



# CLUB CORNER

## THE SWING HIGH PROJECT

**1984 Olympic Team Silver-Medalist Michelle Dusserre Farrell knows all about hard work,** dedication and discipline from being an Olympian. Now, she's using those same talents to pursue a different goal, "The Swing High Project" to help children with disabilities have accessible playgrounds. Farrell's daughter Abby was born with Spina Bifida (a birth defect of the spinal cord). Farrell, whose two daughters have been involved with gymnastics from a young age, knows how important a playground and physical activity can be to children. Farrell has been raising funds through "The Swing High Project" for about three-and-a-half years. Recently she worked with two clubs in her area, Colorado Aerials in Colorado Springs,

Colorado, and Sundance Gymnastics in Monument, Colo., who held cartwheel-a-thons to raise funds for the playground. The efforts raised another \$7,000, which helped to earn the last bit needed to begin the project.

Farrell, a 2006 USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame member, has a bachelor's degree in nutrition and a master's degree in exercise science. She's worked at the United States Olympic Committee in Sports Partnership from 2000-06 and was a member of the NBC Research Division for the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games broadcast. She's now the founder and president of The Swing High Project!

We caught up with Michelle and asked her a few more details about the project. We wanted to share her success story with the gymnastics community!

**Tell me about your daughter and why it is so important to build an accessible playground?**

Abby was born with Spina Bifida. She can walk, but it is difficult, and most of the time she uses a wheelchair. When she was a baby, we went to the playground and it was there I realized that the most introductory form of physical activity for kids, where they can play and interact with their peers, provided a host of barriers to Abby. Sand is the first preventative barrier, followed by steps and stairs. Kids using assistive devices can't even get near the action. Abby and her peers with disabilities want to play and interact with their able-bodied peers, and it's an extremely important developmental activity. Without access, she can't play and explore the world inde-

pendently, or have that critical social interaction with her peers.

Studies have shown that spontaneous play has huge cognitive benefits, but most kids with disabilities must be forced to play in very controlled and programmed arenas (usually physical therapy) because of access and safety. A universally accessible playground will allow our kids with disabilities to play alongside their able-bodied peers. Equally as important, it will show kids who are able-bodied that kids with disabilities can play, have fun, be creative, smart and talented if given the chance (and access) to shine!

**I know you've had both of your daughters in gymnastics. How has gymnastics helped Abby?**

Gymnastics has created a wonderful opportunity for her to develop physically. Being side by side with her peers, her motivation to perform everyday skills was greatly enhanced. When she would watch her friend reach down and pick up a beanbag, climb the rope, do a pullover, she wanted to do it, too! This did not happen in physical therapy. Her ability to acquire "Activities for Daily Living" (ADLs) improved dramatically, and her independence is greatly enhanced. It may not be the best option for all kids with disabilities, but as we realized, it shouldn't be ruled out as an option. This is why it is so important for all kids to have peer interaction during play; they gain so much more.

**Tell me about your fundraiser to raise funds for the playground?**

We held cartwheel-a-thons at Colorado Aerials in Colorado

Springs, Colo., and at Sundance Gymnastics in Monument, Colo., in conjunction with National Gymnastics Day. We raised about \$7,000 total, and we began construction on our playground in October. We have been raising funds for three-and-a-half years, and this helped us to raise the last bit needed to cover some additional expenses and get started on the project. It was during a conversation with two great friends of mine (Cheryl Jarret and Lori Forster) that we realized the power of gymnastics can be so great and can do so much for the community. We then challenged local gymnastics clubs to help raise money for this community cause, and the result was fantastic!

**What hoops did you have to jump through to build the playground? How did you get the land? Is it near your house? Did you have to get approvals? Did you have to find a company willing to do it?**

We went to the City of Colorado Springs Parks and Recreation, and they were 100% behind the idea. Colorado Springs has a fantastic adaptive recreation program and is also one of the fittest cities in the nation, so they believe strongly in opportunities for recreation for all citizens. There are about 8,400 citizens between the ages of 5-20 in El Paso County that have some degree of non-institutionalized disability, and the closest fully accessible playground is about 75 miles away, so for them this was a win-win. We have acquired the space at a current city park. The playground is central to Colorado Springs (Memorial Park, about 1 mile from the U.S. Olympic

Training Center, and just down the road from a major outpatient rehabilitation center). This will become a city owned and operated playground, so the city has taken on the process of finding companies who will build it, etc.

**When will the playground be completed?**

Hopefully, February (if the weather cooperates!).

**How will it benefit kids like Abby?**

She will feel included and have the same developmental opportunities as her peers. You think of what happens on the playground (physical activity, role play, imaginative play, negotiation, leadership, conflict resolution) and these are things that kids with disabilities have missed out on.

