

GEMMA MACLEAN

THE PLAY UNIFIED GENERATION

Having always had an enthusiasm for helping those with special needs, Youth Sport Trust Team Leader, Gemma Maclean, was able to take her passion to the next level through the Special Olympics Play Unified programme. She sat down to talk to YST Connect earlier this month to discuss how her recent trip to the Play Unified World Youth Summit in Austria has allowed her to explore her passion further.

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“Gemma first heard about the Special Olympics Play Unified programme, which looks to bring young people with and without intellectual disabilities together to engage in unified activities, whilst at the Youth Sport Trust Conference in 2015. “Because of my previous experience working at a camp for kids and adults with special needs it was something I was really interested in. Wanting to go into special education within PE myself, it was something that I really wanted to get involved in, so I got in touch with the programme manager, Vicci Wells, who said she would keep me in mind for any opportunities that were coming up.”

This opportunity came in the form of the Special Olympics Play Unified World Youth Summit, which took place in Austria earlier this year. The Summit brought together participants from 18 different countries to develop leadership skills that would empower them to become leaders of the Special Olympics Movement and drivers of inclusion throughout the world. To gain a place at the event, each group had to come up with an inclusive project that they would like to deliver in their countries, which meant undergoing a tough application process with the rest of the team. Joining Gemma were Matthew, a Special Olympics GB World Games gold medal winning footballer, and Vicci and Rachel from the Youth Sport Trust. “The first part of the application was pretty standard; we had to provide information on ourselves and the experiences we had

working with people with special needs, as well as our backgrounds in volunteering and what our interests were. The main block of the application was the proposal, so Matthew and I, alongside Vicci and Rachel, had to come up with a project that we wanted to launch in the UK with the funding that we would be given. Our original funding bracket was between £10,000 and £15,000, so we sat down and came up with the idea of an inclusive unified drama piece that involved sport at its core, we really liked the idea of using sport and drama at the same time to unify people with and without intellectual disabilities. During the application process, I was in America while Rachel and Matthew were in the UK, so it was a case of me getting up at 2/3 o'clock in the morning to fit in with the time zones!”

Having arrived at the Summit, the UK team were able to learn about how they could improve their project by attending workshops and learning from other nations, as well as hearing some incredibly inspiring stories. “We had workshops around leadership, your leadership style and your leadership brand and other workshops that were around your project and your project proposal. We also had posters that were featured at a project expo, so your poster would be up on a board for you to talk about. To help this we had sessions to develop that poster as well as sessions on how we would present our project to community leaders. This was interesting as we were learning how to actually sell your project rather than just telling people what

the project was. The key message we were taught was to concentrate on the background of our project and focus on the ‘why’ rather than the ‘what.’

The variety of projects that were on show was one of the things that really stood out for Gemma: “Every project was completely different and used different methods; some people were using gardening, some were using outdoor adventure, some people were using music while others were using sport, drama or exercise. There was a massive range of projects, but all under the same goal of having people with and without intellectual disabilities working together. So it was really interesting to see different countries’ methods.”

When asked about how she was inspired by her time away, Gemma recounted listening to the story of one of the participants: “One that sticks out is a boy called Joe, who is 22 years old and spoke at a Unified Talks event. Joe told us that when he was born he was the size of an iPhone because he was three months premature, which meant a lot of his organs hadn’t fully developed; his brain and eyesight hadn’t fully developed, so he always grew up smaller than the other boys in his school. Because of this he was bullied and the quote he used was that his time in middle school was ‘like an extended prison sentence’ because he always felt so isolated and alone. But he was able to find sport going into high school where he was actually able to meet like minded people who were able to get him out

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of that prison atmosphere he felt he was in, and actually have fun and make memories. He got involved in the Special Olympics where he managed to make loads of new friends, from which he became more confident in himself, to the point where he was able to deliver Play Unified events and do public speaking and share his story of overcoming these bullies despite his intellectual disabilities. That was a really powerful story, especially when he was up on stage talking about how he used to be this really really shy young boy, and now he's in front of 300 people from all around the world."

Having returned from Austria, Gemma and the rest of the team are looking to start their project, which is being launched in August

alongside the Special Olympics Summer Games. The project will be available for all Special Olympics Play Unified Schools to apply for, with the school that engages with it best having the opportunity to perform the drama piece at a national event, "so there is an incentive for the schools that are taking part, because there will be something at the end of it for one of the schools."

For Gemma, this is simply the latest example of a long association with the Youth Sport Trust, which has afforded her a number of opportunities over the years. When asked if the Trust has had an impact on her development, she answers emphatically: "Oh massively! There is no way that I would have the skill set to work with young people that

have intellectual disabilities, or even be able to work with young people on the whole if it wasn't for my experiences and opportunities with the YST. To be able to lead at Youth Sport Trust camps like Girls Active and Talent Camp, or volunteer at the School Games, or even attend national conferences like the SGO summit or the YST Conference where I could meet with adults or professionals, has helped me hugely. It is that experience of working with all types of people that is really beneficial, especially when it comes to teaching. So it's been a massive help in terms of my own personal development with communication and organisation and time keeping and everything that I will need in the future to be a great teacher having come from being a Team Leader."