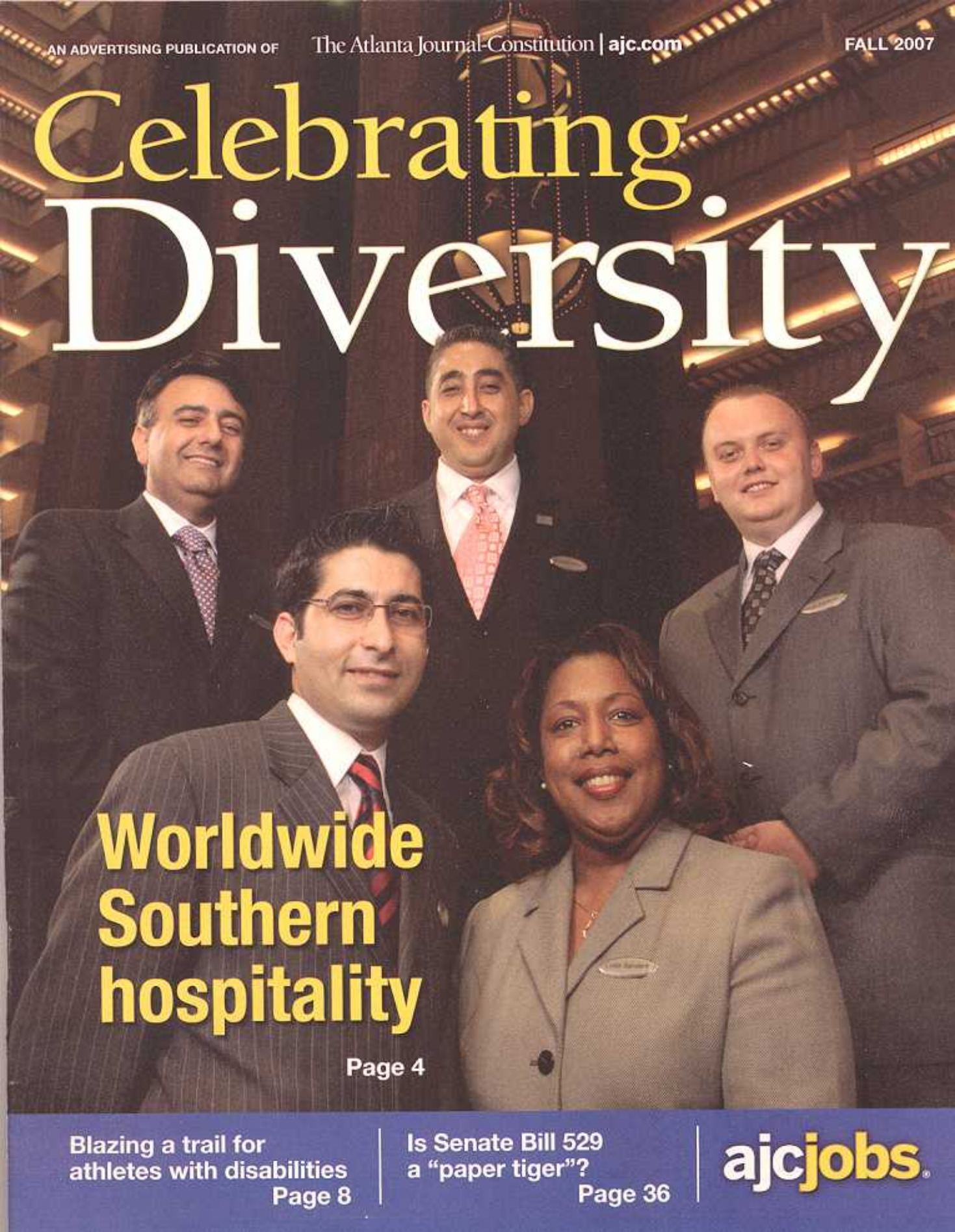


Celebrating Diversity



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Trailblazers

Organization extends legacy from Atlanta's 1996 Paralympic Games to the grass-roots level

By Ray Glier
For Celebrating Diversity

Its identity is tied to the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta, but BlazeSports America is much more than the legacy of that competition. Its reach stretches from Cairo, Ga., to Cairo, Egypt, and has less to do with Atlanta and winning medals and more to do with peace-building and helping people with disabilities to break boundaries.

BlazeSports is an Atlanta-based program launched by the U.S. Disabled Athletes Fund to bring community-based disabled sports opportunities to cities across the country. Its initiatives seem boundless:

► In August, chief executive Carol Mushett Johnson met with state legislators to find a way to fund college athletic scholarships for Georgia athletes with disabilities. Many of these athletes who want to compete in college and get money for books, tuition, etc., have to leave the state to find these opportunities.

