

Embracing and empowering difference

Professor inspires community children, parents and tomorrow's teachers

BY COLLEEN DIXON



Godwin Hall Gymnasium is alive with colors, motion and children's gleeful squeals. Delight is evident on each face — children, their parents and JMU students. Is this a pickup game of dodge ball, or a party? Actually, it is part of an adapted physical education class for JMU students who want to become teachers.

Welcome to Project CLIMB — Children Learning to Improve Movement Behaviors — a 10-week program giving children with disabilities the opportunity to learn through play and physical activity. Tom Moran, professor of kinesiology, had the vision for Project CLIMB before he arrived at JMU in 2008. "I really wanted to create an outreach program associated with my adapted physical education class," he says. "I came up with the CLIMB acronym once I got here."

His experience in an undergrad teacher prep program showed Moran that hands-on experience is essential to gaining confidence to work with children with disabilities. Moran is also part of JMU's physical and health education teacher education faculty. He says that creating an interest in and passion for working with children with disabilities are key elements in truly preparing

Kinesiology professor Tom Moran has created several community outreach programs that inspire children with different learning abilities and their parents, all the while showing JMU students how to be incredible, well-prepared future teachers. (Above): Children learn through play and physical activity in Project CLIMB, offered in Godwin Gym. (Right): Mark Casstevens ('09, '10M) gets valuable student-teaching experience.



tomorrow's teachers. Without interaction with children with disabilities teacher training is not meaningful.

Back in Godwin, the noise and excitement echo off the walls. Five-year-old Brody is playing swords using foam noodles. Emma is reluctant to join the group and pulls away from her mother. Kinesiology major Mark Casstevens ('09, '10M) plops down in front of Emma and signs "play with me" repeatedly. Emma eventually relents and joins Casstevens to play.

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HANDS-ON TEACHER TRAINING

Each child is paired with a JMU student for individual attention. The main activity begins with the children and students huddling around Moran as he gives instruction about the day's activities. They do each activity as quickly as possible, and after each is complete, children run back to Moran to receive a small foam figure as a reward. Impatient to begin, the kids explode with noise and motion once Moran signals the start.

Super-energetic Donnie loves the "wrestling" pit. Brody likes to chase and catch people. Brandy is working on smooth movement in a specific direction. Emma is crawling through a small tunnel toward Casstevens.

The quick pace and fun games make this seem like a play session rather than serious work, but serious work is what is happening. Each child concentrates on activities suited to his or her learning or physical challenges. Moran's kinesiology students have developed individualized programs of learning for their child that focus on developing motor skills.

The individual interaction not only benefits the children by giving them a chance for socialization, physical activity and skill development, but it also benefits the kinesiology students. Moran says, "It's nice when I'm lecturing on autism and a student says, 'Oh, is that what my student has, is that why he starts getting overwhelmed when we're in a certain situation?' It makes the content that much richer for my teacher education students. Not to mention that we're now able to provide a service in the community. Children who unfortunately didn't have a program when everyone else was joining Little League or Youth Soccer now have their own program, at least for 10 weeks, that they can call their own."

BREAKING DOWN TEACHING BARRIERS

Moran developed Project CLIMB by putting together parts of other adapted learning programs he observed. "The year prior to my coming to JMU, I was able to observe similar programs and blend my ideas to develop Project CLIMB. Some programs offer just one-on-one interactions the whole 10 weeks. Other universities don't assign teachers to a specific child; they work with somebody different throughout the hour they're there. I liked the idea of one on one, because stu-



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*professor of kinesiology and
Project CLIMB founder*

dents get to see the growth of a child across the program. At the same time, I don't want them to only gain experience with a child with Down syndrome, or a child with cerebral palsy. I want to create an environment where they get multiple experiences. That's where I came up with the progression of one-on-one interactions, then pairs, then small groups. By the end of the 10 weeks the students have opportunities across different settings, and also work with different students. It's really the best of both worlds."

John Parks ('09) enjoyed working in Project CLIMB for the instant feedback, which helped improve his teaching abilities. "Dr. Moran impressed me with the way he was able to get us comfortable with working with kids with disabilities, something a lot of us had never done before," he explains. "It can be intimidating, but he gave us the tools to break down barriers. We're able to give these kids a quality experience."

