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OUR JOURNEY

# Community Inclusion Newsletter

*It's all about connecting with others!*

## Spencer's Story, How Community Fosters Inclusion

*By Joni Takanikos*

**T-Bird Strong.** An award conceived, given and named for the recipient, Spencer, now seventeen and a senior at Shorewood High School, it is rooted in the value of inclusion. Spencer's mom, Cindy, told me that it is clear to her that aside from her son's outgoing and positive personality, the Shoreline community and its inclusionary dynamics have been a major source of support for her family.

From birth to the age of three Spencer and his family were involved with Wonderland Developmental Center, a non profit dedicated to serving children with developmental delays and disabilities. The center's Play and Learn groups include children of all abilities.

Spencer later attended Parkwood Elementary, a blended school that encourages inclusion. Spencer attended Einstein Middle School and in seventh grade joined the Cross Country team. Many Cross Country athletic programs have a "no cut" policy which enables all students to participate regardless of ability.

Through this policy of inclusion all athletes benefit as illustrated strongly by Spencer's story of inspiration and leadership.



**Coach Miles Mason presents the first T-Bird Strong award to Spencer.**

*Photos used with permission.*

## It's all about connecting with others!

Welcome to the Community Inclusion Newsletter! Our purpose is to share stories and experiences of individuals *with* intellectual disabilities actively participating in their communities with people *without* disabilities (neighbors, co-workers, friends, and other community members). We hope these stories inspire our readers to get involved in their local community by sharing interests with other community members.

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Spencer may not finish first on the track but among his coaches, team captains, teammates and anyone lucky enough to witness his exuberance as he crosses the finish line, he is number one.

Everyone I interviewed spoke of Spencer not as just an inspiration to the team, but also an influence in their lives off the field. He has taught them to be more positive, try their best and that you don't need to be first if you give it your all. Spencer gives his all on and off the track as he generously shares his zestful attitude among his teammates, coaches and all who encounter him. One team captain said, "Spencer won't allow us to be down. He keeps us positive no matter what. The only thing that matters to Spencer is that we try our best."

Andrew, one of his team's captains, speaks eloquently about his long relationship with Spencer. They both began the sport in seventh grade when they attended Einstein Middle School together. "Spencer is a spark plug. He brings a spirit that is always positive and his positivity is contagious. For me he will always bring back the best memories of Shorewood."



Another team captain who was new to Cross Country in his junior year said that Spencer motivated him to push through the intimidation he felt as a new teammate. "Spencer's carefree demeanor pushes through every obstacle. He always tries his best but has fun at the same time. He makes me want to do the same. He pushes me to do better and shine even brighter."



Above, Spencer and his paraeducator and running buddy, Eric.

Left, long time teammates Andrew and Spencer.  
*Photo used with permission*

Spencer's coaches, Miles Mason, Paul Villanueva, and Leslie Silver, who together conceived this special award in Spencer's name all spoke of the magnitude of his influences on not only their teams but all the other teams they encounter at meets. In fact this new coach's award inspired and named for Spencer was also awarded to three other teammates this year. One of the award recipients is on the girls cross country

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team. She told me that due to a chronic back injury, she was often unable to participate. However, this did not stop her from consistently showing up and cheering her teammates on. She told me that for her Spencer was an inspiration. She took a breath and said, "He is a legend!" I looked into her face as she said this and I could see this was no exaggeration.

This is not the first award for Spencer. One of his other awards, the Homecoming Spirit Award, came in 2013. The Homecoming Spirit award is voted on by the ASB Officers in collaboration with the Junior Senators which shows that Spencer's inspirational skills go beyond his involvement in Cross Country.

Spencer has had a long term relationship with many of the medically fragile students at Shorewood High School and as a result of this bonding and interaction over the years, he decided to spend one of his electives helping out these students in a scheduled setting.

This is Spencer's legacy among his community at Shorewood High School and his influence will be an uplifting force for many lives as high school recedes into memory.

