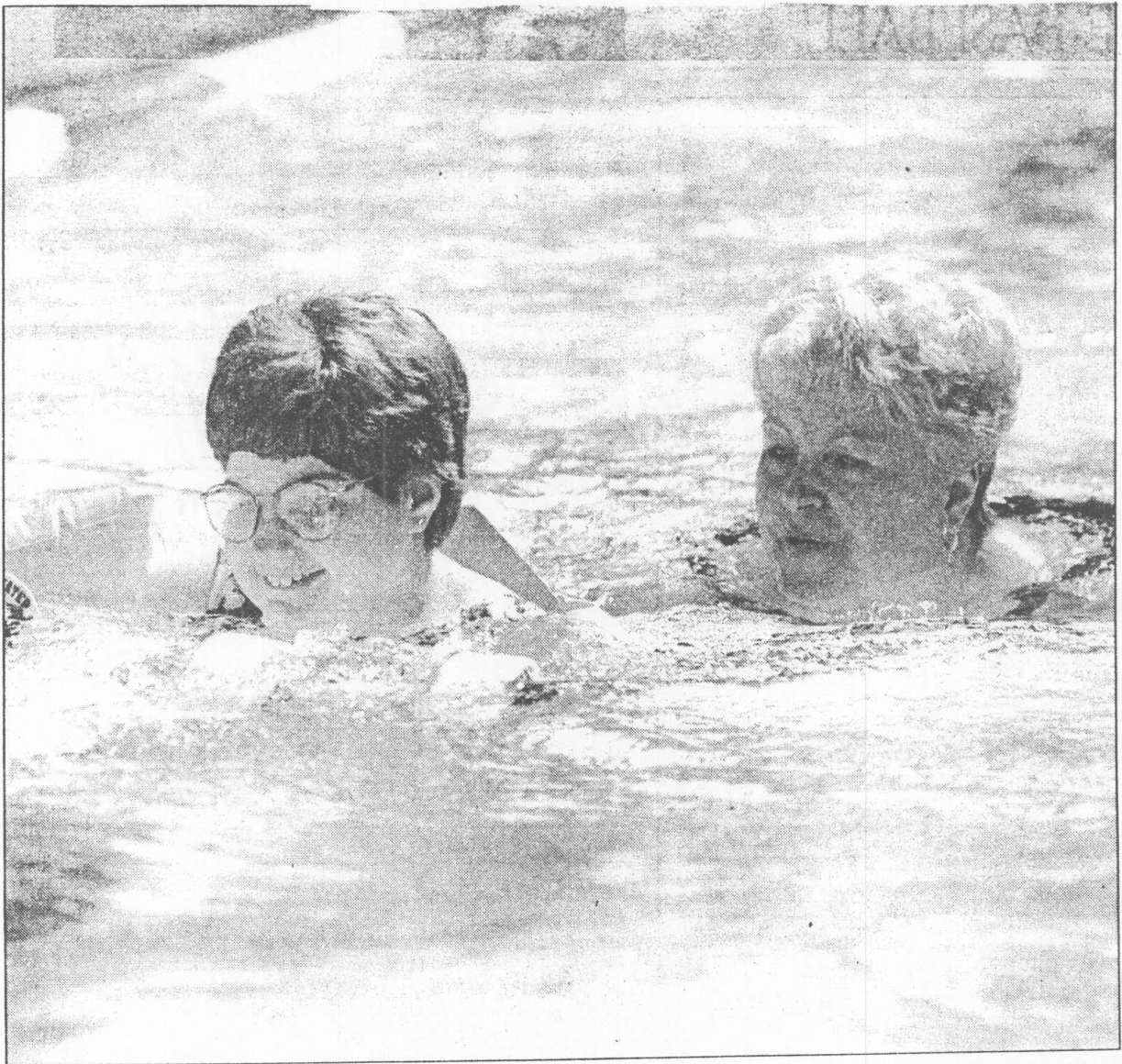


# Special Olympians use sports to topple barriers



Kerri Ann Seminaris gets the support she needs from her mom, Pat Festa.

ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ JIN LEE

## ■ Annual swim meet at Hillside has become a special day for all

The talk at Hillside Swim Club yesterday morning was about how things had changed for the better over the last quarter-century when it came to the way the world at large deals with folks like Nick Derouaux.

Nick, a Special Olympian, is in his 30s now, and among the most determined road racers you'll ever see.



CORMAC GORDON

But it wasn't so long ago he would have been shunted off into one of society's dark corners and forgotten about like thousands of others. Not that many years back, Nick would never have run a race, or even seen a swim meet, much less, competed

in one. When someone asked Rich Salinardi what had changed over the years, the Pied Piper of Island Special Olympics shrugged.

"People decided to do more than do nothing," was his answer.

Salinardi's been working with the developmentally challenged since he stopped throwing touch-downs for Wagner College 30 years ago, and it's been his life and passion across all that time.

He brings to his work a love of people and love of sports that he's melded into a network of challenges for kids with handicaps; and the good people who have thrown themselves into this type of work with him have made events like yesterday's competition between Special Olympians and the Hillside swim team possible.

Through all the years the cornerstone philosophy of the Special Olympics movement in this town has been pretty simple: Don't be afraid to fail.

It's more than 25 years ago that Salinardi brought eight or nine kids up to the Wagner College gym to see what their chances of shooting a few hoops would be. He was amazed at the positive reaction of the participants. From that day on, it's been about knocking down one barrier after another using sports as the vehicle.

"We try anything," Salinardi said. "People would worry that the kids couldn't do this or do that. We just decided that we'd try it all, and let them succeed or fail just like everyone else in the world does."

Yesterday Nick Derouaux and about 35 of his friends were battling Hillside in a sport's challenge that has no losers. It's the third year for this meet, the brain-child of Bob Griswold, a West Brighton dentist who brought the idea to the Hillside governing board and got more than he bargained for in response.

Would the club mind if some Special Olympians were invited to some type of competition one day each year at the Bulls Head facility, was the first question.

Did they mind?

Members like Arlene McGinley, Gail Fairlie and Kathleen Walsh jumped in with the type of energy needed to build an event that has become one more step toward dismissing the most important obstacle facing the developmentally disabled: The perception that they're different from anyone else.

"Once the kids from Hillside and the Special Olympics kids got together that first year it took all of about 20 minutes for the fear to go away," Salinardi said. "After that it was kids with kids. Now they have relationships. That's the important thing."

With the understanding that Special Olympians are like everyone else, each with his own strengths and weaknesses, comes the breaking down of personal barriers, and the opening of possibilities for everyone involved.

That was Salinardi's vision all those years ago when he was helping to save folks from lives in places like the old Willowbrook State School. That it's worked out so well seems to even amaze him at times.

But the real momentum for Special Olympics comes from the volunteers like JoAnn Young, who's been a swimming instructor for Special Olympians for 15 years; and Griswold and the Hillside members who helped out yesterday along with a group from the Kiwanis.

"They do all the work," Salinardi said of the volunteers involved. "And they encouraged the kids from Hillside to get involved. That was critical."

It would have been easy for the people who manage Hillside to have looked away three years ago, when Griswold brought the idea to the table.

"They didn't know what they were getting into," admits Salinardi. "They were absolutely the first club of this kind to come to us out of the blue and offer something like this."

That fact speaks well of the folks from the swim club. But it also says a lot about how far the world has come over these past three decades in dealing with all segments of the Island community.

Now the average youngster at Hillside gets to know someone from Special Olympics on equal terms. All the stereotypes disappear in a flash, and for the rest of that young person's life he'll have an understanding that would have been all but impossible a few years ago.

Everyone's better off in the long run, and if you don't believe me ask Nick Derouaux.



Mary Flora Pannese is congratulated as she finishes the breaststroke.