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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bond Between Student and Coach Transforms Life of Special Olympics Swimmer at YMCA

Northbrook, IL: March 2016 – Eight months ago, Sam Kasallis could barely dog-paddle. At age 15, the young Deerfield resident with autism had taken sporadic swim lessons over the years, but his special needs were too challenging for most instructors. Fast forward to today, and Sam is an enthusiastic, confident swimmer who is looking forward to competing in the Special Olympics Illinois State Games in June.

Sam's achievements grew out of a special coach/student relationship developed through the North Suburban YMCA's camp and aquatics programs. As part of the Y's Leaders summer camp for teens with special needs, Sam worked closely with Tom March, lead instructor of the Y's special needs services. With over 10 years of experiences working with young people with autism spectrum disorders, March had the skills and compassion to bond with Sam. At the end of the summer, Sam's parents arranged for private swim lessons with March, hoping that their relationship would enable Sam to learn enough to be reasonably safe in the water.

As Sam's mother Amy Kasallis relates, "Sam has always loved the water, and we had given him lessons sporadically over the years, but it has always been a challenge finding an instructor who "gets it." This challenge has only increased as Sam has gotten into his teens, and has really mastered the art of playing the adults around him in order to avoid exerting significant effort or undertaking challenging work. As a result, Sam's swimming skills were extremely weak and poorly-formed, really just a messy dog-paddle, and certainly nothing that we felt confident about on even a basic pool or water-safety level. So we were thrilled at the prospect of having Tom as Sam's swim instructor, since we knew, based on the wonderful affinity that had developed between Sam and Tom over the summer, that Tom most certainly 'gets it'."

The actual results, achieved over a few months, went far beyond their dreams, "With Tom's patient instruction, always delivered with deep understanding and engaging humor, Sam's swimming skills skyrocketed. It was amazing to watch week after week. Soon he went from a messy dog paddle to executing proper form in both freestyle and the breaststroke. Next he was swimming an entire length of

the pool. Then he was swimming laps. We had clearly shot well past the "let's just get him safe in the water" goal; we now had ourselves a swimmer!"

March recommended that Sam join the Y's Special Olympics Swim Team, the Flying Turtles, after two months of weekly lessons. While Sam's parents were initially apprehensive about how he would react to a crowded, competitive environment, Sam overcame all obstacles to earn gold and silver medals at the Special Olympics District Meet on March 19. Sam qualified to participate at the State level in June, along with eight of his teammates.

The pride and gratitude felt by Sam's mother shines through in a testimonial she posted to social media on March 20. "Thank you, Tom March, for your skill and your instinct and your infinite patience," she said. "Thank you for allowing Sam to be Sam and, at the same time, encourage him to develop incredible new skills and strengths. Thank you for your confidence in Sam and for seeing in him a potential that we hadn't seen ourselves. Thank you for giving Sam the chance to be a star."

The North Suburban YMCA offers group and private swim lessons for all ages and abilities, along with its Special Olympics Swim Team. For more information, visit www.nsymca.org or call 847 272 7250.



Photo Caption: Sam Kasallis (left), with Coach Tom March of the North Suburban YMCA, poses with the medals he earned at the Special Olympics Illinois District Swim Meet on March 19.

About the North Suburban YMCA

The YMCA is a charitable organization and relies on donations to make services available for all families and individuals in its 15-city region. All board members are volunteers, who donate their time, talents and financial resources. Located at 2705 Techny Road in Northbrook, the YMCA has served the northern suburbs of Chicago for over 45 years. The Y is about youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility, providing programs and services that address the needs of our diverse community and are accessible to all. For more information or to make a donation, contact Kim Nyren at 847-272-7250 or Knyren@nsymca.org, or visit www.nsymca.org.