The Opportunity Initiative:

Increasing Accessibility of Empowerment

Activities for Children with Disabilities

Ty Bever, Nana Danso, Ilana Hayutin, Will Holtzmann, and Rosie Whyte

November 17, 2017

Pioneer Leadership Program: Leading Community Change

University of Denver

CCI Proposal
The Opportunity Initiative works to increase access to empowerment and enrichment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. We hope to narrow the gap between resources that are available to non-disabled children and children with disabilities, especially those in low-income families. Through engagement in activities and mentorship programs, we will build strong, lasting relationships with this population. In congruence with developing social fabric, we are connecting children with organizations that specialize in therapeutic recreation and enrichment activities. This will allow children to foster their true identities and untapped potential in avenues unmatched by any other program.

We focus on adolescent development because the early years of an individual’s life are critical for predicting future success. Transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school are specifically vulnerable periods. During these years, children with disabilities are marginalized because of their status, and they are restricted from participation in social and physical activities. Limited participation is even more problematic in populations of children who come from low-income families. In combination with the stigmatization associated with their disability, these children are barred from participation because their families do not have a surplus of financial resources necessary to accommodate to their condition.

The socioemotional consequences of a lack of access to resources and empowerment opportunities are immense. This is because engaged play, whether that be peer-to-peer based, exercise oriented, or culturally focused, is integral for healthy development. Children who are not involved in these activities have predispositions for mental illness that surface in early adulthood. Psychological repercussions can be reduced with participation in an inclusive program like The Opportunity Initiative.

Our program partners with organizations like the Special Olympics of Colorado, Access Gallery, and Outdoor Buddies to further expand opportunities for children with disabilities. We mentor students in special education programs in Denver Public Schools and take these children on field trips to the sites of these stakeholders. Participating in immersion activities will help these children realize that leisure and genuine fun is not limited to their non-disabled peers.

It is the public’s responsibility to support youth with disabilities and make empowerment opportunities more available so that all members of the community can thrive. Providing children with disabilities with the opportunity and guidance they need requires an extraordinary level of commitment, but the reward of seeing a child thrive is priceless. Only by investing in these children will we reach a level of cohesivity in our community that is transformational for all of its members.
Introduction

Meet T. T is a beautiful, intelligent, and caring young woman. She loves swimming, shopping, nail and hair salons, going to movies, and eating dinners out with friends and family. T was diagnosed with autism when she was three years old. She became nonverbal after 22 vaccines at the age of 18 months. She needs assistance with all day to day activities and home and bathing care.

When T participated in a daily enrichment program for young adults with disabilities, her entire world shifted. She discovered her passions and identity through art, outdoor, and exercise activities. Because of mentorship and volunteer programs, she even found a boyfriend. T was a giddy school girl, restless to go to programming and see her prince charming. This is the power of human connection and therapeutic recreation. It changes and uplifts people. Everyone deserves these experiences, but unfortunately, opportunities for individuals with disabilities in low-income families are extremely limited. By increasing accessibility to leisure activities, children will be able to foster genuine human connection and navigate their true identities.

Team Background

Individuals with disabilities need more human support. We can not call ourselves a community without accepting and uplifting every member, not just the non-disabled normate. Every member of our team is passionate and invested in empowering individuals who fall into this category, specifically individuals with physical and psychological disabilities. Ilana Hayutin has been volunteering for the Special Olympics of Colorado for over seven years and has been interested in the therapeutic effects of sports on mental health ever since. Rosalie Whyte is interested in child psychology and the effects of experience-dependent opportunities on developmental outcomes. Will Holtzmann volunteered at Wellspring Community, which provides enrichment classes and assisted work opportunities to young adults with special needs. Nana Danso is studying cognitive neuroscience and is passionate about health equity. She also volunteered at Craig Hospital, which specializes in brain and spinal cord injury. Ty Bever is studying medicine and has volunteered with the Special Olympics of Colorado and the Children’s Hospital of Colorado, which has motivated his interest in youth health practices.

