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Remarks at a Dinner Celebrating the 46th Anniversary of the Special Olympics

July 31, 2014

The President. Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Good evening, everybody, and welcome to the White House. Everybody looks wonderful.

This is a truly special evening. And we are delighted to celebrate it with so many people from so many different walks of life. It is not often that you get Dikembe Mutombo, Steve Case, Stevie Wonder all in the same room. [*Laughter*] In fact, that may be the first time that they were ever in the same sentence.

We have just one of my favorite people performing tonight, Katy Perry. We are so grateful to her. I love Katy Perry. She is just a wonderful person. I've just met her mom, and now I know why she is such a wonderful person. But I just want everybody to know she is on tour right now, and so for her to take time out to do this is really special, and so we really want to say thank you to her for doing this.

The fact that so many accomplished, wonderful people are here is a testament to the impact that the Special Olympics has had on our Nation and has had on our world. This organization has touched so many lives. And tonight Michelle and I are thrilled that we get a chance to say thank you to everyone who's been a part of it.

When Eunice Kennedy Shriver began what would become the Special Olympics in her backyard over 50 years ago, it's not clear whether she could imagine how far and how fast it would end up going. Of course, knowing her, she probably did have a sense of where it was going to go. That's the kind of visionary that she was. I want to recognize all the members of the Shriver family who are here tonight and who continue to carry on the family's incredible tradition of service. Thanks.

Today, in more than 170 countries, Special Olympians are athletes of all kinds: skiers and speed skaters, sailors, cyclists, equestrians, and judo masters. They make extraordinary contributions to their communities. And I'm pride—proud to highlight a few of them here tonight.

Loretta Claiborne didn't just finish with the top 100 women runners in the Boston Marathon twice; she was also the first Special Olympian to speak to world leaders during the United Nations General Assembly. So we're very proud of Loretta. Where's Loretta—right here. There she is. Yay, Loretta! And by the way, during the receiving line, Loretta and Michelle compared arms. [*Laughter*]

The First Lady. Hers were better. [*Laughter*]

The President. Yes, they were. [*Laughter*]

Tim Harris is a Special Olympian in basketball, poly hockey, volleyball, golf, and track and field. So he has all four seasons covered. [*Laughter*] Now he has a restaurant in Albuquerque called Tim's Place. The most popular item is the hugs Tim gives his customers, and so far, more than 42,000 have been served. Where's Tim? There he is right there. Yay, Tim! Tim is fired up. Tim is fired up, although, Tim, I didn't get a hug. [*Laughter*] Come on, man. Oh, here we go. All right, come on. Come on, man.

[*At this point, Tim Harris came to the stage and hugged the President.*]

Mr. Harris. I love you, Obama.

The President. I love you back.

See, you know, Presidents need some encouragement once in a while too. [*Laughter*] That felt really good. That was nice. Thank you, Tim. [*Laughter*]

Brina Kei Maxino represented the Asia-Pacific region at the Special Olympics Global Youth Activation Summit when she was 16 years old. She was the first Filipina and the first teenager with Down Syndromes to do that, so let's give Brina a big round of applause. Yay, Brina! Yay!

And Deon Namiseb was a captain of Namibia's soccer team when they won silver in the 2007 World Games. Now he's a coach, he mentors orphans, he advocates for the rights of Namibians with intellectual disabilities. We are very proud of Deon. Here he is, right here—Deon. Hey!

Dustin Plunkett competed at the 2007 World Games too. He shared the stage with Yao Ming. He says, "Special Olympics saved my life." And now he's recruiting coaches so that the Special Olympics can keep growing. Dustin, where are you? There he is. Thank you, Dustin. Proud of you.

And Ricardo Thornton, Sr., is here with his wife Donna. He is an international ambassador for Special Olympics, a long-time employee of the Martin Luther King Memorial Library here in Washington, a proud father, a proud grandfather. I recently appointed him to the President's Committee for People With Intellectual Disabilities. A wonderful man, please give Ricardo a big round of applause.

And Frank Stephens is a Special Olympian from Virginia. And he is proud to be a Global Messenger, once spoke before a crowd of 10,000, writes eloquently about the pain and exclusion that comes when others don't accept you or treat you with the respect every human being deserves.

"I am very lucky," Frank has written. "Even though I was born with this intellectual disability, I do pretty well and have a good life. I live and work in the community. I count as friends the people I went to school with and the people I met in my job. Every day, I get closer to living a life like yours."

"Being compared to people like me," he once wrote, "should be considered a badge of honor. No one overcomes more than we do and still loves life so much." Give Frank a big round of applause.

So what Frank wrote, what all these people represent, is what the Special Olympics is all about: overcoming obstacles with love and kindness and generosity and healthy competition. It's about pride, and it's about teamwork, and it's about friendship. And it's about treating everybody with dignity and giving everybody a chance.

So those values are values that everybody could use. Those are values that the Special Olympics can teach all of us. And so it makes a lot of sense that the Special Olympics began here in America, a nation founded on the principles of human equality, on the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for everybody, not just for some. A few organizations exemplify that principle and that promise better than this one, so I want to thank all of you for

being a part of the Special Olympics. We are getting excited for the World Games in L.A. next year, and we hope you have a wonderful evening tonight.

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you. Go head, eat up!

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:02 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Dikembe Mutombo and Yao Ming, former centers, National Basketball Association's Houston Rockets; Stephen M. Case, chairman and chief executive officer, Revolution; musician Stevie Wonder; and musician Katy Perry and her mother Mary Perry Hudson.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Special Olympics, 46th anniversary, dinner.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Case, Stephen M.; Claiborne, Loretta; Harris, Tim; Hudson, Mary Perry; Maxino, Brina Kei; Mutombo, Dikembe; Namiseb, Deon; Obama, Michelle; Plunkett, Dustin; Pretty, Katy; Stephens, Frank; Thornton, Donna; Thornton, Ricardo, Sr.; Wonder, Stevie; Yao Ming.

Subjects: Special Olympics.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400587.