



ALUMNI CREATE SOCCER COMMUNITY FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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It is easy to say a disability limits a child's ability to develop cognitive and physical skills. While mental and physical disabilities do pose challenges for children with special needs, these disabilities also give children the opportunity to grow and develop immensely.

Although at first children with special needs may have a difficult time mastering certain skills, many are very bright and capable of accomplishing extraordinary things.

The Rising Stars Program at Sports City is giving children with special needs a safe environment to practice new skills and participate in fun and interactive soccer games. The program was started in Sonoma County to create equal opportunities for all those with disabilities.

"There are thousands of children in Sonoma County who have been diagnosed with a disability, and unfortunately, there are very few athletic programs for these children to participate in," co-director of the Rising Stars and Sonoma State alumni Shannon Rake said. "This program allows the children to get off the sidelines and into the game."

In addition, the program focuses on developing one's self esteem, learning how to play on a team, building friendships, and creating a soccer community.



COURTESY//Chris Rake

Shannon Rake pictured here with her Keana Pulido after the Rising Stars awards ceremony.

"It's a symbol to society that people with disabilities have the right to actively participate in a team activity," co-director of Rising Stars and Sonoma State alumni Katya Robinson said. "It allows for people with disabilities to create a community outside just their disabilities...a community of soccer players."

Rake and Robinson wanted to create and run a program where they would be able to reach kids of all disabilities, helping them to develop important skills. "With my coaching/soccer background and Katya's soccer and working with children with special needs background, we came together to create and run this program," Rake said.

Rake started playing soccer at the age of four, and she played on a competitive traveling team when she was 10 to 18. She played on the varsity soccer team in high school and went on to play at Sonoma State. Currently, Rake holds the all-time goals record at SSU and has coached various soccer levels for 16 years.

Robinson has been playing soccer since she was ten-years-old. She has been working with special needs children for ten years, and has worked for five years at a public school in a kindergarten through 2nd grade class for children with moderate to severe disabilities. Robinson graduated with a Masters from Sonoma with an autism focus.

The Rising Stars program is currently in its fall session, which runs from Sept. 18-Nov. 1. There are currently 26 children and 29 volunteers in the program. Classes happen every Thursday afternoon at Sports City in Santa Rosa from 4:30-5:20 p.m. There will be two to three sessions each year, with the next session beginning in late March or early April. The program is open from ages four to adult and welcomes all levels of ability.



COURTESY//Chris Rake

Katya Robinson pictured here with two participants after the Rising Stars awards ceremony.

Each player is placed in one of two groups after attending an assessment class. Group placement is based off of one's age, cognitive ability, ability to follow directions, and behavioral observations.

The first group is the Kangaroos. In this class, coaches and players work on one to three step directions, learn how to work with a team, and learn the basic rules and skills of soccer.

The second group is the Polar Bears. This class focuses on the same concepts as the Kangaroos, but they start to learn and build off those concepts. Polar Bears work on building soccer skills such as dribbling, passing and shooting.

The program is also designed to give children with special needs the chance to participate in the same sports other children have the opportunity to play.

"Often times, these children are isolated from society because of their disability," Rake said. "This program allows them to feel like they are a part of a community and to have support within that community."

Additionally, the program is 100 percent volunteer based, and volunteers learn how to work with children with disabilities, gaining many important skills during the course of a session.

"They learn compassion for others, being thankful for having an able body and mind, which so many of us usually take for granted," Rake said. "Hopefully [they will recognize] how amazing it is to give back to the community."

Both directors have been impacted in many ways by the power of the Rising Stars program. "When I coach this program every Thursday, I see the smiles on these kids' faces, I see their parents laughing and cheering for their kids," Robinson said. "I feel happy for these families to finally have something that makes them a little more equal, a little more normal."

Rake has also learned a lot from her experiences while coaching the program. "I feel very blessed to have an able body and mind, and working in this program helps keep life in perspective for me," Rake said. "You cannot help but to leave class with a smile on your face, after seeing how much these kids enjoy themselves. It's contagious."

Rake and Robinson have not just created a friendly soccer program for children with disabilities to partake in; they have created an inclusive and safe community. It is a community that is welcoming and friendly to all, offering participants the opportunity to grow and learn from their experiences.



Anyone can become a volunteer and participate in Rising Stars. Volunteers can fill out and submit a form online at playsportscity.com. When the next session comes around, volunteers will be contacted.