Project Description

We found commonality in our experiences and combined our diverse set of skills to find ways to better serve the community of individuals with disabilities. Before reaching out to stakeholders, we investigated the gap between resources that are available to non-disabled
children versus children with disabilities. We deducted that this stratification of resources is leading to negative outcomes; children with disabilities are getting the short end of the stick, and it is impacting their development and future success.

After meeting with the Headmaster of Denver Academy, we also began to analyze the discrepancy in the level of access to resources between children with disabilities in high and low income families. Socioeconomic status mediates a child’s level of external support and access to certain leisure activities. More often than not, parents who have the financial means to support their children’s specific needs do so. For children attending a private school like Denver Academy, their parents provide them with more opportunities than they can handle. The reverse is true for children in low-income neighborhoods; on-top of navigating around limitations from their disabilities, their family’s financial situation restricts even more opportunities for development.

By reaching out to the community, we internalized the devastating effects limited resources can have on a person’s life, especially in a city that promises boundless opportunity. T and many other young adults on the spectrum were marginalized from activities during their childhood because of their disability and socioeconomic statuses. She could not participate in leisure activities like soccer during recess or music class because those settings and events were not sensory friendly. Rarely were programs accommodating to her needs, and her social development was stunted because of it. A gap in resources spirals into a gap in personal growth, and this disparity becomes even more defined and inflexible in adulthood.

To combat the problem at the source, our team is making strides to increase accessibility of empowerment opportunities to children with disabilities in low-income families. We are initiating a mentorship program that connects youth with disabilities to college-age peers. As a part of this program, young adults will participate in various therapeutic recreational activities and make lasting connections with organizations that specialize in these activities. We are approaching youth empowerment through the avenue of therapeutic recreation, mentorship, and enrichment programs because that is what the community has expressed as effective. During an interview with T’s mother, she described how she saw a “tangible increase in [her daughter’s] quality of life” when she participated in the immersion program and socialized with her peers. When we investigated Access Gallery, artists with disabilities jumped at the chance to show off their work, and their enthusiasm and passion lifted our spirits as we lifted theirs by reciprocating how much we cared. Summer Aden, the youth activities director of Special Olympics Colorado, testified to the therapeutic qualities of human interaction and said “the benefits are endless.” There is a strong community need for more social connection and increased opportunity, and we are honored to fill this need through our initiative.
Collaboration

Various non-profit organizations in the Denver area are at the forefront of these efforts. The Special Olympics of Colorado is one of the leading voices in raising awareness about unequal access. Special Olympics encourages participation in sport training and athletic competition as a means of gaining self-confidence and closing the gap between “normal” and “outsider” (Special Olympics Colorado, n.d). Their programs provide opportunities for children and young adults with disabilities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience authentic joy. Outdoor Buddies follows a similar mantra. This organization links volunteers with mobility-disabled individuals as they explore our state’s natural resources (Outdoor Buddies, n.d). Outdoor Buddies understands that every Coloradan deserves to experience the meditative qualities of the mountains, because Mother Nature’s embrace is a feeling unmatched by any other activity or setting.

Access Gallery highlights the artistic strengths of individuals with disabilities. By making and selling art, these individuals nurture their creative license while also benefiting from economic opportunities (Access Gallery, n.d). Alternative schools in our community also value personal autonomy. We are modeling our program off of the curriculum in place at Denver Academy, which is a leading institution for diverse learners. The academy specializes in programming for students with cognitive and learning disabilities, and incorporates enrichment activities like P.E, art, and music classes into their daily scheduling (Welcome to Denver Academy, n.d). This organization is not unlike the program that changed T’s life for the better. Special Olympics of Colorado, Outdoor Buddies, Access Gallery, and Denver Academy are wholeheartedly dedicated to enhancing the lives of the population they serve. It is with this mentality of change and devotion to enriching human life that we dive into our initiative.

