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Recreation for all: Levis creates opportunities for disabled populations

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Bowling Green Parks and Recreation Special Populations Coordinator Cameron Levis cheers on the local teams competing in the 2023 Special Olympics Kentucky Region 1 Basketball Tournament on Feb. 18 at the Kummer/Little Recreation Center.

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Many decades ago, a young man named Alton Little decided he wanted to spend his summer as a lifeguard at the local pool.

“I think about that a lot, because that decision is the beginning of my family’s story in the field of parks and rec,” Cameron Levis said, sitting in his office in the Kummer Little Recreation Center – half-named for his grandfather.

“His story is kind of the start of our story, if you will, in parks and rec.”

Levis, special populations coordinator with Bowling Green Parks and Recreation, is the third generation of his family to work in the discipline, creating opportunities for people with physical and intellectual disabilities to participate.

His grandfather taught kinesiology, recreation and sport at WKU for the entirety of his career, leading Levis’ mother – Betty Jean “BJ” Little Levis – to enter the field as well.

“Our family’s dedication and focus and passion for people with disabilities is rooted in our passion for parks and rec,” Levis said.

His mother grew up exposed to plenty of Special Olympics athletic programming, leading her to intern with Bowling Green Parks and Recreation and helping to establish what was then known as the Bowling Green Adult Athletic Club.

“Her career, in many ways, was focused on people with disabilities,” Levis said.

Two previous generations of passion were not lost on Levis, and he soaked it up like a sponge.

“I learned all my passions for parks and rec as a whole from my grandfather,” he said. “All my passions for people with disabilities and adaptive and inclusive (recreation) really come from what I learned from my mom.”

Growing up in a single mother household, Levis was too young to be left home alone and found himself at every parks and rec program.

“Every day after school, I was hanging out at the community center,” Levis said.

This exposed him to things like wheelchair basketball and other Special Olympic sports, but more importantly to people with disabilities.

“(Mom) used to tell people all the time that as a baby, I was rocked to sleep by wheelchair users,” Levis said. “That was the population that I was around.”

Levis soon became cognizant of the fact that not everyone gets the chance to meet and grow up with people with disabilities, and not everyone shares the same perspective.

“My worldview was completely different because I was exposed to that population at a very early age, so that forming those relationships, pursuing those friendships with people with disabilities was something I just naturally did,” he said. “I thought that was normal.”

He came to recognize that for many people, what is different is uncomfortable. This is something he actively tries to undo while teaching an inclusive recreation course at WKU.



“I have had nontraditional students come into my class, and they tell me the first day: ‘I’m uncomfortable with everything about this class. I’ve never been around people with disabilities, I don’t know what to say, and I’m uncomfortable,’” Levis said.

His answer?

“Thank you for telling me, I appreciate you being willing to admit that,” Levis said. “Let’s see if over the course of the semester we can change that.”

His goal is to guide people to the same realization – people with disabilities are a tremendous asset to any community.

“I know that they’ve impacted my life for the better, they’ve taught me lessons that I would not trade for anything that I could not learn from anyone else, just about what it means to genuinely love people,” Levis said.

Levis has been with Bowling Green Parks and Recreation for seven years now and knows he’s in the right place.

“We truly do get to come to work every day and help people find enjoyment in life,” he said. “No matter what level of our department somebody works at, I try to connect them back to what they’re helping create.”

During his time with the city, Levis has seen the creation of the department’s adaptive sports program in partnership with WKU as well as an agreement with Warren County Parks and Recreation to facilitate an adaptive water sports program.

“I’ve only been a small part of every process, because it truly does take a team of people to make what we do happen in parks and rec ... I would be remiss if I didn’t say that,” Levis said.

Brent Belcher, director of Bowling Green Parks and Recreation, said Cameron’s ability to reach populations with physical or mental disabilities has been awesome for the community.

“It is a program that’s been something that the department and city government have been proud of for a long time and Cameron has continued that tradition,” Belcher said.

Levis wants to make Bowling Green a destination for those with disabilities to participate in sports, which at the same time helps legitimize adaptive athletics to the greater population.

“Athletes with disabilities are athletes. We want to provide opportunities to see that first hand,” Levis said. “We can truly have an impact on our community and our societal view on people with disabilities.”

Levis says he and his wife Kaitlyn could up and move to any city – Levis can work in another parks and rec department, Kaitlyn could teach first grade at another school – “but we would never want that.”

Levis knows how much his grandfather loved Bowling Green and how much heart and soul he put into it. He wants to do the same.

“This place is home,” he said. “Every interaction, every program that I’m able to help create, every park project I’m able to be a part of, every playground I get to dream up ... everything means more because it’s here in Bowling Green.”