

Idaho Statesman, Sunday, Sept. 9, 2007 – Readers view by Jim and Pirie Grossman (2 pages)

What's special about Special Olympics?

Idaho will host the 2009 World Winter Games

Jim and Pirie Grossman are co-chairs for the Idaho event and are responsible for planning, funding, organization and execution. Here are their thoughts:

Your family has been involved in the Idaho Special Olympics for years. What inspired this involvement?

Jim: My sister, Courtney, was born with an intellectual disability and has been involved with Special Olympics as long as I can remember. I basically grew up with it. One of the very selfish reasons we are doing this — the lifelong lessons that our (two) children will gain from their involvement are immeasurable and critical.

Pirie: My parents taught me early from the Bible that, "To whom much is given, much is required." I've always been concerned about the poor children and their well-being. I've always been concerned about the welfare of others. My dad, in particular, helped people. I literally saw him take the shirt off his back and give it to someone who needed it more. We all can pitch in and make the world a better place to live. It's also a selfish act to serve. It makes us feel better. When you give of your time or money, you receive. Whatever you feel lack of, give it — it will come back to you!

When you close your eyes and imagine the 2009 World Winter Games, what do you see?

Jim: The satisfaction, accomplishment and joy of not only the special athletes, but also the hundreds of thousands of people from all over Idaho, the United States and the world who made this happen.

Pirie: 3,000 athletes' faces smiling back at us.

What do you think Idaho has to give to the Special Olympics movement by hosting the 2009 World Winter Games?

Jim: Its heart and its spirit. During the site visit by the selection committee, one of the members from Ireland wandered into the market in Donnelly and a local who didn't know the first thing about Special Olympics just started talking with him. It was this spontaneous and unplanned encounter with a rural Idahoan and his heart and interest and enthusiasm for the Games he had just learned about that solidified the Irish selection committee member's mind that Idaho was the right place for the Games.

Pirie: Idaho is such a special place — the beautiful mountains, rivers, open vast land. But its other greatest natural resource are its people. I'm from Texas, and we're the friendliest people in the planet. I didn't think anyone else could compare until I came to Idaho. Wow! I felt so at home. Idahoans have a lot of compassion — nobody's afraid to roll up their sleeves and get the job done. We're honorable people — salt of the earth. Really, that's what people from 85 different countries will experience from Idaho, beauty outside, and inside, its citizens.

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What one gift would each of you say you have received because of your involvement in Special Olympics?

Jim: Patience, because that patience in my mind really includes perseverance and determination and dedication and certainty. These are attributes that all the Special Olympics athletes who I know have. When I was 8, I didn't always think my sister was 'patient' but I know both her and I have grown.

Why you are doing this?

Jim: It is my sister. When everyone in my family had been given so many natural gifts of skill and aptitude, I used to think that my sister was given none, until I realized she had been given the most important gift and done the most with it, the gift of courage and of love.

Who are your heroes?

Jim: Loretta Claiborne. She was the middle of seven children in a poor, single-parent family. Born partially blind and mildly retarded, she was unable to walk or talk until age 4. Eventually, though, she began to run. And before she knew it, she had crossed the finish line of 25 marathons, twice placing among the top 100 women in the Boston Marathon. She was honored with the Arthur Ashe ESPY Award for Courage, and she was just inducted into our own World Sport's Humanitarian Hall of Fame. Not only do I wish I could accomplish 1/100 of what she has done in her life, but I am honored and lucky to have her as a friend and inspiration to become a better public speaker.

How do you expect the 2009 World Winter Games to transform this state during the next 18 months?

Pirie: Overcome the belief that some people have that Idaho is a land of potato skins and skinheads — to — it's a state full of very caring people; people who care about others, full of compassion. We want to lead the country showing human rights, we want to lead the country in education and we care about our environment.

Many people say Special Olympics is really a lesson in human rights. Do you think this is true?

Pirie: Yes. It's so easy to 'judge' a book by its cover, isn't it? I've learned from the athletes to not do that. They don't want pity from us, they want a chance to be seen, be heard, to show they have something to offer — friendship, employee, athlete, a family member. Yes, you will be surprised at what you'll learn about yourself when you get involved. They will bless your life — in some cases, transform your life.

The 2009 World Winter Games will be the largest sporting event to be held in Idaho, not to mention bigger than the Salt Lake City Olympic Games. Do you think Idaho is ready for this caliber of an event?

Jim: Yes. With the World Winter Games, everyone can be involved and take part and make a difference.

What needs to happen over the next 18 months to make the World Winter Games a success?

Jim: The Games and these athletes need every Idahoan to step up and give of their time, talent, resources and heart.

The two of you are often linked to the Hollywood crowd and it's been rumored that can we expect to see a steady stream of stars, musicians and world leaders visiting Idaho in conjunction with the World Winter Games. Is this true?

Jim: It's not about how you look or what people think about you, it's about who you are inside and how you share that with people. And I know that the essence of the Games will, like they have in the past, attract lots of celebrities. Let's just hope we can get them to go home when the Games are done.

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What legacy do you hope is left behind?

Pirie: Have Idaho be on the world stage as a state that is on the leading edge of human rights, taking care of people, taking care of our state, our natural resources, being a leader of teaching for quality of life, leader in sports, leader in high tech/education.

You have committed a large part of your life to the Games. What will you do when it is over?

Jim: Rest, and chase our kids (ages 3 and 5) around the rivers and ski slopes of Idaho and relish in the friendship of hundreds and thousands of wonderful and unique individuals from around the world and... I'm sure that opportunities to be of service and help others will present itself.