

Danielle Oehlman - In her words...

I am proud to say that I've been a Special Olympics athlete for 24 years. When I was very young, my twin sister and I both got sick with the flu. For Mandy, it was just a stomach bug like we've all experienced. But I wasn't so lucky. The virus went to my brain and caused permanent damage, leaving me to re-learn how to walk and talk.

Growing up with a disability was hard, but NOT because of the things I couldn't do. It was hard because other people didn't always accept me. Like a lot of people who are different, I was picked on and left out a lot.

But I was always pretty good at sports.

When I was a kid, I played with my sister and our friends. Most of the time, I felt like I belonged. When we got to high school, Mandy and I both went out for the basketball team. There were probably 15 girls at tryouts. Afterwards, I found out I wasn't selected. I was devastated.

I felt like I had let myself down that I wasn't good at anything. I remember asking the coaches "Why?" The reason, they said, was that I had a disability and that I would jeopardize their chances of winning.

I was lost for words.

Later, when I talked to my special education teacher, he told me about Special Olympics and encouraged me to call.

That's when my whole life changed. From the very beginning, my coach encouraged me to go after my dreams and not stay hidden in the dark.

Over the years, Special Olympics has given me opportunities to grow as a person and experience things that I might never have tried on my own.

I've been part of the Unified Sports movement, where people with and without intellectual disabilities play on the same team together. I've been on Team Indiana competing at one World Games and two USA Games. I'm a proud representative of Special Olympics Indiana's athlete leadership program.

Through Special Olympics, I found myself, and I also found my family. I found Dustin, who became my husband in 2006. He and I have two sons and one daughter. Like their parents, our two sons have learning disabilities. Also like their parents, the boys like to run and play sports, so we introduced them to the wonderful world of Special Olympics.

Now, as a mother of three and with a husband who doesn't slow down, our life is crazy sometimes. But I love it. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Special Olympics brought me closer to my friends and family. It's also brought me closer to the ones I love, the one who calls me wife, and definitely the ones who call me mom.

