



Art Raynes dedicates his weekends to helping children with autism

The NJSBA's Members Who Inspire program is an ongoing series that turns the spotlight on members who are making a difference in their career and outside of the law. The program offers an opportunity for members to share their unique stories with colleagues, inspire future legal professionals and strengthen awareness of the profession and Association. This story features Art Raynes, a Basking Ridge attorney and NJSBA member, who for 30 years has run a weekend program for children with autism.



Some attorneys might relax at the beach to end the week when the burdens of practicing law weigh heavy. Art Raynes has a different outlet.

On any given weekend from September to June, you can find Raynes in his element—at the local YMCA in Basking Ridge, leading scores of children with disabilities and teen volunteers in aerobics, gymnastics or whatever the activity of the day.

During the week he's a partner at Wiley Malehorn Sirota & Raynes in Morristown, specializing in litigation with an emphasis in employment cases. Come the weekend, Raynes runs Saturdays in Motion, a recreational program he started decades ago for children diagnosed with autism. And if you ask him which endeavor has brought him the most satisfaction—despite a successful legal career—helping children realize their full potential is the easy choice.

"When I'm at the program I really enjoy it. It's the most fulfilling thing I do," he said.

What started as a modest idea in the early '90s has blossomed over the years into the longest running, non-public recreational program for children with autism in the country, according to David Carcieri, president and CEO of the Greater Somerset County YMCA. Running twice a month during the school year, the program routinely hosts between 50 and 70 kids from ages 3 to their early teens, along with their families for each session. Initially designed for children with autism, the program has expanded to include children with Down syndrome, visual impairments and their siblings.

"The Saturdays in Motion program is rooted in the importance of providing every child with experiences, during their youth, that provide them with a sense of belonging and surround them with people who care," Carcieri said. "Art Raynes and his family have



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lifted the spirits and the futures of countless children, as well as the teen volunteers that are the backbone of the program."

With a small army of teen volunteers—more than 100 throughout the year, who work one-on-one with each child—the cohort takes over the Somerset Hills YMCA for a two-hour session. The first hour is spent in the gym, where the children spread out with all sorts of equipment—balance beams, trampolines, soft basketballs for shooting and exercise mats. After the gym session, they rush downstairs where the YMCA has two pools.

"I don't baby them at all. I talk to them the way I talk to adults. Sometimes they aren't used to that," Raynes said.

It's important work, he said, since drowning is the top cause of death among autistic children.

"For an hour in the pool it's all one-on-one. The range of abilities goes from kids who just want to be held up in the water to those on swim team," Raynes said. "By then the kids are exhausted, the parents are happy because the kids are exhausted, the teenage volunteers feel good and I feel good."

Raynes said he started Saturdays in Motion in 1992 after his second son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

"I got together with a few fathers who thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to have a recreational program for our kids?'" he said.

They shopped the idea around the surrounding school districts, and even consulted with a recreation expert at Rutgers University, but were told the program wasn't feasible, Raynes said. Only the local YMCA was willing to open its doors.

"The YMCA just said, 'Sure let's do it, what do you need?' And then boom, it happened," Raynes said.

The first session drew about 18 people, including volunteers. But within a few months, kids and volunteers started filling the gym in droves, all without advertising, he said.

"All the sudden, people were coming and I remember thinking we need a bigger boat," Raynes said.

He credits part of the program's success to its loose format. There isn't much structure, and nothing is really organized, he said. Children are free to participate in the activities, or just roam the gym with their volunteer if they prefer.

"The whole idea is these are kids who can't be in a traditional gym program. That wouldn't work with this population," Raynes said. "Instead, we have different stations and the kids do what they want. If a kid just wants to walk on the balance beam, with spotting of course, then that's fine. The idea is that they're connecting with their volunteer."

The other key to Saturdays in Motion's longevity is its volunteers, many who start as teenagers but stay with the program for years, Raynes

said. Several have chosen interesting careers related to helping children, including pediatric neurology, physical therapy and special education.

"I learn a lot about patience from watching the volunteers," Raynes said. "All of the good ideas in the program, the new advances and changes, have come from them. Not the boring lawyer."

Running the program for 30 years has brought a lifetime of fond memories. It's impossible to pick a favorite, Raynes said, though he recalls one special moment at a holiday party the YMCA hosts each year. A child who had been with the program for years and was mostly nonverbal, Raynes remembered, walked up to a volunteer Santa, sat on his lap and spoke at length about what he wanted for Christmas.

"The mother was crying, Santa was crying, the volunteer was crying. There aren't too many memories that top that," Raynes said. "One of the greatest rewards is that you get to watch these kids grow and come out of their shells."

As for the program's future, Raynes—now in his 60s—said he remains fully committed to Saturdays in Motion. There's no formal succession plan for when he decides to step away, but he envisions another volunteer, parent or even his children carrying the mantle.

"There is certainly no shortage of kids on the autism spectrum. And the YMCA continues to ask what else can we do," he said. ■