

Mission Statement

KEEN is a national, nonprofit volunteer-led organization that provides one-to-one recreational opportunities for children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities at no cost to their families and caregivers. Neither income nor the severity of a child's disability is a barrier to joining a KEEN program. KEEN's mission is to foster the self-esteem, confidence, skills and talents of its athletes through non-competitive activities, allowing young people facing even the most significant challenges to meet their individual goals.

KEEN provides opportunities for mentally and physically disabled children and young adults ages four to twenty-one. KEEN's athletes have autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and other significant physical or intellectual disabilities. For those athletes who have extensive mental and/or physical disabilities, KEEN is the only organization that can accommodate their special needs.

KEEN differentiates itself from other programs by:

- Accepting any child no matter the severity or type of disability. KEEN's primary goal is to find those hard-to-serve kids and provide a place where they can participate fully and succeed in fun, confidence-building recreational activity.
- Being free of charge. Due to the financial burden of additional health care expenses experienced by families with a disabled child, KEEN is committed to offering all of their programs at no cost to the athletes, families or caregivers.
- Providing a one-to-one and, if needed a two-to-one, ratio of volunteer for every athlete. Adaptive sports leagues and other community offerings are not always suitable for kids who find it hard to compete or understand a team environment. KEEN's one-to-one approach provides the individual attention that allows each athlete to succeed.

The individualized attention that all athletes receive is what really distinguishes KEEN from other programs that offer similar services. By working one-on-one with a trained volunteer, the athlete is able to receive the specialized attention needed to build his/her self confidence. In addition, parents are able to provide KEEN with specific goals for their child. These goals are then communicated to volunteers at every session, which ensures the growth of each athlete.

Organization Existence

KEEN is modeled on an innovative program established in Oxford, England by Elliott Portnoy, who brought KEEN to the Washington, DC area with his wife Estee in 1992. KEEN started in an elementary school gym with five children and a handful of dedicated parents and volunteers. For six years, KEEN operated completely as a volunteer run organization. In order to meet the demands of the growing program, KEEN hired its first program coordinator in 2001. In 2004, Sonnenschein, Nath and Rosenthal LLC provided the seed funding that enabled KEEN to expand across the country.

Today, KEEN has seven affiliates providing programs in ten states and offering 28 various programs to over 600 children with disabilities. KEEN affiliates operate

independently with their own local board of directors and staff and meet the unique needs of athletes and volunteers in their communities. To date, KEEN's affiliates include: Greater DC, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Phoenix, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

With the national expansion came the formation of an organizational structure designed to provide the necessary oversight of and support to all the affiliates. Three years ago, the national organization, KEEN USA, was created, with the primary mission of providing the guidance and financial support necessary to bring the same quality of service to all KEEN programs.

Need and Problem

The community that KEEN targets is significantly lacking in appropriate sports and recreational programs that can accommodate the needs of children with disabilities. According to a recent 2008 clinic report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the most frequently identified barriers to the active participation in recreational programs for children with disabilities include 1) the child's functional limitations, 2) the high costs of programs and 3) the lack of nearby facilities or programs. KEEN is helping to overcome these barriers by accepting any child into the program regardless of the nature or severity of their disability and providing all of the programs completely free of charge.

Another issue has been the rising cost of raising a child with a disability. Children with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than other families. The biggest challenge for these families is providing everything that their child needs without the financial means to do so. For example, the child may require the use of a wheelchair, but the parents may not have insurance to cover it. In addition, if the child would benefit from attending a program, but the program costs money, the family may not have the ability to pay. KEEN, being a free program, ensures that all children have access to the program regardless of the family's financial situation.

One last issue that impacts disabled children, particularly those in New York City, is access to these programs. Given that most families do not have a car, they need to rely on the subway, which can be difficult for a disabled child. In addition, for families that would benefit most from these programs, it may not be worth the travel time and effort to get their child to the program. One option for an alternative means of transportation is Access-a-Ride, which is a New York City Transit provided service that helps individuals that are unable to use regular transportation. However, for those individuals that do not qualify for this service, KEEN wants to be there for them, which will provide families with easier access to the programs. Support from the Harry S. Black & Allon Fuller Fund grant will enable KEEN to reach a new group of children who currently do not have access to the programs.

Successful Programs

KEEN currently runs three different programs: KEEN Sports, KEEN Swim and KEEN Arts & Crafts. While developing a program that responds to the unique needs of the New York City community, the sessions always keep the KEEN core of providing one-to-one ratio of volunteer to athlete and offering all programs free of charge.

A few noteworthy accomplishments that have occurred since the inception of KEEN New York have included witnessing a child lose weight from gaining confidence in his sports skills, watching a four year old child learn to walk from someone just giving him the attention he needed, and seeing a mother cry when she saw her son's smile after winning his first race.

Staff and Volunteers

Currently, there is one paid part-time staff, the program coordinator. Since KEEN is a volunteer-led organization, there have been over 350 volunteers in the past 22 months. KEEN relies heavily on its volunteers who donated more than 1,000 hours of their time since 2008. KEEN volunteers serve as coaches, help run KEEN sessions, assist with fundraising and event planning, serve on KEEN boards, and even help with data entry and administrative tasks. Without their many hours of service, KEEN would simply not be able to serve the number of children that the program does.

