

**Waukegan Park District-Special Recreation
IAPD Outstanding Citizen Volunteer of the Year Award Nomination
Mercedes Rivera & Christian Torres**

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The Waukegan Park District and Special Recreation Services of Northern Lake County-Waukegan are proud to nominate Mercedes Rivera and her son, Christian Torres as the IAPD Outstanding Citizen Volunteers of the Year. Ms. Rivera began volunteering for Special Recreation-Waukegan in the fall of 2002 when she was accepted as a founding member of the Special Recreation Program Advisory Committee. As a parent, Mercedes's goal has been to create community awareness of recreational opportunities for those with disabilities. The Waukegan Park District and Special Recreation Services of Northern Lake County-Waukegan programs and special events have benefited from the more than 250 documented volunteer hours provided by Mercedes and Christian's 130 hours. Their involvement in Special Recreation for the last 21 years includes volunteering both officially and unofficially.

At age 2, Christian was diagnosed as mentally handicapped. Unfortunately, few resources existed to help with raising a child with a disability. After five years in the first grade and limited vocabulary words, a move to the United States was made. Ms. Rivera, a native of Puerto Rico, arrived in Waukegan in the spring of 1993 as a single parent of two; Christian was 11 years old. Through a note sent home with Christian from school, Mercedes discovered the Special Recreation brochure and registered Christian for his first program.

Ms. Rivera has been a positive, supportive, and actively involved parent of a participant with a disability in Special Recreation programs over the past two decades serving many roles: as an active volunteer lending support to Polar Bear Plunge fundraising, promotions and registration, as support staff for park district and Special Recreation events, a cheerleader and scorekeeper at Christian's sporting events, and translating flyers and documents into Spanish. She never misses an opportunity to advocate for Special Recreation programs and services by writing letters of support for grant proposals, participating in interviews for newspaper articles and being videotaped for the Gold Medal nomination. She goes above and beyond as a volunteer. She is exceptionally dedicated to ensuring the advancement of fundraising activities, and increasing awareness of Special Recreation programs and services. She regularly volunteers at Waukegan Park District Special Events such as the Fishing Derby, American Independence Festivities, and Halloweenfest.

Recreation Supervisor/Special Recreation Kari Robinson stated, "Mercedes has been a fixture at Special Recreation programs for years. She is a devoted advocate for both her son and others with disabilities. She is committed to educating the public on the great opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities." Her enthusiasm to provide a helping hand and advocate for special recreation is admirable. It is this trait that led her to involving her son Christian as a volunteer.

Christian's greatest love is being an All-Star athlete in Basketball, Softball, Volleyball, Bocce Ball and Tennis. In this role, Christian is observed cheering for and encouraging fellow team members. He is the first to provide helpful tips and directions to those who may need it on the court or ball field, in the heat of competition or during practice.

Over the past nine years, Christian has volunteered at several events: as an active Special Recreation Program Advisory Committee Member, lending support to the Polar Bear Plunge registration or SRSNLC Resource Fair and Bowling Tournaments. He has volunteered to assist at park district special events: Fishing Derby, American Independence Festivities, Halloweenfest, Live Green Family Festival and the Kidø Garage Sale. At the 2012 Resource Fair, a participating vendor stated, "The young man who delivered the water was very courteous and helpful." That young man was Christian.

Mercedes has educated many on the benefits of recreation and assisted numerous individuals with special needs and their family members. She touches the hearts of those she encounters, imparting knowledge and encouragement to reach for and accomplish goals, big or small. Christian is an inspiration and positive influence to fellow participants and park patrons. His friendliness and positive attitude are on display as he greets and helps customers with a big smile in his job at a local grocery store. He is a shining example of giving his all to succeed while being supportive and encouraging to others so they too can experience success and be an "All-Star" in life.

Ms. Rivera and Mr. Torres should be commended for their admirable enthusiasm and devotion to providing a helping hand and advocating for Special Recreation. Together, they unselfishly give their time to enhance the lives of many!