**What advice do you have for others who take on a project such as this one?**

We obviously have a strong passion because there is a personal connection. There is such a benefit to this type of project and the story just really speaks for itself, but it can be tough at times. I must continue to remind myself that this is too important of a project for it to not happen, and the more I tell the story and why it's important, the more momentum it builds. If you have a strong cause and passion, just keep telling the story and spreading the word. Most people who become connected to the project either know Abby or have met Abby, and it's that personal connection with Abby that has helped the process move. She spoke to the City Council,

and they immediately supported the cause because they formed a personal connection with her. It's like *The Tipping Point* by Malcom Gladwell, you have to keep working on ways to get the idea to "tip" and for the "it" to take off.

**What setbacks have you had throughout the project?**

In February 2008, Abby became very sick with an issue related to her spina bifida and she was in critical condition. One doctor described her condition as "knocking on death's door." I had to put my efforts for the project on hold. It was such a strong reminder that kids with fragile medical conditions and disabilities have so many challenges and issues to deal with, that the simple things in life have so much more meaning and significance. These kids deserve to have these basic rights. Fortunately, Abby fought back and is doing fine now.

**What great revelations have you had throughout the project?**

There have been times during this project that I think my time as an athlete and Olympian have all been preparation for taking on a project like this. I look at it as living the ideals of Olympism. Being an Olympian, you realize that living these ideals is a far greater responsibility that extends beyond athletic accomplishments, and now we will be impacting an underserved community to make a difference. And the great thing about the fundamental principles of Olympism is that you don't have to be an Olympian to live these.



## SUNDANCE GYMNASTICS

**Kathy and Steve Clowes, owners of Sundance Gymnastics in Monument, Colo.,** heard about the great cause and decided to help out.

"We were planning to do a National Gymnastics Day celebration so the money we raised went towards Michelle's cause

of building an accessible playground for kids," said Kathy Clowes. "It's a great opportunity to get our kids involved in the community and to use our talents to help other people."

The event raised more than \$6,000 with the help of all of the Sundance Gymnastics team members.

2004 Olympic team silver-medalist Brett McClure and Geoff Corrigan signed autographs and helped with the day. The club gave prizes to the kids who could do the most cartwheels in a minute, plus the team kids did exhibitions and a leo sale was conducted.

Kathy Clowes said, "We had never done anything like this before – we are a relatively new gym (started competitive gym 5 years ago) – we wanted to help our community. It was a great way to get involved!"



## COLORADO AERIALS

**Tom and Lori Forster own Colorado Gymnastics and have three gyms.** All three of their gyms participated in the National Gymnastics Day cartwheel-a-thon and silent auction to benefit the Swing High project. In fact, the gym has helped to fundraise for the Project for the last three years!

"We wanted to help another non-profit organization and we selected the Swing High Project," said Tom Forster. "Michelle's daughter Abby takes gymnastics here and this is a great cause; plus we wanted our girls on our teams to learn about community service. We wanted to pick something in our community and be a part of helping out!"

Colorado Aerials has raised a total of \$15,000 for the project over the last three years and still has more fundraisers in the works. Tom Forster said, "We are doing another fundraiser with a jewelry sale and we also do corporate sponsorships for our meet/gym and 10% of the money goes to the Swing High Project." ✧





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## Operation Christmas Child

By Christine McIlhenny

**For a day or two in November**, Cumberland Gymnastics, in Carlisle, Pa., becomes a bit like Santa's workshop! Head Coach Melanie Heckert, and her team of approximately 50 girls and parents, wrap and stuff shoeboxes for young boys and girls in need. The boxes are shipped off to North

Carolina to the staff of Samaritan's Purse, who then ships the boxes overseas to various countries where children in need will receive them as Christmas gifts for Operation Christmas Child.

Last year was the first year the Cumberland Gymnasts took on the task with a goal to fill 100

shoeboxes and they ended up filling 200. This year the goal was to double that number and, by the end, 420 boxes were filled with towels, soap, toothbrushes and paste, school supplies, socks, candy, play doh, and toys!

Coach Heckert plans to continue the program as families have generously contributed bulk items as well as time to this fun and rewarding project. To learn more about the project go to [www.cumberlandgymnastics.com](http://www.cumberlandgymnastics.com). ✧



The Licking County Family YMCA Gymnastics Team (pictured left) from Newark, Ohio, held a meet called "Flip for a Cure," and raised \$1,000.00 to The Susan Komen Cancer Fund. The girls were proud to be able to donate to such an important cause. ✧