Eunice Kennedy Shriver: Agent of Change

People who are *Agents of Change* are not sitting on the sidelines watching other people work or waiting for someone else to make a difference. Their hands are dirty. They are doing the work. Eunice Kennedy Shriver was an agent of change when she received a phone call about a summer camp not being available for a child with special needs. Bring them to her house was her answer, and a summer camp for children with special needs was born. How inspirational to be notified of a problem and to be the person who actually fixes it. When I look at this, I see a woman with high expectations for herself and the people around her. She knew that all children, regardless of their abilities, deserved similar experiences. Eunice Kennedy Shriver used her strengths to benefit the marginalized in her community, becoming a true Agent of Change. When presented with a problem or a need, I hope to answer this call with the same humility, attitude, and strength so that I may also be an Agent of Change.
U.S. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Influential Founder of Special Olympics, Dies at 88

By CARLA BARANAUCKAS AUG. 11, 2009

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, a member of one of the most prominent families in American politics and a trailblazer in the effort to improve the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, died early Tuesday morning at Cape Cod Hospital in Hyannis, Mass. She was 88.

Her death, at 2 a.m., was confirmed by her family in a statement. A family friend said Mrs. Shriver had been in declining health for months, having suffered a series of strokes.

A sister of President John F. Kennedy and Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Edward M. Kennedy and the mother-in-law of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, Mrs. Shriver never held elective office. Yet she was no stranger to Capitol Hill, and some view her work on behalf of the developmentally challenged, including the founding of the Special Olympics, as the most lasting of the Kennedy family’s contributions.

“When the full judgment of the Kennedy legacy is made — including J.F.K.’s Peace Corps and Alliance for Progress, Robert Kennedy’s passion for civil rights and Ted Kennedy’s efforts on health care, workplace reform and refugees — the changes wrought by Eunice Shriver may well be seen as the most consequential,” U.S. News & World Report said in its cover story of Nov. 15, 1993.

Edward Kennedy said in an interview in October 2007: “You talk about an agent of change — she is it. If the test is what you’re doing that’s been helpful for humanity, you’d be hard pressed to find another member of the family who’s done more.”

As an example, Mr. Kennedy cited the opening ceremony of the 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Shanghai, where a crowd of 80,000 cheered as President Hu Jintao welcomed more than 7,000 athletes to China, a country with a history of severe discrimination against anyone born with disabilities.
Mrs. Shriver’s official efforts on behalf of people with developmental challenges began after she became the executive vice president of the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation in 1957. The foundation was established in 1946 as a memorial to her oldest brother, who was killed in World War II. Under Mrs. Shriver’s direction, it focused on the prevention of mental retardation and improving the ways in which society deals with people with intellectual disabilities.

“In the 1950s, the mentally retarded were among the most scorned, isolated and neglected groups in American society,” Edward Shorter wrote in his book “The Kennedy Family and the Story of Mental Retardation.” “Mental retardation was viewed as a hopeless, shameful disease, and those afflicted with it were shunted from sight as soon as possible.”

The foundation was instrumental in the formation of President Kennedy’s Panel on Mental Retardation in 1961, development of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (which is now named for Mrs. Shriver) in 1962, the establishment of a network of mental retardation research centers at major medical schools across the United States in 1967 and the creation of major centers for the study of medical ethics at Harvard and Georgetown in 1971.

In 1968, the foundation helped plan and provided financing for the First International Special Olympics Summer Games, held at Soldier Field in Chicago that summer.

“I was just a young physical education teacher in the Chicago Park District back in the summer of 1968, a time of horrific tragedy for the Kennedy family, when Eunice Kennedy Shriver wrapped her arms around the very first Chicago Special Olympic games held at Soldier Field,” Justice Anne M. Burke of the Illinois Supreme Court said in an e-mail message. “I will never forget at the start of the games when she asked me to go to Sears and buy her a $10 bathing suit so she could jump in the pool with the Special Olympics swimmers.”

Just weeks after her brother Senator Robert F. Kennedy was killed, Mrs. Shriver said in her address at the opening ceremony, “The Chicago Special Olympics prove a very fundamental fact, the fact that exceptional children — children with mental retardation — can be exceptional athletes, the fact that through sports they can realize their potential for growth.”

This was an extraordinary idea at the time. The prevailing thought had been that mentally retarded children should be excluded from physical activity for fear that they
might injure themselves. As a result, many were overweight or obese.

