

## Lieberman's Camp Abilities helping change attitudes

Physical educators face many challenges in today's school settings. One of the most significant, which relates directly to their teaching effectiveness, is the increase in the number of students with disabilities who are being included in general physical education. Sadly, not all teachers have the knowledge or experience necessary to make appropriate adaptations for children with disabilities, and find it difficult to meet the learning and physical needs of all students.

Lauren Lieberman, a SHAPE America member since 1988 who currently serves as a distinguished service professor of adapted physical education (APE) at The College at Brockport, NY, recognized this challenge years ago, and created a summer sports camp specially designed to train future teachers to include students with visual impairments (VI) in physical education and sport programs. Camp Abilities just celebrated its 20th anniversary and has made a difference in the lives of thousands of teachers and students.

We interviewed Lieberman for *Momentum* and asked her what made her start Camp Abilities. "In the past, teachers received little to no training in how to teach children with visual impairments, and the biggest challenges teachers face today are the lack of training and the fear of the unknown," she said. "I wanted my preservice students to know what to do when teaching children with visual impairments. Although many resources exist to help teachers — such as the book by Lieberman, Ponchilla & Ponchilla (2013) — you can't learn how to teach these kids from a book; you must experience it."

Lieberman went on to explain that until 1985, most children with VI attended special schools for the blind. Today, 93% of these students attend their local schools, which has created a new need in the training of future teachers. Many studies in the field have acknowledged the lack of training as the main obstacle for teachers to include children with disabilities and identified a need to educate

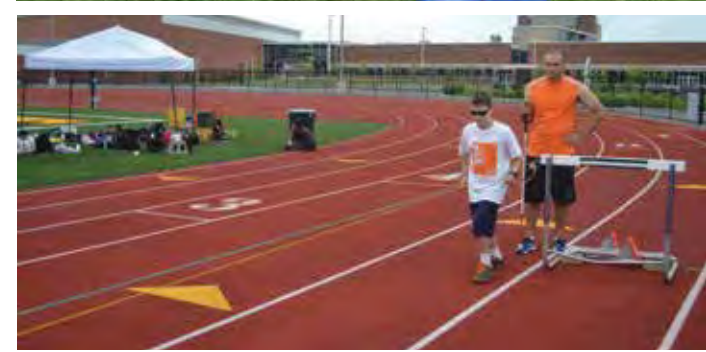
the faculty who teach Introduction to APE courses in higher education. Camp Abilities aims to close that gap by providing counselor training to future teachers, as well as materials, adaptations and the opportunity to interact with the kids. The benefits are twofold: 1) The teachers gain experience and confidence in working with children with VI, and 2) the students develop and improve their skills and learn that, with a few simple adaptations, they are able to participate in sports and activities with their peers (watch this segment of Real Sports on HBO about how students are benefiting from what they learn in Camp Abilities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnbdp35NvEo>).

One example of the impact the camp has had on its participants is the story Lieberman shared about Martha Reuther: "She was a swimmer, and had been on her ninth-grade swim team but had never heard about the Paralympics. When she attended camp, she was timed while swimming and the instructors discovered that her time would place her in eighth place in the world! After camp, she went on her junior swim tour, continued her training, and is now on the Paralympic swim team going to the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro."

Lieberman added that several of the camp counselors have gone on to get jobs working with students with VI — some of them even landed their job *because* they had been a part of Camp Abilities. "Since the camp also develops leadership skills, several of them have even won awards for their leadership or have won the Teacher of the Year award."

Despite the many success stories that Lieberman is witness to each year, she recognizes that schools still face serious obstacles when it comes to APE: "The main challenge is attitudes... teachers and administrators are scared, and many schools don't have proper equipment."

How can physical educators address these challenges? "School districts have 'quota funds' that allow them to order a certain amount of free special equipment for teaching children with visual impairments — for example, those 3D models of molecules used for a chemistry class. The teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) or orientation and mobility instructor at each school district is responsible for ordering the equipment from the American Printing House for the Blind ([www.aph.org/pe/products/](http://www.aph.org/pe/products/)), which is government funded and is in charge of creating curricula and products that help kids with impairments learn better," Lieberman explained. "The problem is that many PE and APE teachers don't know they can get free equipment for their classes, and that many TVIs don't believe PE is as important as other



subjects, so they won't take the initiative to order PE equipment. Teachers must make a case for PE... get on the TVI's radar and work with them; after all, they want what is best for the child." (For sample forms that can be filled out with/for the TVI, refer to the van Munster, Weaver, Lieberman, & Arndt [2015] resource.)

Lieberman is excited to be preparing for another successful year of camps and is determined to do her part in ensuring that all children, including those with VI, have the same opportunities to learn. "You can't change the child," she said. "What you can change is the environment and the way you teach activities (rules, speed, equipment). As physical educators, we are responsible for teaching children with disabilities the same things we teach all children. There should not be a special curriculum, but rather adaptations to use in the existing curriculum so all children can do everything their peers are doing and are not excluded."

For more information on Camp Abilities, you may contact Lieberman ([llieberm@brockport.edu](mailto:llieberm@brockport.edu)) or look up the following resources:

- Camp Abilities website: [www.campabilities.org](http://www.campabilities.org)
- Lieberman, L. J., Lepore, M., & Haegele, J. A. (2014). Camp Abilities: A sports camp for children with visual impairments. *Palaestra*, 20(4), 37-43.
- Lieberman, L.J., Ponchilla, P., & Ponchilla, S. (2013). *Physical education and sport for individuals who are visually impaired or deafblind: Foundations of instruction*. New York, NY: American Federation of the Blind Press.
- Schedlin, H., & Lieberman, L. (2011). *Sports for everyone: A handbook for starting sports camps for children with visual impairments*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind.
- van Munster, M., Weaver, E., Lieberman, L., & Arndt, K. (2015). Visual impairment and physical education: Steps to success. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 108, 231-237.

