

Lots of smiles and lots of heart out front as handicapped compete in Olympics

By STEVE CROSS

Gigi Zaccone sat in a corner of Cromwell Center, talking with a group of friends around her. They were waiting to try out in the softball-throwing contest, only one of many events held for Staten Island's handicapped people yesterday in the borough's Special Olympics.

"I like it here," Gigi said, taking time out from her conversation to greet a visitor. "I want to stay here and see all my friends."

Of course, the teacher of Gigi's special education class at PS 32, Elverton Ave., Great Kills, obviously wouldn't like that, but the fun and games yesterday afforded the Islanders a chance to compete against each other in all kinds of contests.

There were wheelchair races, a first for the games, and three different track meets. The softball throw was preceded by the broad jump, and in between was lots of punch donated by Staten Island McDonald's restaurants.

Throughout, there were lots of smiles around the gymnasium at Cromwell Center.

"I think these games are wonderful," said Gigi's older sister, Francine, who accompanied Gigi to the meet. "They're important to have. A lot of times people don't realize the retarded and handicapped need this kind of competition. It gives them a chance to get together with people of their kind."

The games originally were planned at the College of Staten Island's Sunnyside campus, but the inclement weather caused a change of location.

"It's worked out quite well," commented Sonia Braniff, a member of the Special Olympics Committee whose daughter, Lynne, placed second in the wheelchair race.

Ellen Trapp, chairwoman of the special education committee of the Community School Board, agreed, saying it was actually better inside because "the children can just lounge around."

While some participants rested sore arms and others geared up for competition in their special disciplines, a marching band from Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, drew a few extra roots and raahs for its contestants.

Sporting yellow sweaters and matching hats, the eight-member band, made up of patients at the center on snare and bass drums, marched center contestants into the hall yesterday morning and out again yesterday afternoon.

The band was under the direction of

Judy Stecker, music therapist at the center.

"I been having a good time," commented Richard Lentz, one of the institution's contestants just before marching out of the hall.

While the more than 700 contestants nearly filled the center, there also was a host of volunteers on hand who helped make the event possible, including 50 off-duty firemen.

"We don't even know where to start thanking them, actually," said Mrs. Trapp. "It's hard to find the words."

Winners from each event in the contests will travel to Cobleskill, N.Y., to compete in the state's Special Olympics contest, scheduled for June 2 at the State University of New York.

Held yesterday as part of Rights of the Handicapped Week, declared by Borough President Gaeta, the Island games will be worked on during the year by a Special Olympics committee, which will raise funds for the statewide competitions and help institute training clubs for the events at individual schools.

In addition, the club will work on developing on-going after-school education programs to aid the handicapped in their continued development.

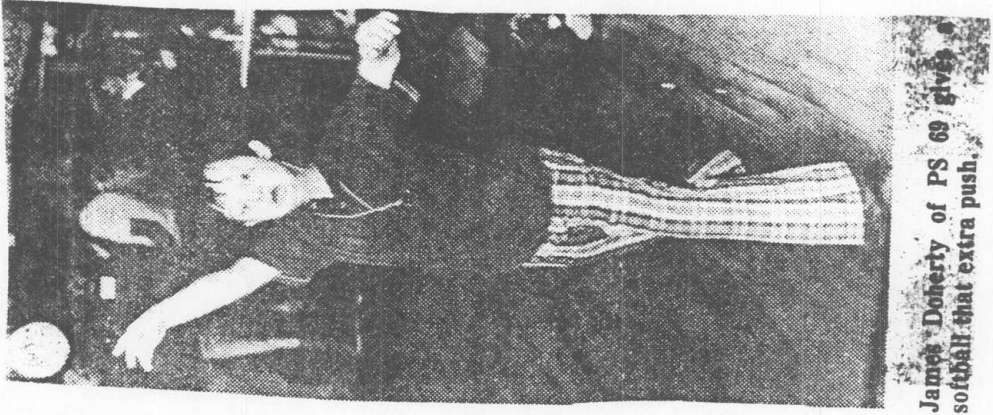
Participants in the events included people from Island public schools, the developmental center, United Cerebral Palsy, Staten Island Aid to Retarded Children, the Occupational Training Center and the Staten Island Exceptional Children's Club.

