

Unified Sports Coach Jennifer LaCapra of Oxford High School was surprised Thursday morning by a delegation of officials from Special Olympics North America (SONA), Special Olympics Connecticut (SOCT), and the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC). They arrived during the Unified PE Class to announce her selection as the Special Olympics North America Unified Coach of the Year! Her students, family, friends, and colleagues joined in the celebration, cheering as she was presented with this incredible honor.

While SONA has a long history of recognizing outstanding coaches, this is the first year they have designated an award specifically for their school-based Unified Sports program. Tara Baker, Director, Marketing & Communications presented the award. The honor is based on a coach's significant and demonstrable impact on the Special Olympics program, the community and, most importantly, the athletes and partners. Coach LaCapra was selected from twenty incredible nominations and represents the more than 147,000 North American Special Olympics coaches. "Coach LaCapra's whole resume and everything she's done to impact the lives of her students and others is what made her rise to the top."

Jennifer was the 2020 recipient of the SOCT/CIAC George Synnott Unified Coach of the Year Award for the state of Connecticut and was named Unified Coach of the Year by the Connecticut High School Coaches Association in 2018. SOCT/CIAC Director of Unified Sports Robert Hale shared in his nomination that "Ms. LaCapra is the founding coach of the Oxford High School Unified program and has been coaching and advising her students there for nine years. Her own personal qualities are the major reason that the program there has been so successful. She is definitely a people person and is one that consistently takes advantage of every opportunity and makes things happen!"

Beau Doherty, President of Special Olympics Connecticut, conceived of Unified Sports over thirty years ago and founded the partnership with CIAC to bring the program into Connecticut's schools. He describes coach LaCapra as "an impressive, accomplished woman whose achievements demonstrate compassion, leadership and inclusion. It has been my pleasure to get to know Jen, whose character, kindness and dedication to excellence shine through in all she does."

Oxford High School principal Dorothy Potter describes Ms. LaCapra as "uncompromising in her efforts to provide unity and unified sports not only at OHS but across the district. Her consistency with the students and genuine investment in their achievement are the reasons so many families trust her."

"Unified Sports is my passion," shared Coach LaCapra. "I just love what it brings to the entire school community. Seeing the kids working together, the relationships that form. Whether it's on the court or in the hallways. It's honestly the best thing that I've been a part of as a coach, seeing the bonds that form between teammates."

Brittany Garguilo, coach of the Wolcott High School Unified Sports program supported Jen's nomination for this honor. "Jen not only challenges herself professionally but also

demonstrates and practices impressive leadership qualities. She has a unique way of finding inspiration and then the ability to spread it.” Despite the many restrictions imposed on activities due to the pandemic, “Jen continued to inspire virtually on her Instagram page with her team where they posted inclusive videos and pictures as well as Spread the Word to End the Word initiatives. Jen planned an entire Inclusion week within her school and the pandemic did not stop her. It has been an honor getting to know and work with Jennifer LaCapra and her team at Oxford High School. Jennifer stands out in my mind not only for being a great coach, but more importantly, for being an impeccable person.”

Unified Champion Schools Coordinator Barbara Horn shares that “Jen is on an ongoing mission to find inclusive social and sports opportunities to share with the other schools in her Naugatuck Valley League including her recent introduction of Unified Kickball and the annual Oxford Unified League Dances. Whether pioneering a kickball league or spearheading a statewide “Inclusion starts with I” video challenge Jen embraces all things unified with gusto and a contagious enthusiasm.