

# Local Athlete Rose Baxter celebrates 50 years of the Special Olympics in Canada

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Gazette staff

COMBERMERE - Special Olympics Canada celebrates 50 years this year, and one local athlete has been with the organization since its beginning.

50 years ago this month, the Special Olympics began in Canada. That same year, athlete Rose Baxter began her association with the games. She began her involvement with the organization by participating in track and field events when she was just 11-and-a-half years old. She has been a rock steady participant, promoter, and ambassador for the games ever since.

The Valley Gazette caught up with Rose and her sister Catherine Baxter at one of Rose's favourite breakfast places, The Old School Café in Combermere. During the conversation, they recounted several stories of how the Special Olympics had positively impacted Rose and the Baxter family.

At the games Rose initially participated in back in 1969, the crowd cheered her on as she was on pace to take the gold in a sprinting event. Another participant was coming up behind her, on track to finish second; that girl tripped and fell. Rose, in a heroic act of sportsmanship, gave up her first place position to stop and help up the other girl. They crossed the finish line together, dead last.

Winning in the Special Olympics is not always about coming in first. It's about coming in together. It's about inclusion, about comradery, about doing your personal best, and about helping others to achieve their best too. Make no mistake, Special Olympics athletes are in the games to win. They train like any other athlete, they set goals like any other athlete; they dream of victory like any other athlete. However, they have not lost sight of the fact that winning isn't everything.

The motto of the games says it all: "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me brave in the attempt."

Rose Baxter was brave in the attempt at those first games in 1969 and in many other aspects of her life outside the games. Despite suffering from multiple disadvantages in life, Rose has turned each of them into reason to aim for the next victory.

Born in an era when people with special needs were institutionalized, Rose was fortunate to have been born to parents with a strong faith and a dogged determination to give their daughter a high quality life in a loving home. Now well into his nineties, Rose's father is still going strong; her mother passed away a few years ago. Both laid the foundation for Rose's success by treating her with the dignity she deserves as a human being.

The middle child of five siblings, Rose has been an inspiration for many in her family



Rose Baxter, left, with her sister Catherine, right in front of The Old School Café in Combermere

Photos Katrina Boguski

and community. Her older sister Catherine, who has been an advocate for Rose her entire life, recounted a story from Rose's teenage days. The story sums up Rose's character and manner of living.

When Rose was attending high school in Toronto, she decided that she wanted to travel to school each day by bus, just as any other teenager might. Nearly five decades later, we may take for granted what a monumental task taking the bus in downtown Toronto would have been for a 1970's teenager with special needs. Rose took up the challenge anyway.

She and a small group of other students with special needs practiced going on the bus together. When one of the students mistakenly got on the wrong bus, Rose knew the error immediately. She had the choice to separate from the other student, or ride out the trip with him until the end of the line where she finally convinced him that they were on the wrong bus.

With a bit of help, the students corrected the mistake and ended up at school, late but in good form. Rose knew it was important for all of them to stay together and work out the problem as a team. This spirit of togetherness has been part of the Special Olympics mandate since its beginning.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of JFK was the founder of the Special Olympics; the first event was held in Chicago in 1968. This event quickly inspired a Canadian to bring the movement to Canada.

According to the history page on the Special Olympics website, "In the early 1960s, a group of students at Toronto's Beverley School became the test group for Dr. Frank Hayden, a sport scientist at the University of Toronto. Dr. Hayden was



A newspaper article from 1976 showing Special Olympian Rose Baxter.

studying the effects of regular exercise on the fitness levels of children with an intellectual disability."

Rose Baxter was one of the students who attended the Beverley School and became an active participant in Hayden's work.

"Dr. Hayden's research was nothing short of groundbreaking. It challenged the prevailing mindset of the day - one that claimed that it was the disability itself that prevented children from fully participating in play and recreation. Through rigorous scientific method, Dr. Hayden proved that it was simply a lack of opportunity to participate. Given that opportunity, people with an intellectual disability could acquire the necessary skills to participate in sport and become physically fit."

Rose is a fan of any and all sports teams from Toronto. She is a great ambassador for

the Special Olympics, and she has paved the way for other people with special needs. She also has a tremendous gift for fundraising and for speaking the truth in ways that people hear it. She has an active prayer life and is a good conversationalist. Her sister tells us that the only time Rose is quiet is when she is fishing.

For those of you who may have held back a tear at the beginning thinking about Rose forfeiting her gold medal, you will be glad to know that the story has a happy twist to it.

At this year's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Games, Rose's sister Catherine told this story to a police officer who was at the games. (The Toronto City Police are great supporters of Special Olympics.) The officer arranged to have Rose receive a 50 Year Gold medal in recognition of the heroic sacrifice she made five decades earlier.

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