

Celebrating 40 years of therapeutic recreation

Track program founder honored for work with disabled athletes, families

Jessica D. Bolandrina
newton@wickedlocal.com

More than 350 guests dressed up in their funkier '70s outfits last week to celebrate 40 years of year-round recreational programming by the city's Parks and Recreation Department for children and adults with disabilities. Athletes, coaches, volunteers, and staff members gathered at Post 440 to recall stories of its humble beginnings in 1978 and to fondly reminisce over its growth and development through the years.

A silver disco ball necklace hung around 27-year-old Ben Majewski's neck as he danced with several of his Newton Tigers teammates. The Newton resident laughed freely and smiled easily, surrounded by people he'd spent 21 years with. Majewski started participating in Newton's recreation programs at age 6 and, since then, has played baseball, floor hockey, and soccer among many other spots with his Tigers teammates.

"We play every Saturday morning," Majewski said proudly, "me and a bunch of my friends." He listed baseball as his favorite sport but excitedly told stories of the numerous other activities he had participated in over the past two decades.

Majewski is one of hundreds of athletes that have benefitted from Newton's Parks and Recreation programming for individuals with disabilities. The department is partnered closely with Newton Athletes Unlimited - a nonprofit organization that independently raises funds to support the city's therapeutic recreation programs.

"It started very small - just a group of parents that went to meet with the director of recreation to say our children deserve more," said resident Gloria Michelson, one of the parents who first approached Newton Parks and Recreation in 1991. Michelson recounted how the parent group, then called Newton Area Corporation for the Benefit of Special Needs Athletes, Inc., was active in helping the city select the first director of special needs and start shaping the programs.

Michelson described the early '90s as a time when people were finally "becoming aware" of special needs and how the "education was there but recreation wasn't yet." Newton's decision and efforts to implement a strong recreational special needs program made it stand out among its neighboring communities.

"The children needed more than just education for their minds and bodies," she said. "They needed the same things and opportunities as other kids."

Since 1991, Newton Parks and Recreation has worked with Athletes Unlimited to provide activities year round for young children to adults in their 60s. In addition to popular sports like football and soccer, there are also teen and adult socials, movie days, family nights, holiday



During a celebration at Post 440, John Ray was given a framed photo of his track team which had grown from eight athletes in 1988 to over 70 in 2018. Ray was the founder and head coach of the track program and served for 32 years. [WICKED LOCAL PHOTO/JESSICA D. BOLANDRINA]

parties, and even a heavily-attended summer camp.

"Life becomes isolating and these individuals are frequently on their own," Newton Athletes Unlimited President Morton Orlov said as he explained why it was important to have year-long but also lifelong opportunities.

"I've gotten to watch the transformation in my child over the last decade," he said as he watched his son dance with his teammates. "He's gone from isolated to someone really connected."

Guest of honor celebrated

Many of the annual awards celebration attendees had been part of Newton's therapeutic recreation programming for decades but one guest of honor was given the spotlight at the anniversary event.

John Ray, the founder and head coach of the track program, had dedicated the last 32 years to serving the athletes and their families. At first, the track program began with eight athletes, including Ray's daughter Heather. Over the years, it grew to the most popular program with an average of 70 runners during the Tuesday night meet.

"John has been the linchpin to the track program for over three decades," said Mark Kelly, director of special needs. "He is an inspiration and role model for all of the athletes and coaches. He encourages physical fitness, social connection and friendship each week."

As the guest of honor, Ray embraced the disco theme in a black wig and a blue daisy-covered suit. With a wide grin, he addressed a room



Newton Parks and Recreation Director of Special Needs Mark Kelly last week at Post 440 presented Mayor Ruthanne Fuller with a red Athletes Unlimited backpack - a gift given to each of the athletes during the 2018 season. [WICKED LOCAL PHOTO/JESSICA D. BOLANDRINA]



From left, Newton Tiger teammates Brian Heffernan, Brendan Whalen, Ben Majewski and Peter Johnson take a break from dancing at Post 440 last week during the 40th anniversary celebration for the Parks and Recreation Department's programs for individuals with disabilities. [WICKED LOCAL PHOTO/JESSICA D. BOLANDRINA]

full of athletes and families calling out, "Good job, Coach!" as he retired from his position.

According to Karen Peirce, the program's associate director, Ray had spent 1,152 Tuesdays at track practices and more than 100 days with his team at Special Olympics competitions but this was the year he had to "hang up his sneakers."

"My passion is driven by the kids and the athletes themselves," Ray said. "And we've got a tremendous amount of coaches that have helped out throughout the years. It's their energy and the athletes' response to them that's been so awesome."

Ray and several program staff members praised the coaches and volunteers that continued to dedicate their time and expect that they will only continue to expand in the years to come. The party was full of the athletes' excited chatter as they looked forward to upcoming games and events.

"I'm glad I live in Newton to take advantage of this," Michelson said as she watched the celebration unfold. "Everyone puts their whole hearts into it and, once they get involved, they never leave."

Individuals interested in volunteering with the Newton Parks and Recreation Department and Athletes Unlimited are encouraged to visit <http://www.newtonathletesunlimited.org/> for more information.



Several athletes from Newton and surrounding areas thanked Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, center, for joining their celebration at Post 440 last week in honor of the 40th anniversary of the Parks and Recreation Department's programs for individuals with disabilities. [WICKED LOCAL PHOTO/JESSICA D. BOLANDRINA]

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