PLAYING ALONG
A MINI-DOCUMENTARY ON THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS
IN COLUMBIA, MO.

Convergence Capstone – Spring 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The creation of “Playing Along,” serves as a journalistic approach to shed light on the subculture of the mid-Missouri chapter of Special Olympics Missouri in a long-form feature story. The 20-minute mini-documentary explores the definition of competition and what it means to win for the families and athletes involved in the Special Olympics. In the process of discovering these issues, the documentary features one family that provides a more personal look into their daily lives, growing up with and raising two boys with special needs.

The Wilson family allowed us into their hectic schedules and shared their successes and failures in comparison with other American families. The mother, Sue Wilson, acts as the main narrator of the documentary, describing her outlook as a parent of two special needs kids and two kids without special needs. After speaking with several parents, adult living caregivers and Special Olympics volunteers, it became apparent that the Wilson family is unique for having two special needs kids because most families only have one. Wilson shares her understanding of her unique situation, yet describes her acceptance of being, “just like any other family in America.”

To clarify this statement, we followed the Wilsons since January to weekly basketball practices once a week, attended basketball tournaments with them, and visited their home to gain a better sense of their personalities and how they interact as together. We began interviews of all family members by asking about their involvement with the Special Olympics and what they enjoyed, and then dove into deeper questions about their
interaction with peers outside the subculture, as well as how they perceive their relations between family members.

As the story unfolds in “Playing Along,” we learn how the Wilsons and other families have discovered the benefits of their Special Olympics involvement, as well as how they cope with caring for relatives with special needs.

The following pages explain why we chose to focus on the Special Olympics, how we gathered our information and our editing and producing process.

**INTRODUCTION**

Josh and Ryan Wilson have been playing basketball for the Special Olympics for four years and have found a new community within their teams and network of families. But the impact of the Special Olympics expands far past the court boundaries. “Playing Along” explores what it means to succeed and win in the Special Olympics from the perspective of the families and volunteers invested in these special needs athletes of mid-Missouri.

**WHY SPECIAL OLYMPICS**

The Special Olympics is a worldwide organization dedicated to providing year round athletic opportunities to people with special needs – but we have found that only those who have pursued a personal investment in the cause have a solid understanding of this subculture. The Special Olympics Missouri chapter in mid-Missouri attracts the largest population of athletes in the state. This provides dozens of volunteer opportunities and outlets for special need athletes. From a public relations standpoint, this information is not
publicized from a local approach. Almost all of the videos, articles, information and documentaries currently available to the public are produced by the Special Olympics organization, highlighting the successes of chaptered programs and notable athletes across the globe. “Playing Along” is a journalistic approach to feature the culture of the Special Olympics with a hyper local appeal.

Our goal was to find a feature subject matter that would allow us to provide insight to a local culture. After learning about the gravity of the Special Olympics, specifically in mid-Missouri, we believed that the organization would provide an array of characters and angles to explore for a mini-documentary. The fact that we could not find any local coverage on this group, except for event coverage, was surprising, yet encouraging for us to pursue this focus. The vast amount of promotional long-form videos also kept us inclined to provide a more genuine portrayal of the stakeholders, without a marketing bias.

We were pertinent in our objectives in the production of this documentary to provide an unbiased portrayal of the Special Olympics. The piece was not meant to be a promotional video for the organization, as most of the public videos equivalent to “Playing Along” were created to endorse the group. Our efforts to interview several families, volunteers and athletes had no hidden agenda or investigative twist. The interviews were not structured to uncover the pros and cons of the Special Olympics, but to shed light on their individual stories and the stakeholders of this organization. Our end result is an authentic storytelling of their personal reflections on the organization and reflection on their lives with special needs athletes.
SUBJECTS AND INTERVIEWS

In late January, we began attending the basketball practices of the Parks and Recreation’s Special Olympics teams on Monday and Tuesday nights. From day one, we were exposed to a plethora of possible interview subjects and main characters that we quickly determined that focusing on the sport of basketball would help narrow our approach. Basketball was also the sport that best fit our capstone timeline as they were midseason and were practicing for the state tournament set for mid-April. With this in mind, we arrived to practices with camera equipment, but invested our time in targeting our central characters.

