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City marks 40 years of Special Olympics

'BORN IN CHICAGO' | Festivities on tap Saturday

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Forty years ago, 9-year-old Mark Affetto arrived at Soldier Field for a track and field competition that would change his life forever.

He was one of 1,000 athletes to participate in the event that later became the Special Olympics. There were more participants than there were spectators.

On Saturday, Affetto will make a triumphant return to Soldier Field as Chicago celebrates the 40th anniversary of an event organizers called Mayor Richard J. Daley's

"greatest legacy."

The "Born in Chicago" Celebration Festival will begin with a traditional Olympic torch run that starts at Daley Center Plaza and ends at Soldier Field. An 11 a.m. opening ceremony will be followed by a day filled with music, sports, magicians, clowns and more.

Comedian Tom Dreesen will emcee the program.

Affetto, who has Down syndrome, has traveled the world to spread the word about the Special Olympics.

"I am proud to say I have been a Special Olympic athlete since the very first games were held at Soldier Field in 1968, and I'm still going strong," said Affetto, a 49-year-old gold medal winner who trains four days a week and has competed in basketball, floor hockey, baseball, soccer and track and field.

If not for a 23-year-old physical education teacher



Mark Affetto, who was in the first Special Olympics, speaks to the media with Mayor Daley and Chris Kennedy. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

for the Chicago Park District who went on to become an Illinois Supreme Court justice, the Special Olympics never would have happened.

Anne Burke came up with the idea to create what was supposed to be a one-time competition for kids with special needs.

With a nudge from Richard J. Daley, Burke approached Eunice Kennedy

Shriver to help fund the first competition. The Kennedy Foundation donated \$25,000, and Shriver helped gather 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada to participate. The rest is history.

"Mrs. Shriver had the bigger vision of doing it everywhere else in the country because it was so successful here in Chicago," Burke said. **Comment at suntimes.com.**