



14 KEEN on Athletic Programs for Youth with Developmental Disabilities in Los Angeles

For many children with developmental disabilities participating in traditional physical fitness opportunities is not always possible. In Los Angeles, in particular, there is a shortage of specialized recreational programs, but all that is about to change. Kids Enjoy Exercise Now (KEEN) is launching a Los Angeles program later this year. Although KEEN LA hopes to offer weekly programs in the near future, KEEN LA programs will initially be available every other Sunday afternoon.

KEEN is an international, non-profit tax-exempt organization started in the United States in 1992 that is dedicated to providing specialized athletic programs for school-aged children and young adults with significant developmental disabilities. KEEN LA is one of two new programs starting this year, the other being St. Louis, Missouri, and will complement already existing programs in the Washington, D.C., Chicago and Kansas City metropolitan communities, as well as programs in England.

Participating children and youth are paired with a volunteer coach for a variety of age-appropriate recreational activities, including soccer, tennis, track and field, basketball, swimming, aerobics, bowling and other various adaptive activities. The sessions generally last for two hours and are expected to be offered up to four times per month in the near future. KEEN provides an open, unstructured environment for people with any type of disability, including those with significant needs. In many cases, the KEEN program frequently constitutes the only recreational and social activity for some athletes who are unable to participate in other programs.

Prior to making the decision to establish a program in Los Angeles, KEEN sponsored a community meeting in downtown Los Angeles, which included representatives from many of the largest non-profit entities and government agencies that provide services to children and youth with developmental disabilities. The purpose of the meeting was to identify the need in the Los Angeles area for specialized recreational programs serving this segment of the population. KEEN representatives also met with several elected officials and conducted a preliminary community needs assessment to determine the

need for KEEN-type recreational programs in the Los Angeles area.

Lanterman Executive Director Diane Anand, who attended the community meeting, states, "We are delighted to assist KEEN LA in the development of this much needed resource for economically disadvantaged children and young adults with developmental disabilities in the Central Health District of Los Angeles."

Based on the results of its preliminary survey and the input received from the community representatives at the town hall meeting, KEEN has elected to move forward with planning for the launch of KEEN programs in Los Angeles later this year.

Currently, a task force comprised of volunteers from the community meeting and other interested individuals is being developed. Startup funding for KEEN LA is through a special grant received from Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, a national law firm with an office located in downtown Los Angeles.

Elliott Portnoy, the founder of KEEN stated that "KEEN is thrilled that Los Angeles recognizes a need for the specialized programs developed and offered by the KEEN affiliates." Portnoy further emphasized that "community participation in the development of KEEN LA is critical to assure that KEEN LA provides services which are supplemental to, and not in competition with, existing service offerings." Ed Reeser, the head of KEEN LA and the managing partner of Sonnenschein's Los Angeles office, also noted that "the development of KEEN LA would

constitute an important addition to our firm's commitment to supporting community service in Los Angeles, which includes support of selected education programs and our community service placement of young attorneys in causes that match up to their individual passions." Marjorie Heller, former Lanterman board member, is assisting Reeser in launching KEEN LA.

Anand adds, "Sonnenschein's two-year commitment to launching KEEN LA demonstrates that the spirit of volunteerism and charitable contribution is alive and well in the Downtown business community."

KEEN is currently recruiting volunteers to help with launching KEEN LA, including program planning, media outreach, program marketing and volunteer recruitment, as well as volunteers who are interested in being



KEEN athletes and volunteer coaches participate in a variety of recreational activities, including various adaptive activities.

paired with young people with disabilities on Sunday afternoons to experience sports and have fun. Volunteer coaches come from all walks of life and include working adults, corporate and community groups, college or high school students, retirees and families. Volunteers are not required to make any commitment of time, and no previous experience working with young people with developmental disabilities is required as training will be provided. Minimum age for volunteers is 15 years old.

KEEN offers fun in a safe and supervised setting while offering families valuable respite opportunities, and helps young athletes develop friendships with other athletes and volunteers, self-esteem and confidence, social and teamwork skills, athletic skills and talents, and a sense of belonging. KEEN LA programs will be taking place at the Elysian Park Therapeutic Recreational Facility.

For additional information on the operations of KEEN LA contact Jack Gilbertson or Rebeccah Keating Edelstein, KEEN LA coordinators, at 213.892.2935 or KEEN@sonnenschein.com. Information about KEEN is also available at www.keenusa.org. The KEEN LA Web site is currently under construction. Look for more information in the coming months as the program develops.



KEEN offers youth with special needs who may not be able to participate in traditional physical fitness opportunities specialized recreational opportunities.



KEEN helps young athletes develop friendships with other athletes. The program also boosts self-esteem and confidence, helps develop social and teamwork skills, and offers young athletes with special needs a sense of belonging.