The first step towards empowering youth with disabilities is forming strong, intimate relationships. We are laying the foundation for our project by partnering with public elementary and middle schools in the Denver area and establishing a mentorship program with their special-education subsets. Starting in January of 2018, students will be paired with one of five volunteers in our group and have bi-weekly meetings or “hang-outs.” During this time, volunteers will familiarize themselves with the kids’ needs and behaviors through games, activities, and informal conversations. Hopefully, as volunteers commit to the success of their student partners, the children will start to internalize their own value and importance as well and develop a reciprocal relationship of trust with their mentors. As T’s story highlights, some of the most effective therapeutic intervention is simple human connection and the formation of social fabric.

In congruence with bi-weekly mentorship sessions, our program will hold “Monthly Days of Play” where children will have the opportunity to participate in art, sport, and outdoor recreational activities. Our team is collaborating with Access Gallery, Special Olympics of Colorado, and Outdoor Buddies to make these “field trips” a reality. During a weekend in
February, we are planning on doing an excursion to Access Gallery’s headquarters in the Art District of Santa Fe. Students will take an art class instructed by one of the faculty at Access Gallery and connect with some of the artists that the organization employs. In March, our participants will venture to Southridge Community Recreation Center in Highlands Ranch where the faculty and volunteers of Special Olympics of Colorado will conduct swim lessons, indoor soccer and volleyball games, and tennis matches. When the weather becomes more cooperative in April and May, we will explore Colorado’s natural landscape on a trip guided by Outdoor Buddies. These young adults will engage with the local wildlife through a fishing excursion at Lake Lehow, equipped with accessible gear such as electronic tank wheelchairs.

The relationships built through this program and the confidence instilled in these children must be maintained. In order for our project to be sustainable, we want to establish The Opportunity Initiative as a Serve to Lead site for incoming freshman in the Pioneer Leadership Program. We would also like to legitimize our project as a platform that connects low-income parents with organizations that specialize in therapeutic recreation, enrichment activities, and mentorship for their children. The community could also connect through this interface and form support networks.

**Evaluation**

To further measure our project’s impact and sustainability, our team will engage in a direct line of communication with our participants. We value constructive criticism, so we will ask our students to write a journal entry or give us verbal feedback at the end of each hang out and field trip. We will incorporate this feedback into our programming and continuously modify our initiative to best suit the participants’ needs. Our project’s success is determined by the growth of the people we serve. Even positively impacting the lives of a few individuals will make this initiative worthwhile. This might include cultivating a sense of safety and security for our participants so they feel comfortable exploring their identities and realizing their integral value in our community. Success might even be measured by something small, like bonding over a joke, forming new friendships, and making someone laugh.

The retention rate of our initiative will serve as our tangible, quantitative indicator of success. We hope to attract a consistent group of individuals in our bi-weekly meetings. Should the number of individuals in these hang-outs stay consistent or increase this year, the effectiveness of our project will be validated. Additionally, entry and exit surveys given to the participants will serve as another quantitative measure for the project’s success. We want to engage more community members in our mentorship programs so the project becomes relatively self-sustaining beyond the Spring of 2018. The combination of written and oral feedback and participation inventory will allow us to evaluate our project and make necessary accommodations efficiently and effectively. A long term indicator of success would be whether
or not the organizations we bridge during this year maintain alliances in the future, as well as if our mentorship program is established as a Serve to Lead opportunity for incoming 2018 freshman. If both of these items are accomplished, the legacy and future of our project will be nothing short of exceptional.

Conclusion

Because participation in leisure activities is vital for cognitive, social, and physical development, The Opportunity Initiative believes that the combination of these activities with mentorship programs will make a lasting and meaningful impact. We also hope that by providing these youth with a glimpse of the fun they can have doing these activities and making meaningful peer connections, they will be more likely to maintain involvement with our organization and organizations like us in the future. We want them to realize that leisure is not limited to their wealthy, non-disabled peers. Equal opportunity to have fun should and will be universal.

References

Attachments

Research Brief

Worksheets