The last person I interviewed was Spencer himself, and I have to say that after hearing of his profound influence from his teachers, coaches, classmates, and helpers I felt like I was meeting a rock star!

When I asked Spencer how participating on the Cross Country team had impacted him



Left to right, Eric, Andrew, Spencer, Coach Leslie Silver and Coach Paul Villanueva.

*Photos used with permission*

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Coach Miles and Spencer share the finish line!

*Photos used with permission*

and also what his reaction was to receiving the award with the further legacy of his name attached to it, he replied, "It makes me happy. It impacts my whole life. I will keep running." When I told him that Coach Miles had mentioned that it would be great if Spencer would come back next year to give out the **T-Bird Strong** award, he grinned and said he would love to.

Spencer's influence is felt throughout his Shoreline community. He is active in his church's youth group, participating in fundraisers and traveled with the group for the last two sum-

mers down to Tillamook, OR to participate in Habitat for Humanity projects. Spencer's positive approach to their projects has benefited their efforts and inspired the others in his youth group.

Spencer also volunteers at the Dale Turner YMCA. For over a year now he has spent his Sunday afternoons there. He has a mentor that supervises him at jobs such as cleaning the equipment and laundry duty. Spencer also enjoys working out at the Y and has made many friends there. If his father goes to work out without Spencer everyone asks him "Where is Spencer today?"

When we spoke of his future moving on to Shoreline Community College in the fall, he told me that he is on the "team of life." After meeting Spencer, I know I want to be on that team too. In just one afternoon he had broadened my horizons.



Left to right, Coach Miles Mason, Spencer, Coach Leslie Silver and Coach Paul Villanueva - Spencer and his proud and inspired coaches!

*Photo used with permission*

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The Shoreline community encourages inclusion and fosters the growth of inspiration that manifests itself throughout the community and beyond. This is so richly illustrated by Spencer and all of the lives he will continue to influence. He will be remembered and missed at Shorewood High, but he has a bright future ahead of him and a supportive community who will benefit from his spark. Spencer models the kind of approach to life that can benefit all of us in our communities, both large and small. Beyond our neighborhoods, schools and churches, there is a field where we can all run together.

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**Spencer's joy on the track spills over to all aspects of his life. Look at that smile!**

*Photos used with permission*

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### *Community Inclusion occurs when:*

- New relationships are built and current relationships are strengthened with neighbors, co-workers, friends, and other community members;
- Unique contributions are made with others in community settings (classrooms, board rooms, businesses, neighborhoods, community events, local organizations);
- Choices are available from a variety of possibilities to decide what to do, when and with whom;
- Strengths, gifts, and contributions are recognized and opportunities are available to learn more;
- People are respected and valued for what they have to offer;
- People feel strongly valued by others and are an integral part of a group or community.

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### Hot Tips for Community Inclusion

Hot tips from our author, Joni Takanikos. Thank you!

- Consider how policies of inclusion motivate and inspire people of all abilities to do their personal best.
- Support systems of an inclusionary nature can begin early. The earlier we begin to include all people in our community activities, the more benefits will be accrued in our lifetimes.
- Although it seems as if it is human nature to compare and contrast our achievements with others, we are most strengthened by the example that one person's passion can ignite in us. Strength and ability can be measured by our exuberance to give ourselves wholeheartedly to life.

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[www.hedgebrook.org](http://www.hedgebrook.org)

# Community Inclusion Newsletter



## Be sure to check out the Blog!

We've been working hard behind the scenes to get all your stories, tips, pictures and ideas up on a Community Inclusion Blog/Photo Gallery. We really hope this becomes our 'virtual' community gathering spot. Please check it out! Let us know what you think, share your stories, hot spots, ideas - we really want you to be part of this!

<http://blog.satraininginstitute.org/community-inclusion/>.

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What is your story?

What stories can you share about individuals with developmental/intellectual disabilities living full lives in the community? Send them to us, tell us about them so we can send a reporter to you, and help to share what is possible!