Parents are equally excited about the opportunities opening for their children

in Project CLIMB. "I get a lot of good feedback from parents not only about improving the skill levels of their kids, but also about how it improves their self-confidence and self-esteem," says Moran. "Some of the kids have gone on to join other community programs. Parents return and say, 'I didn't even think they would join Project CLIMB,' and now my child is saying, 'Can I join a baseball team? Can I get involved in a different program?' We're starting to see some self-actualization and some improved self-image. Children who have been through Project CLIMB go from thinking, 'I can't do these things,' to asking, 'What can I do next?'"

Parents have told Moran that they want their children to learn how to ride a bike or how to swim,

or continue to work on their motor skills so they can throw and catch in the backyard. "The spinoff of this program we created is a community-based adapted physical education program that, hopefully, we'll be able to bring under the JMU academic umbrella," says Moran. "We're able to provide either one-on-one or small group instruction for children with disabilities through the academic year, and some during the summer."

On a donation basis, parents can sign up for various programs. "We have a mechanism where we can continue to provide services year-round," adds Moran. "In 2009 we created, as an offshoot to Project CLIMB, the Helping Hands program, where instructors assist community children and adults with disabilities." Helping Hands can assist an adult who wants to go to a local gym and work out or a child who wants to sign up for a self-defense class at Boys and Girls Club.

"Now parents can sign up for those community programs, and we'll provide an instructor who can accompany them and provide one-on-one support within the larger group setting. This is a great mechanism to get the kids out into other community programs," says Moran.

Beyond Project CLIMB and Helping Hands, Moran desires to provide even more outreach programming. He's always asking, "What can we do, within our resources, to continue to provide services? We just need financial support to keep it going," he adds.

Shannon Dougherty ('10, '11M), a kinesiology major in physical and health education teacher education, has been involved in

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Kinesiology major Shannon Dougherty ('10, '11M) says Tom Moran's outreach programs offer valuable community services, as well as learning opportunities for JMU students interested in becoming teachers.

several programs Moran coordinates. "Dr. Moran has really helped me get into working with children with disabilities. ... All the kids are so loving and appreciative, and their parents are the same way," says the future teacher. "They are grateful that there is something the kids can do other than just going to school and coming home."

Because there have been limited programs in the Shenandoah Valley for children with disabilities to participate in physical activities, parents are excited by Moran's outreach and the students' mentoring.

"Our JMU students embrace these opportunities. They really want to work with the kids and take them to the next level," says Moran. "I think even the parents realize that

it's more than 'I just bring my kid here and they have some fun for an hour.' They realize there are some real goals behind our programs. Each of my students takes that mission personally." The students want to make sure they are improving upon something, whether it's a child's skill levels, self-confidence or self-esteem.

GROWING COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES

This year, Moran received funding to implement an Overcoming Barriers Project through the I Can Do It You Can Do It Program Grant. JMU was selected as one of eight sites nationally to receive the grant of \$15,000 to conduct a physical activity and nutrition mentoring program for individuals with disabilities.

In addition to Project CLIMB, JMU now offers a Physical Activity and Nutrition Mentoring Program, and local parents are able to enroll their children in an aquatics class or an individual sports/recreational activities program. The pool at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community is the venue for the aquatics activities. The sports/recreational activities program allows individuals to choose from several outdoor activities: golf, personal training, bike riding, hiking and tennis.

To sustain the impact of the Overcoming Barriers Project, Moran has offered special-

ized training and support to six community organizations to train their staff members to better meet the needs of all participants.

Moran says these programs are a good part of reaching out to the community. "We are always serving two purposes," he says. "I'm meeting the needs of my students by giving them hands-on experience in education, but we're also filling a need for these programs in the community."

Once the noise has died down at Godwin, it's time for Moran's students to discuss how things went during that session — the good and bad. Struggling for composure, one student relates that things did not go well with her child. She is immediately surrounded by classmates offering encouraging words and hugs. Another asks her peers, "How do I get through to Faith? How do I get her to participate?"

Another student says, "The reward system worked; he wasn't screaming." Another: "I was amazed at the energy and smiles."

The students' comments will join other information about the children and form the basis of new methods in succeeding weeks of the program, according to Moran.

The young children were not the only ones learning and growing on this day. **M**

*** Learn more about Tom Moran and his outreach at www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/projectClimb.shtml. Also read how Moran is training Shannon Dougherty ('10, '11M) to help get kids healthy at www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/dougherty-healthy-kids.shtml.**



Project CLIMB offers children — who may not make a Little League team — the opportunity to have a program to call their own. JMU student teachers get immediate feedback from children and their parents.