

Volunteer of the Year – Northeast Wisconsin

Debra Moore-Gruenloh

Special Olympics Wisconsin



Through her 35 years of volunteer service, Debra Moore-Gruenloh personifies the mission of the Special Olympics to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience joy and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. Deb shares a story that she knew the age of 13 that she wanted to become a Special Education teacher, having a “calling” to work with individuals with intellectual disabilities. This calling also led her to many roles volunteering with Special Olympic Wisconsin and journeys across the USA and internationally coach for delegations of athletes.



Deb has been a key volunteer in multiple roles for Special Olympics Wisconsin since 1987, volunteering over 1,000 hours annually. She demonstrates outstanding passion and commitment to service for Special Olympics Wisconsin both in the sheer number of volunteer positions she holds and the significance of her contributions within those roles. In this past year alone, Deb has served in numerous leadership roles, some of which include serving as the Volunteer Athlete Leadership Coordinator, Unified Leadership Task Force member, Athlete Global Messenger Trainer, Athlete Health Trainer, and Athlete-As-Coach Trainer.

Deb has also been a local fundraiser and coach for multiple sports, and volunteered for the Summer, Winter, and Outdoor Tournament Games at the regional and state level. Additionally, Deb will be the Bocce coach for USA Games bocce delegates attending the USA Games in Florida in June 2022.

When Special Olympics Wisconsin was unable to offer in-person events during the COVID-19 pandemic, Deb helped find ways to help address the emotional health challenges their athletes were facing due to isolation. Deb was part of a Unified Leadership Task Force made up of both individuals with and without ID, who created and modified athlete leadership curriculums to a virtual format. She volunteered to recruit and train athletes in a variety of curriculums, and find ways to provide online resources and individual consultation to the local athletes that she coached.

When asked to describe the impact of her service, a Special Olympics athlete parent explained that “Deb’s dedication and passion to Special Olympics is part of her being. To watch, learn and be around her and athletes, one cannot help get caught in that passion — and be inspired to be involved.”

