



THE FOREFATHER

OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST AND PHILANTHROPIST RAFER JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT HIS ROLE WITH SPECIAL OLYMPICS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, THE KENNEDYS, AND HIS LOVE AFFAIR WITH LOS ANGELES

By Lora Shinn

Q: How did you get involved with Special Olympics?

Eunice Kennedy Shriver's sister Rosemary had an intellectual disability. But Mrs. Shriver thought her sister and other people with intellectual disabilities should have the opportunity to be

involved in society with broader experiences instead of being lost in an institution's dark rooms. Mrs. Shriver invited me, several athletes, and friends to meet with her. She shared her great vision with us about Special Olympics, and asked us for our input and to share with her our sports expertise. At that moment I was hooked.

I've been involved with Special Olympics for 47 years. So many people helped me on my journey. I couldn't have accomplished what I did without the backing and support of family, friends, and coaches, along with great opportunities coming to me. I knew I wanted to give something back in a big way. Special Olympics was the perfect place for me to get involved, combining my passion for sports and helping, to make the world a better place.

Q: How did you meet the Kennedy clan?

I had the pleasure of meeting John F. Kennedy when he spoke at UCLA, where I was student body president. Once you meet

one or two Kennedys, you meet all of them. Ethel Kennedy organized athletic fundraising programs, because of our common interests in sports; I became good friends with Ethel and Bob [Robert Kennedy]. I was lucky enough to be invited to spend several summers with the family. When the family sat down in the evenings, part of the conversation was always, "What did you do today to put yourself in a better position to serve, and whom did you help?" What a great lesson! They're a great family and we're still close.

Q: Do the words of your former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden ever spring to mind when you're involved with Special Olympics athletes?

Coach would say, "I'm here to prepare you for the challenge," training you to be the best you can be. These were words we could live by, on the court and in life. Interestingly enough, you're the only person who knows whether you're putting everything on the line. Your coach doesn't know, your family doesn't really know. Now we didn't win every game but we never walked off the floor without an all-out effort.

Through Special Olympics, I've learned that sports can mean something more than what I'd previously experienced. At many Special Olympics events, I've seen an athlete in a race fall down or slow down. More often than not, another athlete will go back, help that person up, and finish the race together. You never see that in any other sporting competitions. At every Special Olympics event, there's something that touches your heart in a special way.

Q: What does it mean to you to have the Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles?

We have an unbelievable community of volunteers, athletes, and coaches worldwide that support Special Olympics, and they will be here in force for World Games. In 1984, one of the greatest Olympic Games took place in Los Angeles, and I believe without any doubt that 2015 will be the greatest Special Olympics event ever brought to a city.

Rafer's Recommendations

His Favorite L.A. Places



For a walk or run: **UCLA Campus** is beautiful, with woods and running trails all over. Lots of little spots where you can stop and look at art, fountains, or the athletic arenas.

ucla.edu/visit, 405 Hilgard Ave., 310.825.4321



For a quick lunch: If you like hot dogs—and I do—**Pink's** is a great place. Just mustard, ketchup, and mayo on a turkey dog—that's my Pink's. **pinkshollywood.com**, 709 N. La Brea Ave., 323.931.7594



For a museum: The **California African-American Museum's** nice paintings depict different periods of time, which my forefathers traveled through. It's a good history lesson for both parents and the young person.

caamuseum.org, 600 State Dr., 213.744.7432



For a day with kids: My grandson Kory can name all those ancient huge animals at the **Page Museum** at the La Brea Tar Pits.

tarpits.org, 5801 Wilshire Blvd., 323.934.7243



For evening entertainment: The **Hollywood Bowl** has a variety of talent coming in: blues, great female singers, popular singers, classical. We go with a couple friends and bring a picnic. hollywoodbowl.com, 2301 Highland Ave., 323.850.2000