Tip a Cop raises awareness about Special Olympics

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Easern Connecticut State University Police Lieutenant Tom Madera sat a family of four at a corner table at Nita's Restaurant on Nov. 8. Nearby, Sergeant Lisa Hamilton helped to clear away dirty dishes. It was the second annual Tip a Cop event at Nita's, and the restaurant was bustling with activity.

Also helping out were Kyra and Ian Beattie, Police Cadets from Troop K, and their mom, Carol Bagshaw. The group would help serve during Nita's busy morning hours, collecting tips to help support Connecticut Special Olympics. Similar events are held throughout Connecticut, according to Madera. The ECSU Police teamed up with restaurant owner Nita Durnik two years ago. "We were looking for a restaurant where we could serve, someplace that is busy on the weekends," said Madera. "She has been great. She'd like us to do this two times per year, and we try to accommodate."
Aside from raising money, the event is intended to help raise awareness about Special Olympics, an organization that Madera has been involved with for 20 years. "When I first got involved, it was just the compassion that drew me," he said. "You see the results almost immediately, the happiness of the athletes." After one event, Madera was hooked. He also plays Unified floor hockey and softball. And a recent marriage has brought the issue even closer to home. Madera’s new brother-in-law is an athlete. "You realize they share the same aspirations we do," he said.

Madera’s colleague, Officer David DeNunzio, is also involved with the organization, participating in the annual Torch Run, one of the largest grassroots fund raisers for Special Olympics, according to Madera. "Last year $500 million was raised worldwide through the Torch Run," he said. Other Eastern Connecticut State University Police colleagues get involved through the annual Jail and Bail activity, said Madera, scheduled this year, for April 28.

Over the years, Madera has developed a great deal of respect for Special Olympics athletes. "They're wonderful people to be around," he said. "You realize that we’re all pretty much the same."