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## ***UNIFIED SPORTS CAMP***

**By Joel Cookson**  
**September 4, 2025**

Little differences can grow into big differences. There are many lessons derived from Special Olympics Unified Sports, but that is a core principle. A pebble drops into a pond and the rings slowly circle out. A partnership on a team, a celebratory high five, a post-game hug. Any of those small elements expand out, and slowly a community, a school, a town or even something bigger looks and feels different. Maja Grabowski, a 2025 graduate of Plainville High School, lived those little differences and felt them become bigger in her own life. Then one small act expanded beyond the borders of Plainville touching many other lives.

Encouraged by one of her school mentors, as she neared the conclusion of her senior year, Grabowski applied for a Petit Family Foundation *Be The Change Community Service Award*. In the essay for her application, she focused on her experiences as a four-year participant in the Plainville Unified Sports program. A program she entered reluctantly as a freshman, but one that came to play an enormous role in her high school life.

She admits she entered the [Unified] program cautiously, but quickly became a fixture, participating in three sports seasons. Those around her noticed her passion, frequently alerting her to new and greater opportunities for involvement, whether it was conferences or leadership roles. Her efforts ultimately earned her recognition as a recipient of the *CIAC Beau Doherty/Mike Savage Exemplary Unified Teammate Award* for Plainville.

“It [Unified participation] improved my high school experience, I’ve grown as a person so much since starting,” she explained. “It allowed me to be more openminded and mindful. I didn’t do it to get recognized, I thought it was a cool opportunity and a way to put myself out there.”

With this involvement and service to others, it is not shocking Grabowski was selected as a recipient of the Petit Foundation award. The surprise was the award recipients are given \$500 for a donation to a charity or non-profit of her choice. Considering her submission essay focused on her experience with Unified Sports, the choice was clear. She contacted the CIAC Unified Sports office and informed them the program would be receiving her donation. The ripples of impact so common in Plainville were about to expand out and become bigger. The only question was where they might go.



That’s when CIAC Unified Sports Director, John Niski, played matchmaker. Around the same time he heard from Maja about the generous gift, he had been speaking to an individual with a plan. DeVonne Parker is the boys basketball coach at Wilby High School in Waterbury and has been working in support of individuals with disabilities his entire career. He was looking to provide some summer programming for that population, and Niski saw an obvious match with the spirit of Grabowski’s gift. Niski checked in with the Plainville alum whose response to the idea of supporting the camp was “that is so awesome,” and just like that Parker had funding to help get his idea off the ground.



In the spirit of the inclusive opportunities of Unified Sports, Parker saw no reason students with disabilities should be denied opportunities for summer sports or activity camps that are readily accessible for their non-disabled peers. Buoyed by Grabowski’s gift he launched the four-day Unified Sports Camp which ran from August 11 to August 14 for four hours each day at Wilby.

A group of twenty-five boys and girls with disabilities, representing various ages and schools, gathered to participate in this exciting new program. Thanks in part to generous donations of food from local restaurants, and financial support provided by Grabowski’s gift, the camp was totally free for all participants.

Parker’s aims were for the camp to provide a fun, structured, and productive experience for this oft-overlooked population for whom finding safe and accessible summer programming can be challenging. Though he knew the first year would be a learning process, he was happy with how the structure held up

“I think it went well,” Parker said simply. “Keeping the kids busy, happy, and active was really great. It turned out to be really good in terms of the activities and everything. I’m big on keeping kids active, if they aren’t smiling and being energetic then we aren’t doing our job...but I saw a lot of smiles, a lot of adjustment, a lot of self-control.”

He designed the program to match the Unified Sports model with the various sports and activities the campers participated in supported by nearly forty non-disabled partners and volunteers. Among them, unsurprisingly, was Grabowski who was able to witness firsthand on the opening day of the camp the impact of her generosity.

“It was very sweet seeing everyone come together as one, they were from all different places,” she noted. “I definitely saw the kids were very happy, they all just met different people, and you could see sparks in kids – I loved it”

The selflessness of one Unified partner played a giant part in helping twenty-five athletes gain a summer experience they otherwise would not. A small difference becomes a big difference. That generosity came from a variety of different places which was much of the joy for Parker who was thrilled with the support this event got in its first year, and the large group of volunteers who took part as well.

“We had so many people reach out with offers to help, whether it’s with food, or drinks, or other things,” Parker noted. “Truth of the matter, people see these kids are being left out and they want to see how they can help. I’m very grateful for everyone who contributed to this.”

Meanwhile Parker’s ambition for this exciting program is to see it grow into something bigger. He dreams of expanding to a two-week program in future years, and wants to bring in more guest speakers and help make connections and share information about available services for this population. And while it’s never easy to judge the success of an endeavor, he saw a lot in this special week to make him think he’s on the right track.

“Every single parent said they couldn’t wait until next year. This is when I knew it was a pretty good camp: a lot of parents were pretty reluctant to leave their kids, but after Tuesday they just dropped off and left, so the trust was there. One thing I really enjoyed was how my volunteers – who were young, some of them were younger than the participants – adjusted. So it was a good experience all-around for them and the Unified kids too.”

Satisfied, trusting parents. Smiling, happy participants. Impacted volunteers. Generous donors. There is every reason for the people involved in putting this camp together to feel good about the accomplishment. For Parker that means appreciating everything the camp was this year, and plotting how he can make it bigger and better going forward. For Grabowski, it’s taking stock of the part she played in making it happen, and how it all derived from the choice to get involved with Unified.

“I feel like I did good,” she plainly said. “I was genuinely proud of myself that I was able to help contribute, and even win the scholarship in the first place and make a difference in the world. Even if it was a small difference it was still a difference.”

Perhaps it was a small difference, but in a certain context – like for kids whose one week of summer suddenly looked a whole lot brighter – it is no doubt a big difference. Maybe, just maybe, that little difference spreads out like another ripple on a pond, inspiring one more person to an act of kindness and generosity. Just like it did for Maja Grabowski and DeVonne Parker, there is no telling how far the ripples from caring, passionate, and selfless individuals can carry.

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<https://casaci.ac/12006>