It took us about three weeks to find the Wilson family and decide to feature them. We conducted a few preliminary interviews of other parents during practice, sought advice from Special Olympics volunteers and employees who knew the families well, and even partook in basketball practices and drills to personally get to know the athletes. Josh and Ryan Wilson were particularly friendly athletes who seemed to be receptive to our attempts at conversation, however their mother and one of their sisters kept us engaged. Sue Wilson shared a lot of insight on her family’s involvement with the organization with two athletes and one child who took it upon herself to volunteer as a coach for her brothers. This was a great start and allowed for a more family-oriented angle to the understanding of the Special Olympics.

At every practice, we divided our tasks with two people interviewing parents and athletes in the hallway while the other member gathered footage on the courts. We
approached each of our subjects by explaining the motives of our documentary project. We did this to get to know the parents and allow them to feel comfortable with us as people, rather than journalists. For the most part, our subjects were receptive to our project and were open to share about their involvement and opinions on the group. Only a few subjects declined to participate, as they were camera shy.

We devised a strategy for each of our interviews to begin with light questions, and then to dig deeper for more heartfelt reactions. We have learned that most of these families have only spoken in depth about their participation with the Special Olympics with other families whom share the same situation. This made it a slight challenge for us to gather quality sound bites that did not sound like promotional messages from the Special Olympics-made videos we have watched during secondary research. We began covering basic information like the length of involvement of their special needs athlete and why they decided to join, and then eased our way into discovering the type of special needs their child has, understanding what it is like to care for their child and how their involvement with the Special Olympics has impacted their relationships. Some of our interviews were successful in discovering those golden nuggets of personal anecdotes, while in others we could not break through to a genuine level of trust.

The importance of our interviews in the final product of our documentary was key because we established this as a sound bite-driven piece. With this predetermined, we decided to use only the best interviews in the final cut of this video, including only the interviews that did not need the journalist’s voice. We conducted several interviews with
athletes, but were forced to omit these from our final cut because of our emphasis on interview-driven journalism.

We were able to learn about the athletes, see them in action and hear from them during their interaction with their family members and peers. The parental and volunteer interviews provided emotional and honest insight on their lives and a perspective on their special needs athletes, allowing the audience to gather an authentic sense of these subjects. The interviews with the athletes alone did not provide the strong storytelling power that our other interviews provided, and in the editing process, we could not include these sound bites without needing to hear the interviewer's voice or include a voiceover track before and after the sound bite clip. Without these voices, we increased the amount of b-roll and footage of the athletes, included more natural sound pops and interaction footage to ensure the validity of our package. The interviews we kept are from sources who know the athletes and interact with them on a very regular basis – and ultimately allow viewers to relate with their successes and struggles as they share their stories.
We tried to make the documentary a bit different than most sports documentaries. Because of how unusual the team is and fact that the story of the Wilsons is our main focus than the actual game and competition aspect, we made the film have a much slower pace. This allowed us to create a more intimate atmosphere and the footage had to go along with the feel of interviews.
We tried to achieve that by getting unusual angles that create more intimate and sometimes ironic atmosphere.

By using DSLRs that have low depth of field we were also able to achieve blurry backgrounds that allowed us to focus viewers attention on what we wanted to show. This was made possible by reducing the distraction from the background that we put out of focus.

Another aspect we tried to keep in mind was lighting. By using darker footage we gave the movie a more personal feel rather than a straightforward recording of events.
On the other hand we kept the competitions and practices bright to show the action without unnecessary confusing viewers. This way we created a strong contrast between the games and personal life.

Getting to know our interviewees, getting their trust and keep the track of who is who was one of hardest things we had to do. It was important for us to show that we know what we are doing and that we are not planning to make anyone look bad. Another issue was making them feel comfortable enough to open up and give us more depth than we would need for a news story.

At the beginning it was really hard for people to open up to us and tell us anything more that just general information. Everyone was just saying that it’s great fun and that kids really like it. But once they got used to our presence during practices they started sharing more personal stories.

**THE EDITING PROCESS**

The biggest logistical challenge of this documentary was assembling all of the footage in a way that made sense. From the first practice we attended on January 30 to the final banquet on April 17, we filled up countless CompactFlash cards with several hundred
gigabytes of high-definition video, photos and audio. We often used three DSLR cameras at once, in tandem with wireless lavaliere microphones and Marantz recorders.