The Coaches Committee is a group of dedicated volunteers that help each session. Each member has a title: Director of the Coaches Committee, Director of the Sports Program, Director of the Arts & Crafts Program, Director of the Parents, Director of the Athletes, and Director of the Volunteers. These six volunteers ensure that each session runs at the highest standard and that every child is receiving the attention he/she needs.

Other Organizations

KEEN New York supports all organizations that are working for a common goal. In the quarterly newsletter, an organization that serves the disabled community is mentioned in the "Spotlight on a Non-Profit" section. Brochures and flyers are also put out on the registration table for the parents to take when dropping off their child at the sports session.

The main difference between KEEN and the other programs is the one-to-one ratio of volunteer to athlete. This unique approach lets KEEN accept even the lowest functioning children. The sports program is often referred to children that other organizations are not able to help.

Utilization of Funds

KEEN New York is requesting \$100,000 to expand KEEN Sports to the boroughs by 2012. In particular, KEEN wants to reach those children who are low-income and live in foster care or in group homes. These children have fewer resources available to them and could benefit greatly from KEEN's free program. Support from generous donors will enable KEEN to spend additional resources to grow the program by expanding the program's reach to invite the neediest of special needs children to join the program. The grant will go towards the salary of Nichole Cerimele (the program coordinator), rent for the facility, equipment and fundraising to keep the program running in 2012.

The average cost of an athlete to attend a KEEN session is \$50. This figure does not include the generous donations from the community of equipment, supplies and giveaways for the athletes and volunteers. KEEN works hard to keep the overhead costs to a minimum. The sports program has received donated facility space to run

the Manhattan location. Furthermore, KEEN does not have an office, so there is no rent. KEEN is committed to spending time and resources on the activities that will enhance the programs. The reason for this is so that the program can serve more children who would otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in any sporting or recreational programs.

While fun is the obvious theme at KEEN, the programs fulfill an unmet need. The health benefit for young people to engage in physical activity is truly needed due to the increase in weight problems across children. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 17 percent of children age 2-19 were overweight in 2003-04. Furthermore, NCHS analysis suggests that overweight in youths has not leveled off or decreased, and is increasing to even higher levels. A child who is overweight and not active is likely to become an overweight adult, and, therefore, likely to develop additional health problems. But a child who participates in physical activities as a youth has a chance to prevent these conditions in adulthood.

The story is more complicated for children with disabilities. Studies show that children with disabilities are four times less likely to be physically active than kids without disabilities. The main culprit is the lack of access to recreational and physical activity. Traditional community recreational programs are simply unequipped to serve children with disabilities for a variety of reasons. First, they are often organized in competitive teams, where a child with, for example, cerebral palsy, may not be able to keep up with his/her peers or not be able to participate at all. Second, most community recreational programs are structured in a way that does not accommodate, for example, a child with autism who needs to take frequent breaks from an activity. Finally, recreational programs do not typically offer individualized attention to the participants.

On the other hand, KEEN provides programs that are non-competitive and flexible, offer one-on-one coaching and are free of charge. The athletes of KEEN are taught the lifelong skill of exercise and the programs helps them become the kickballer, bowler, swimmer, runner or tennis player they aspire to be. The benefits of the programs are far-reaching and significant, even beyond the benefit of being physically active.

- The athletes have opportunities to build friendships with peers or coaches, gain confidence, exercise, develop athletic and social skills, and feel that they belong to the world around them as they are part of a group: KEEN.
- KEEN's programs strengthen families by providing resources for parents of children with special needs. Parents and caregivers are able to have some down time while their child is at KEEN. Parents may opt to join a group of other KEEN parents in the cafeteria for organized meetings, go to the grocery store, attend to another family member or even take a much needed nap. The staff frequently refers parents to other community resources that may benefit the child and the family. KEEN becomes a support network for the entire family.
- The volunteer coaches gain a deeper understanding of themselves and people with disabilities through their coaching at KEEN and are enriched by giving back to their community. The program is also teaching a generation of young adults to be community leaders.

The athletes and volunteers thrive in an environment of exercise and fun. KEEN welcomes the support of generous donors in the effort to expand the program and to reach more children.

Evaluation

KEEN New York recently had the families fill out a survey to look at the community that the program is currently serving and why they chose to attend a KEEN session. One hundred percent of the surveys indicated that the program provides self confidence, as well as both sports and social skills. Other parents have also noted that weight loss and better behavior have been seen. Another way to measure the success of the program is through attendance and retention. When a child keeps coming back to the program, it means KEEN is aligned with the mission it set out to accomplish.

Anecdote

KEEN New York has positively impacted so many athletes and their families. One child in particular has touched the hearts of many. Max is in foster care and has Autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. He came to KEEN right after his fourth birthday and was late to his first session because he was just learning how to walk by himself. At each session that Max attended, there was a noticeable improvement in his ability to walk. After three months of KEEN, he was not only walking, but learned to run and set up the bowling pins by himself. It is children like Max that make KEEN a necessity in New York. As a result, by expanding to the Bronx, KEEN will be able to help more and more children that will greatly benefit from this program.