The first Special Olympics brought together 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada for competition. In December 1968, Special Olympics Inc. was established as a nonprofit charitable organization. Since then, the program has grown to almost three million athletes in more than 180 countries.

The Kennedy family learned firsthand about these issues through Rosemary Kennedy, the third of nine children and the oldest daughter, who was born mildly retarded in 1918, about a year after John F. Kennedy. Rosemary spent her childhood in the Kennedy household, unlike many other developmentally challenged children who grew up in institutions, sometimes as their families told friends that they had died.

Rosemary and Eunice developed a close bond, participating in sports including swimming and sailing and traveling together in Europe. “I had enormous affection for Rosie,” Mrs. Shriver said in an interview with NPR in April 2007.

She added: “If I never met Rosemary, never knew anything about handicapped children, how would I have ever found out? Because nobody accepted them anyplace. So where would you find out? Unless you had one in your own family.”

As Rosemary grew older, she had bouts of irritability and mood swings. In 1941, when she was 23, her father arranged for her to have a prefrontal lobotomy in an effort to calm her. But the procedure, which was relatively new, only further incapacitated her, and she was sent to an institution in Wisconsin, where she died in 2005.

Rosemary’s disabilities were a closely held family secret until 1962, when Mrs. Shriver — with the approval of President Kennedy — wrote an article about her sister for The Saturday Evening Post. Referring to Rosemary’s move to an institution, Mrs. Shriver wrote, “It fills me with sadness to think this change might not have been necessary if we knew then what we know today.”

Earlier the same year, Mrs. Shriver began what became the forerunner of the Special Olympics when she opened a summer camp for mentally retarded children at her home in Maryland, called Timberlawn. The idea was born when a mother telephoned her and complained that she could not find a summer camp for her child.

Mrs. Shriver recalled the telephone conversation this way in an interview with NPR: “I said: ‘You don’t have to talk about it anymore. You come here a month from today. I’ll start my own camp. No charge to go into the camp, but you have to get your kid here, and you have to come and pick your kid up.’ ” With that, the conversation ended.
For years, Camp Shriver provided physical activity for developmentally challenged children, and Mrs. Shriver took a hands-on role, even jumping into the pool to give swimming lessons.

Senator Kennedy said many of the activities at the camp were based on games the family had played with Rosemary on camping trips to western Massachusetts when they were growing up.

Mrs. Shriver’s family said in a statement Tuesday morning, “She set out to change the world and to change us, and she did that and more.” Mrs. Shriver, her family said, “taught us by example and with passion what it means to live a faith-driven life of love and service to others.”

Eunice Mary Kennedy was born in Brookline, Mass., on July 10, 1921, the fifth of nine children and the third daughter of Joseph P. and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. Her maternal grandfather was John Francis Fitzgerald, the Massachusetts politician known as Honey Fitz who served as mayor of Boston and a member of the House of Representatives. She attended Convent of the Sacred Heart Schools in the United States and England and Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart. She received a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Stanford in 1943.

After graduation, she worked in the Special War Problems Division of the Department of State, then was executive secretary for a juvenile delinquency project in the Department of Justice. In 1950, she became a social worker at the Penitentiary for Women in Alderson, W.Va. The next year she moved to Chicago to work with a shelter for women and the Chicago Juvenile Court.

In 1953, she married Robert Sargent Shriver Jr., a graduate of Yale University and Yale Law School and a former Navy officer, who worked for her father’s firm in Chicago, the Merchandise Mart. Mr. Shriver became the first director of the Peace Corps in the Kennedy administration and the Democratic Party’s vice-presidential candidate in 1972. He survives her, along with their five children: Robert Sargent Shriver III; Maria Owings Shriver, who is married to Mr. Schwarzenegger; Timothy Perry Shriver; Mark Kennedy Shriver; and Anthony Paul Kennedy Shriver.

She is also survived by 19 grandchildren as well as her brother Edward and her sister Jean Kennedy Smith, a former ambassador to Ireland.

Among the awards Mrs. Shriver received for her work on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities are the Legion of Honor, the Prix de la Couronne Française, the
Albert Lasker Public Service Award, the National Recreation and Park Association National Voluntary Service Award and the Order of the Smile of Polish Children. She was also made a dame of the Papal Order of St. Gregory. On Nov. 16, 2007, she was honored with a personal tribute at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, with many Kennedy family members present.

In 1984 President Ronald Reagan awarded Mrs. Shriver the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor.

In an interview with CBS News in 2004, Mrs. Shriver’s son Robert said: “My mom never ran for office, and she changed the world. Period. End of story.”