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Creating his own vision

Youth adds Junior Blind Olympics medal to busy life

By Alicia Doyle
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Photos courtesy of Noel Kleinman Thirteen-year-old Joel Mueller of Simi Valley, who was born blind, earned a medal in the recent Junior Blind Olympics in Los Angeles.



After months of training, Joel Mueller won a medal in the 100-yard dash. He has also competed in archery, rowing and soccer throw.

Born blind, 13-year-old Joel Mueller is a Boy Scout who enjoys water polo, baseball and growing orchids when he's not winning medals in the Junior Blind Olympics.

"With kids his own age, most of them don't even know that he's blind," said Joel's mom, Barbara Mueller, of Simi Valley. "For the kids who are blind, they are amazed at what he can do."

Extremely visually impaired, Joel has hydrocephalus — a condition involving excessive accumulation of fluid in the brain — which has left him with 5 percent vision in only one eye.

"But despite his disability, Joel is extremely active and athletic," his mom said. "Among other things, he plays in a challenged baseball league, loves swimming and diving, and is working toward becoming an Eagle Scout."

Joel's most recent achievement was winning a medal at the Junior Blind Olympics in Los Angeles, a premier event for athletes who are blind, visually impaired and multi-disabled.

A unique event

The annual competition, held earlier in the spring, drew hundreds of athletes age 6 to 19; it was hosted by Junior Blind of America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping children and adults achieve independence.

"It's fun and good exercise," said Joel, a three-time participant who competed in archery, rowing, soccer throw and the 100-yard dash.

Junior Blind Olympics is a unique event that incorporates athletic activities that are adapted to meet the needs of children who are blind or visually impaired, giving them the opportunity to challenge their physical abilities, overcome sight barriers and realize their potential, said Jay Allen, chief operating officer.

"This is especially important because all children, regardless of visual impairment, deserve to experience the joy of friendship and fun that is fundamental to their development," Allen said.

After training for six months to compete in the 100-yard dash at Junior Blind Olympics, Joel won a medal and felt like a winner, Allen said.

"Joel's success at Junior Blind Olympics shows other children and teens who are blind or visually impaired that with confidence, courage and commitment, they too can achieve their goals," Allen said. "Furthermore, it shows the world that people who have visual impairments can live independent and fulfilling lives when given access to the right resources and services."

Among his other activities, Joel is a volunteer at Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District, where he received the Volunteer of the Year Award out of 600 people for supporting district activities, including the annual street fair and Halloween party.

Living life to the fullest

"He loves his job and the independence skills he is learning," said his mom, adding that Joel is learning to use the dial-a-ride system by making his own appointments and setting up the pickup time.

"He has to get himself up to his office without any assistance," Barbara Mueller said. "This whole process helps him feel more independent."

For Joel, a full life was the vision of his parents, who brought him into their home as a foster child when he was 8 days old and adopted him at age 2.

When Joel was old enough, "we told him what (his disability) was, turned him loose — and never took an eyeball off of him," said his father, Tom. "Any visually impaired person has to learn how to navigate, so we had to let him go, and he survived."

If Joel ever came to a point where he might hurt himself, Tom Mueller said, "there's one word he responds to: Stop.' And he'd stop moving until we could get him to safety and explain to him where he was heading."

As a boy engaging in the same activities that youths with sight enjoy, Joel has had his share of spills over the years, his mom said — like the time he rode his modified three-wheel bicycle into a cactus bush.

"He got right back up and kept on trying," she said. "Joel never gives up. He just keeps trying and never complains about it."

Some things are hard for his parents to endure, like letting him navigate his way across Sycamore Drive and Cochran Street — one of the busiest intersections in Simi Valley.

"If you can imagine him standing at that corner, cars turning left, cars going right it's terrifying as a parent," his mom said.

Being visually impaired made it difficult for Joel to be in a regular classroom, so he's home-schooled from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and earns his physical education credits as a member of the swim team through the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District.

As far as his future is concerned, "I want to be a lawyer," said Joel, who hasn't decided what type of law he will practice. "I haven't planned that far ahead yet."