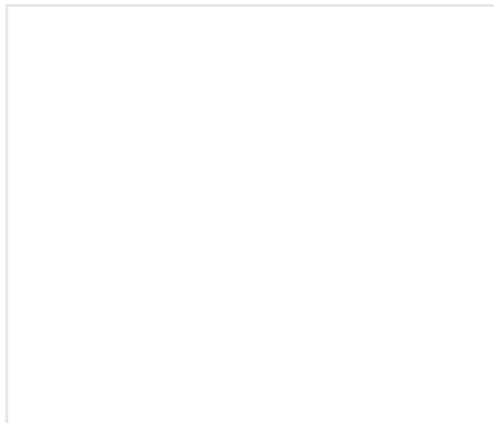




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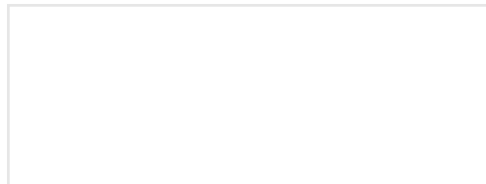


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Cheektowaga Police takes on unified basketball team of students with disabilities

Cheektowaga Police hopped on the court with a high school basketball team of students with disabilities after their opponent canceled.

Unified is a good way to describe this Cheektowaga basketball team, judging from the roars of support during tonight's game. When their original opponent had to cancel, the Cheektowaga Police Department stepped up to the plate, or rather, hoop, as a part of their Blue Bridges initiative — a plan to involve police more in the youth community.





"We want to show that police are out there playing sports with the

eb Harte said. "We want to be

This game is special in another way, too.

The unified team is made up of student-athletes with disabilities and their partners, who are leaders on other teams. Last year, Cheektowaga joined the rapidly growing local league, where students with disabilities are able to play on school teams, sparking strong friendships off the court.

"Seeing the kids that don't like -- they never usually get a chance for this -- it's really inspirational," said Alisiana Muscureil, a sophomore student who helps coach the team.

What Coach Brian Pane, a special education teacher at the school, wants to stress is that this team is not much different than a regular high school basketball team. They are a Section VI team that plays by the same rules. There's no "condescending behavior."

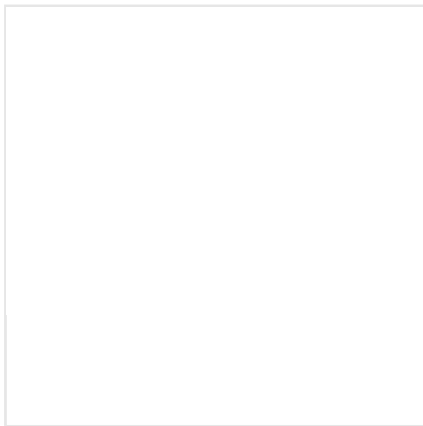
"[Teaching] how to interact with other people, maybe at different levels," Pane said. "That's what Unified has really brought to the table. Just because somebody has a disability doesn't mean we treat them differently."

Cheektowaga added another unified team this year, a bowling team. And they already one section championships.

The unified teams are a part of a larger destigmatizing goal Pane has. He also coordinates Rachel's Challenge, an anti-bullying movement started in memory of a Columbine school shooting victim named Rachel, and a campaign called "Spread the word to end the word" to end use of a derogatory word used to describe people with disabilities.

How did the event go, overall?

"It was awesome," said Amy Zelasko, a student-athlete on the team. She scored three baskets tonight.



Soon, Zelasko will be attending prom with another player on the team, after meeting and bonding while playing some basketball.

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