

The Trentonian

Special Olympics 2014 USA Games: A Dream to Grown on

By Tammy Duffy



(Lto R) Olympic Athlete Rafer Johnson, Suzy Domenick, SVP Human Resources at Prudential, Stephanie Domenick, Special Olympic Athlete, John Strangfeld, Chairman and CEO of Prudential Financial

After four years of training, planning and preparation the 2014 Special Olympics USA Games have arrived in Mercer County. The games began on Saturday with the Cessna Airlift of the athletes to the Trenton Mercer Airport. On Sunday, the opening ceremonies brought together 3500 athletes who are being supported by 1,000 coaches, 10,000 volunteers and an anticipated 70,000 spectators. These games are possible because of the multitude of athletes, people and corporations that support the games. The athletes who compete and have competed in the past also are changing the world, one perception at a time.

The 2014 Special Olympics USA Games is the largest national games undertaking ever in the United States and will include 16 different sports competitions at 10 different locations including Princeton University, Rider University, Mercer County Park and others.

During the opening ceremonies there were icons everywhere. Icons like, Rafer Johnson and Special Olympic athlete, Stephanie Domenick.

Rafer Johnson was the 1955 Gold medalist at the Pan American games, 1956 Olympic Silver medalist, Decathlon, 1960 Olympic Gold Medalist, Decathlon and 1984 Final Torch Bearer. Rafer's accomplishments in life are quite grand.

Stephanie Domenick, another athletic icon, is a NJ Special Olympic athlete who has competed in Track and Field (relay race, Long jump, 25 yard dash), Gymnastics (uneven bars, vaulting, floor exercise and balance beam), Swimming, Hockey, and Softball. She has been competing since she was 8 years old. She has been competing for many years.

In July 1968, the first International Special Olympics Games were held in Chicago, Illinois, USA. The first International Special Olympics Summer Games were held at Soldier Field in Chicago. It was a joint venture between the Kennedy Foundation and the Chicago Park District. The advisory committee to the Chicago Special Olympics included Dr. William Freeberg, Southern Illinois University; Dr. Frank J. Hayden, Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation; Dr. Peavy; William McFetridge, Anne McGlone Burke; Stephen Kelly of the Chicago Park District; and Olympic decathlon champion Rafer Johnson. Eunice Kennedy Shriver was the honorary chairman.

In 1961, Rafer Johnson was to receive an award, where he met U.S. Attorney General at that time, Robert Kennedy. When Rafer he gave his acceptance speech, he talked about his desire to help others and improve the lives of the less fortunate. After the presentation, Robert Kennedy invited him to Washington, DC to meet President John F. Kennedy and Sergeant Shriver.

In the years that followed, Rafer formed a friendship with the Kennedy family. He became more aware about what Eunice Kennedy Shriver was doing to help people with intellectual disabilities by setting up sports camps and giving them opportunities to be the best they could be. After Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, Eunice approached him about becoming more involved in the Special Olympics movement. Rafer joined the first Special Olympics, Inc. Board of Directors and led a delegation of 40 California athletes and coaches to the first International Special Olympics Games in Chicago in 1968. Rafer is still on the board with the Special Olympics in Southern California.

Rafer Johnson, along with a small group of volunteers, founded the California Special Olympics in 1969 by conducting a competition at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum for 900 individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Stephanie Domenick and Rafer Johnson are part of an amazing team, the Special Olympics. The members of this team and coaches, not only excel in their sport of choice, but they teach us all how to be the best we can be. Stephanie's Aunt, Suzy Domenick, Senior VP of Human Resources at Prudential Financial, said, "Stephanie has taught us to be more compassionate and strive to do our best every day and do it without any judgment. We live in a judge free zone."

Prudential Financial, Inc. is one of the Founding Partners of the 2014 Special Olympics USA Games. They are supporting the' *Healthy Athletes Experience*. The *Healthy Athletes Experience* will provide free health screenings – including hearing, dental, healthy lifestyles, fitness and podiatry – to the nearly 3,500 athletes who are competing in the games. Screenings will take place all week on the campus of The College of New Jersey. (2000 Pennington Rd, Ewing, NJ 08610).

The *Healthy Athletes Experience* screenings are designed to remove the anxiety and trepidation many people with intellectual disabilities feel when faced with a visit to a physician or dentist. In addition to screenings, the *Healthy Athletes Experience* will also provide eyeglasses, sunglasses, hearing aids, mouth-guards and other critical items that assist athletes on the playing field and in everyday activity.

There are lots of ways to find success. Hard work is one of them. Stephanie Domenick and Rafer Johnson have worked very hard to achieve all their success. What they have accomplished in their athletic careers is quite monumental.

This week it's all about the athletes and those who support them. Be a part of this historic event and go out and support the athletes at the USA games in Mercer County. Here is a link to the schedule of the athletic events. <https://www.2014specialolympics.org/games-2/2014-special-olympics-usa-games-schedule/#.U57fnvldWSo>.

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