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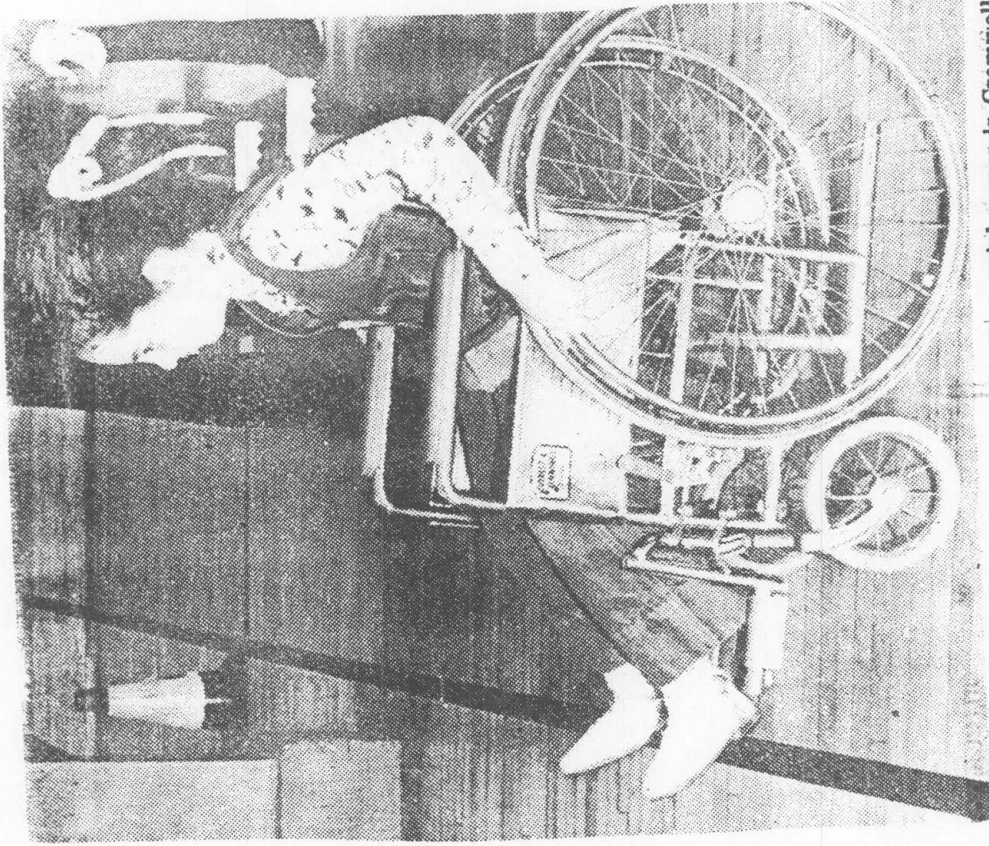
Joseph Martino admires Doris Michal's medal at the Special Olympics. Both youngsters are from PS 69, Merrymount Ave., New Springville. S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons



James Doherty of PS 69 gives a softball that extra push.



Robert Frymal of the Staten Island Developmental Center plays the drum during Special Olympics ceremonies.

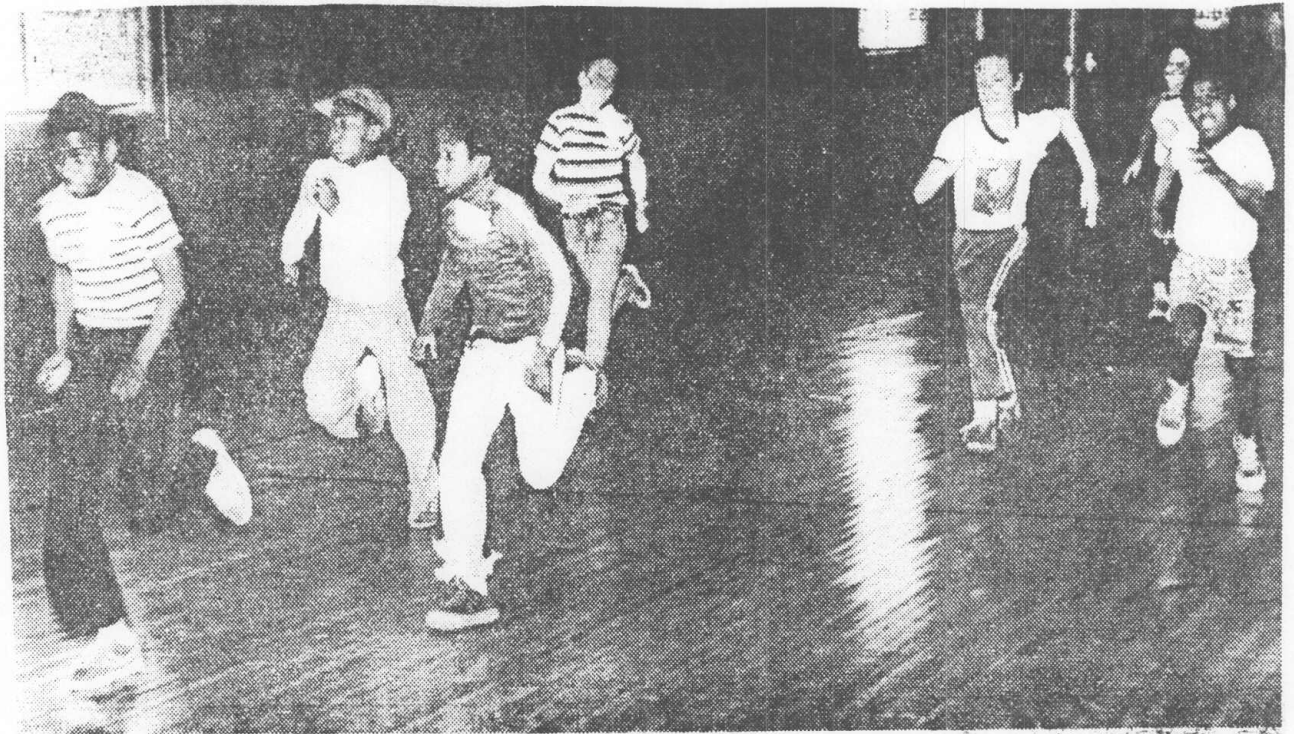


Lynne Braniff races for the wire during the special games in Cromwell Center.



This youngster proves that what goes up — if high enough — will come down ahead of the pack in the broad jump.

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A field of eager entrants makes for tough competition.



There was even some clowning around at the Special Olympics with Ronald McDonald. Advance Photos by Robert Parsons

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