Once we had all of our footage, we uploaded the files we needed to the ISIS server and decided to use Final Cut Pro X as our editing software. The learning curve for Final Cut Pro X was a little steeper than we had expected, as all three of us had used it at least once before. The process of putting together a longer video, however, was the biggest challenge in this respect.

Therefore, we decided to divide our film into six distinct sections, which we edited individually and then put together as one 20-minute film.

A little more than halfway through our shooting schedule, we decided on a basic narrative and then, as shown above, assembled a rough timeline and storyline for our project. From the very beginning of the project, we wanted to make the kids playing sports in Special Olympics seem as ordinary and normal as possible. We had originally anticipated having a sort of “reveal” early in the film, but we felt it was more honest to portray the characters for who they were from the very beginning.
The film’s opening scene was one with which we struggled quite a bit. Our initial cut of the film featured a volunteer carrying a bag of basketballs out of the gym, talking about volunteering. As she walked, other people’s voiceovers mentioned how much their children had grown from playing, and then there was a cut to the banquet at the end of the season. After revisiting our outline and script, as well as getting advice from Olga, we decided the film would work better if it established the main characters from the beginning.

Olga suggested the artistic filter at the beginning of the film, as well as the slowed-down video. We settled on the purplish filter and oversaturated colors because it evoked a calming yet urgent mood. This, of course, was one of our last considerations. The most pressing logistical challenge was developing a workflow that was convenient for us and did not take up too much room on the ISIS utility server. Ultimately, we started a script and tried to group clips in specific categories, but it became difficult to know if clips were being
used more than once. Preventing this required a great deal of coordination and quality control, but in the end, we were able to make it work.

When we first started editing, we had a framework of where we wanted clips to go, but we didn’t have a defined script. We put together the script by section as we edited, however, which allowed us to have more control over the placement and alteration of certain scenes as we saw fit. From the footage we had, we needed to make a decision on how to introduce our main character, Josh Wilson, into the film.

On March 15, we accompanied the Wilsons and their extended family to HuHot Mongolian Grill in Columbia. The video we shot that night helped form the beginning scenes with Josh, where he could be any 11-year-old boy celebrating his birthday with his family. We decided, however, to use voiceovers from his aunt and mother to illustrate that taking care of Josh and Ryan when out in public isn’t always the easiest task. Without giving too much away, the film establishes that while the family appears normal, they deal with problems that not every family faces.

The sheer amount of video we shot while we
were with the Wilsons helped us immensely when transitioning from scene to scene. The transition from the celebratory birthday scene to the Wilsons’ house happens inside Sue’s minivan, where Tymon happened to be riding. The rest of the scene, in which Sue reveals her two sons’ conditions and how she learned about them, takes place in the Wilson home.

In addition to getting to know the Wilson family quite well, every week during practice, we picked out parents and guardians from the bleachers and interviewed them about their experience with having their children compete in Special Olympics. Their stories were just as interesting, compelling and worth our time as the Wilsons’, but unfortunately we were not able to include all of them in the final cut of the film. In the final cut of the film, the interviews with Janis Jansen, Mary Nemec, David Christianson and others are all pretty close to each other in the film. This was intentional—we wanted to make it clear in the film that although the Wilsons deal with certain problems, these aren’t the only ones that parents of special needs children deal with on a daily basis. Fortunately, the cameras captured a few candid moments from the parents during the interviews, most notably
when their children interrupted them. There is a moment when Joshua Christianson, 27, stopped his father David’s interview to tell him it was time to go, that captures the parent-child relationship regardless of age or physical or mental disability. Capturing moments like these is what made producing this documentary both fun and fulfilling.

**THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Every good documentary has an audience or a niche, no matter the size. For the first phase of our research, we canvassed people attending the True/False Film Fest between March 1 and 4. Questions included:

- How often do you watch documentary films?
- What is the most important part of a documentary movie for you?
- How familiar are you with the Special Olympics program in Columbia?
- What aspect of Special Olympics interests you the most?

From the opinions we gathered and the films we watched during True/False, we gained a better sense of the story we wanted to tell and how we wanted to tell it.

