwanis Special Games XXVIII with help from Flor Styczynski, a teacher's aide at the school. Left, a young participant gets congratulations. See story and photographs on Page 3B.







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Tiffany Ariente, 15, of San Jose and a student at Rogers Elementary, displays a first-place ribbon in the archery competition. She was one of 825 children competing in the Kiwanis Special Games.



# Miles of smiles for kids, volunteers

## 825 CHILDREN COMPETE IN KIWANIS SPECIAL GAMES

By HongDao Nguyen

*Mercury News*

Maureen Gutierrez has seen her 9-year-old son through seizures, watched him struggle in the intensive care unit and prayed that God would ease her boy's misery after doctors told the Santa Clara mom he could die.

### CUPERTINO

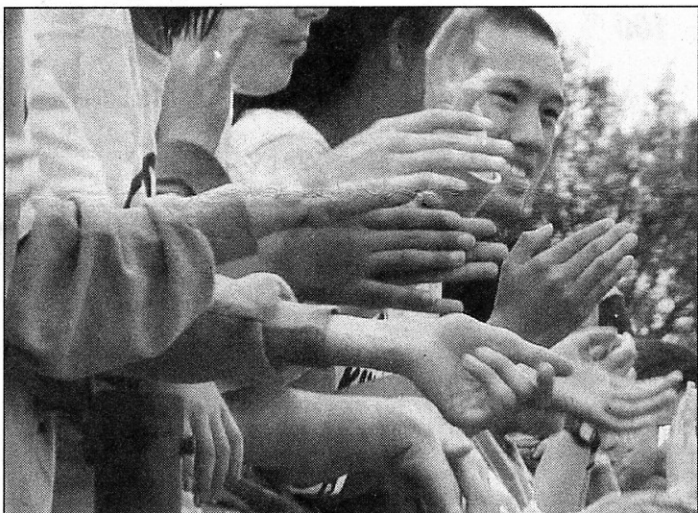
But Friday, Gutierrez cheered for Jacob as he meticulously followed the chalky white loops and zig zags of a wheelchair obstacle course in the Kiwanis Special Games XXVIII at DeAnza College in Cupertino.

After years of competition, Gutierrez still tears up when she thinks about how far her son has come: "I just never thought I'd see the day when I'd see him in something like this," she said.

Jacob, who lives with diabetes, cerebral palsy and dwarfism, was one of 825 kids who threw Frisbees, shot foam arrows and raced the 50-yard dash. The events are designed for Bay Area kids who are too physically and emotionally challenged to compete in the Special Olympics.

It was clear Friday that the games aren't just benefiting the children, but also hundreds of Kiwanis Club volunteers and students from Bay Area Key Clubs who ran the softball toss, bean bag drop and skittle bowl at the De Anza College track and field.

For the Kiwanis, "This is the most meaningful thing we do each year," said Jim Phillips, 71, of Palo Alto. "We're getting the thrill of seeing a kid smile."



Applause was abundant as the athletes at the Kiwanis Special Games in Cupertino paraded before their competition Friday.

The Special Games are sponsored by 17 Bay Area clubs affiliated with Kiwanis International, a service organization. The event is geared for preschoolers through high schoolers, all grouped by ability.

This year, a flag relay and other new events were offered for the increasing number of autistic children in the games, said Peter Bergsman, the event co-chair. In the past, games were geared toward children who use wheelchairs; the new games allow kids who can walk to stretch their legs and run.

Tina Meier-Nowell, a special education teacher at Branham High School in San Jose, brought six of her autistic students to the event. During physical education classes, her kids have trained for the special games by working on their racing and throwing skills, she said.

The games allow her students to interact with their peers, compete and earn awards for their accomplish-

ments.

"I want them to go to new places, be exposed to loud sounds," she said, nodding toward a loudspeaker blaring music.

Jacob Gutierrez said he did face new challenges this year, including driving his wheelchair up a wooden ramp for the obstacle course. He thought it would be scary, he said, but he overcame that fear to get a second-place ribbon.

His mom said Jacob's also learning the value of sportsmanship.

"Up until last year, if he didn't get first place he didn't want the ribbon," she said. "He's very, very competitive."

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### Online Extra

To see a video of the Special Games, go to [www.mercurynews.com/news](http://www.mercurynews.com/news).