Sports Program at CSU Helps Students with Disabilities

Chicago (January 7, 2009) — Youngsters with a range of physical disabilities from Chicago’s Neil Elementary School were able to take part recently in sports ranging from bocce to wheelchair tennis thanks to 19 dedicated physical education teacher candidates from Chicago State University. The CSU students planned and taught developmentally appropriate sports skills to the Neil students in an afterschool program on the CSU campus.

Using sports wheelchairs supplied by the Chicago Park District, the Neil students participated in wheelchair basketball, tennis, football, softball; handcycling; bocce; and power soccer using electric wheelchairs.

CSU President Dr. Frank G. Pogue said the program is an outstanding example of the University and local schools working together to make a better life for students with disabilities. “What we do best is serve the academic and social needs of the community,” said Pogue. “This program allowed our physical education students to get invaluable hands-on experience while making a lasting, positive impact on these students.”

The course was organized and led by CSU professor Dr. Bob Szyman, a resident of Mount Greenwood, and supported by Neil Elementary Principal Helen Wells, whose school teaches more than 200 students with disabilities.

“We could not have accomplished all these good things without Principal Wells, the Chicago Park District and the financial support of Nike, the Peter D. & Carol Goldman Foundation and several friends of wheelchair sports,” said Szyman. “Our students’ enthusiasm and professionalism were the heart and soul of the program and the Neil students responded in kind.”

Andre Sutton, a CSU junior from South Shore lauded the program. “It really opened my eyes. I don’t think I will veer look at a person with a disability again without thinking about his or her potential. It was neat to expose the Neil students to sports and skills that they had never tried before.”

Another Mount Greenwood resident, Larry Labiak, serves as Disability Policy Officer for the Chicago Park District. “The CSU-Jane Neil wheelchair sports program has been an invaluable experience for both Chicago Public Schools students and CSU students,” said Labiak. “The kids are getting a chance to learn and play competitive sports for the first time in their lives. That is huge. And the future physical education teachers are getting a first-hand opportunity to work with youth with physical disabilities before they encounter them in the classroom. That is a rarity in our higher education system, and it is a credit to the University and Dr. Szyman.”