



Special Olympics *New Zealand*

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Special Olympics New Zealand seeks review of Broadcasting Standards

In the wake of recent media events, Special Olympics New Zealand has approached the Broadcasting Standards Authority and requested a review of the application of the Broadcasting Standards to ensure that the use of “retard” and “retarded” when referring to individuals with intellectual disability is regarded as unacceptable.

“We considered other options such as lodging a formal complaint but feel this issue needs to be addressed more broadly by the broadcasting standards,” says David Rutherford Special Olympics Chairman. “Central to our thinking has been the consideration of people with intellectual disability. Most people with intellectual disability would find it very difficult to defend themselves in the medium of television. Special Olympics New Zealand believes that the Broadcasting Standards Authority and other state agencies have responsibilities to recognise this when considering what is acceptable on television.”

What happened last week highlights the need for the New Zealanders to realise that the word “retard” is as hurtful to those labelled by it as “nigger” and “kike” was in the past to those labelled with those words.

“Special Olympics globally is leading a movement to stop the use of the R word,” says Mr Rutherford. “In New Zealand, we need keep up with global change. Special Olympics New Zealand will pick up the pace on this campaign here.”

Special Olympics athletes at the Global Youth Congress in Idaho this year demanded that Special Olympics launch a campaign to “Ban the R Word”. Within three days, some of the world’s most talented web designers had activated www.r-word.org and the campaign has grown since. Special Olympics New Zealand says it’s time to lead the change to “Spread the Word to Stop the Word” in New Zealand.

“Last week,” says Mr Rutherford, “I was in Los Angeles as a Board Member of Special Olympics Inc. I met John C McGinley, who is well-known for his role in the television show Scrubs. However, John is also the father of a son who has Down syndrome. He knows first hand the hurt the word “retard” causes. John is a leader of the Spread the Word to Stop the Word campaign. He told me that American television networks are in the process of agreeing to put the R word in the same category as “nigger” and “kike” and ban the use of the word by staff on their networks. Just that day Fox Broadcasting had agreed that use of the word by its staff on air would be a breach of Fox’s Broadcasting Standards and Practices.”

Special Olympics New Zealand challenges New Zealand broadcasters to follow the lead of their United States counterparts and support this change process.

“Special Olympics Athletes have made clear that they expect Special Olympics to take a stand on this issue. We ask individual New Zealanders to stop using the R word. Each person that does so makes a difference,” says Mr Rutherford. “People with intellectual disability are important and equal members of our community. They may play sport, drive cars, get married and hold down jobs. And they certainly deserve to be treated with respect.”

On Wednesday, 2 December 2009, Special Olympics New Zealand will celebrate the Opening Ceremony for its 7th National Summer Games. This ceremony will launch Games that will attract nearly 1100 athletes to the Manawatu region where, for the next three days, athletes with intellectual disability will compete in 10 Olympic-type sports. These athletes will be supported by over 400 coaches and managers and nearly 1000 local volunteers. While ability level varies greatly and all levels are welcome, at the 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Shanghai, there were 109 performances that would have bettered performances at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

“During the Special Olympics New Zealand National Summer Games, television, radio and print media will report on the competition and successes of the athletes,” says Mr Rutherford. “We are hopeful that the New Zealand media will focus on the talent of the sportsmen and women and not undermine athletic performance by using disrespectful language or derogatory so-called ‘light-hearted’ comments based on intellectual disability.”

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Special Olympics New Zealand is a year-round programme of sports training and competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. More than 5000 athletes throughout the country train and compete in 16 different Olympic-type summer and winter sports. Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics provides athletes continuing opportunities to develop fitness, demonstrate courage and experience joy as they participate in the sharing of gifts and friendship with other athletes, their families and the community.