After finishing the editing process, we uploaded the first cut of our documentary to YouTube and then created an online survey that we shared with our social networks online and offline. The survey itself is short but has a higher than normal barrier to entry because people need to watch the 20-minute video on YouTube before taking it. Since editing on the film wrapped on May 1, the survey went out with a response window of about one week. As
of May 7, the survey had received 25 responses and the video itself had 169 views on YouTube. While 68 percent of the survey respondents were female, only 51 percent of the YouTube viewers were female. In addition, the most common age demographic that took the survey was 21-29, which makes sense because that is the age group that our team is most connected with on Facebook and Twitter. Our survey reached people between the ages of 18 and 59.

When asked about the extent of the knowledge of the Special Olympics, 80 percent responded that they had “some knowledge,” as opposed to “no knowledge” or “extensive knowledge.”
When asked to choose the character or characters they found the most compelling in the film, 72 percent of respondents chose Josh Wilson, the main character of the film. Sue Wilson received 52 percent of the vote, while others trailed behind significantly. A friend of Tymon’s composed and played the music used in the film, and the survey asked how effectively it worked in the film.

The results were mixed, with 36 percent responding that the music was effective, 40 percent finding it somewhat effective, 12 percent finding it very effective and 12 percent finding it not effective.

When asked about the varying camera angles during interviews and game footage, 40 percent of survey respondents found them to be somewhat effective. The survey also asked how balanced respondents found it, in terms of the numerous storylines. Ninety
percent of respondents found it balanced or somewhat balanced. One respondent wrote that, "I would have liked to see more interaction between teammates. Some points seem overbearingly explanatory -- having a timeline of development with an outsider’s stance, a more minimalist approach to editing, might be preferred." Others were more complimentary, one writing that it appeared that the “reporters/editors really cared.”

Several free-response questions follow in the survey, including “Where did you feel the pace of the film could have been improved?” and “What was your favorite moment (or moments) in the film?” Responses to the pace question included: “Some answers could have been shorter. Maybe picking more specific question, maybe trying more variety in the points on view,” and “Less filming at the restaurant? I thought the pace was very appropriate, but if I had to pick one place to improve it it would be at the restaurant in the beginning.”

Indeed, after we posted the first cut of the film to YouTube, we rearranged a lot of clips at the restaurant and removed some redundant material. When the survey asked respondents what their favorite moments were in the film, the responses included:

• “When the sister answers the questions and shows a less flowery image. The mother needs to have a positive attitude but makes it feel too unrealistic.”

• “Enjoyed the at-home moments with the Wilson family.”

• “Showing how unashamedly affectionate Josh is with his loved ones.”

• “I think the kids joking around on the bench while they are all at the basketball game is good...”

The final two questions asked respondents what they liked most and disliked most about the film. When asked what they liked, respondents gave answers that included:
• “The fact that it was made. It is a very interesting reality people should be more aware of.”
• “The subject matter. Special Olympics is usually only covered for fundraising and publicity, not with the personal angle you took...Great choice for your capstone!”
• “The film was very sensitive in how it portrayed athletes as ATHLETES—and not people with special needs.”
• “The fact that I got an honest glimpse into the lives of a family with special needs kids.”

As far as things that could have been improved, respondents gave the following answers:
• “Felt a bit sweetened. More focus on the kids’ day to day learning would make the improvements more appreciable.”
• “I wanted to hear and see more of the athletes and their sport and less of the interviews with family members. We get that the family members have challenges other families may face, but I want to see and hear more from the athletes and see them engaging in "normal" activities.”

CONCLUSION

While we explored one family that participates in Special Olympics activities, there is tremendous potential for future capstone teams who are interested in long-form documentary stories. The Wilsons provided our team with a great story and strong
material to work with, but we are confident that other families would be willing to open up and talk about their children who have special needs.

This has been a sometimes difficult, sometimes wonderful and, above all, enjoyable experience. The documentary film may be the end product, but along the way, we developed a strong rapport with our subjects and learned the value of developing deeper relationships with “sources” that transcend that label and become ordinary people.

“Playing Along” represents an attempt to break through the stereotypes about mental and physical disabilities and those who play Special Olympics sports. The documentary isn’t intended to be a universal story about sports or disability. By capturing a small slice of one family’s life, we showed a story people do not often see.