► In January, five BlazeSports America staffers traveled to Egypt for a conference to train sports officials; they also held a one-day sports event for disabled women in Egypt. The event, which was expected to attract 50 participants, drew more than 300 people.

► BlazeSports fields phone calls — sometimes as many as 100 a month — from representatives of recreation centers around the country, who ask about how to empower people with disabilities.

► The organization helps manage 62 clubs in 28 states plus the District of Columbia.

► BlazeSports aims to expand its presence in Georgia so that every potential athlete and parent are within a short drive of a recreation center that can help nurture a disabled athlete.

More than anything, BlazeSports' initiatives are about giving hope — and wheels — to discouraged children.

"They have kept me from sitting at home and feeling sorry for myself," said



Yvonne Reyes (left) and Maggie Frederick speed toward the finish line during the women's 800-meter wheelchair race at the U.S. Paralympics Track and Field Championships in Marietta this summer.

Photos by LEITA COWART/Special

17-year-old Maggie Frederick, a senior at Marietta High School, who was born with spina bifida. "Without Blaze, I don't know what I would've done. I got into sports when I was 10 years old, and it was all because of Blaze."

BlazeSports — a nonprofit with a budget of \$1.2 million and 10 employees — was named after Blaze, the mascot from the 1996 Paralympic Games, a phoenix.

According to its Web site (www.blazesports.com), the group's mission is "to maximize the potential of children and adults with physical disability through sport." To that end, BlazeSports conducts workshops and hosts events for people with physical disabilities.

The organization's core sports are basketball, tennis, rugby, swimming and

track and field.

The organization has a string of success stories, including Karin Korb, a Buckhead resident and world-class wheelchair tennis player. She has played on nine USA World Teams and competed in two Paralympic Games (2000 and 2004).

The former director of Sports Partnerships and Community Relations for BlazeSports America, Korb was one of the first two students (and the first woman) with physical disabilities to receive an athletic scholarship at Georgia State University. She works part time for BlazeSports as a consultant so she can train for the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

"What's great about the place is it is almost like a clearinghouse for sport across the country," Korb said. "You have this gigantic network of



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BlazeSports

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people working in adaptive recreation. . . . This is very competitive sports.

"Blaze is good at the grass-roots programming and bringing people together. The goal is to get . . . off the couch, and Blaze is a facilitator."

Georgia State has since eliminated its wheelchair tennis program.

Exporting athletes

Tommy Gray started participating in BlazeSports events as a freshman in high school in Macon and played on the organization's wheelchair basketball travel team.

When the team was on a trip to Philadelphia, the wheelchair basketball coach at Edinboro State University

in Pennsylvania saw Gray play and offered him partial scholarship.

"It counts as a real sport there," said Gray, 19, who is in his junior year. "I was lucky because the coach saw me in a tournament."

BlazeSports' Johnson doesn't want Georgia to lose any more athletes like Gray, who are role models to others in the state. She is especially concerned about losing Frederick — who excels in track and field and wheelchair basketball — to an out-of-state college.

"We would love to have college athletics as a pilot program in Georgia, and Kennesaw State [University] has expressed some interest in a program for student athletes," Johnson said. "Maggie is making the decision now about where she might want to go to college, but she doesn't want to have to forfeit her HOPE scholarship. That is a privilege she should have but will lose if she has to go out of state."

While BlazeSports doesn't want to export its athletes, it has no problem sharing its expertise. It's essential to BlazeSports' mission to spread its knowledge and expertise, because many Third World countries can't meet even the basic needs of disabled athletes.

Changing attitudes

"What we are trying to do is literally people-to-people," Johnson said. "You change attitudes toward Americans one person at a time, and you change our young Americans' attitudes toward others one person at a time."

The international element of the program, which is a collaboration between BlazeSports and the U.S. State Department, is called Building Global Citizens. This month, 12 Egyptian children will attend a camp in Warm Springs, along with American athletes with disabilities.

In June 2008 BlazeSports will host an international



Photos by LEITA COWART/Sp

"They have kept me from sitting at home and feeling sorry for myself. Without Blaze, I don't know what I would've done."

MAGGIE FREDERICK
Senior, Marietta High School

youth summit, where teenagers and young adults will get leadership training, Johnson said.

Although BlazeSports has seven programs in the state and is a presence in four of the Georgia Recreation and Park Association's seven districts, Johnson is not satisfied. She said that BlazeSports wants to double its Georgia programs.

"You have to have somewhere to go and compete; you just can't run down the street to the local soccer field and compete," Johnson said. "We just hosted the national [Paralympics] Track and Field Championships in Marietta. We organize wheelchair basketball tournaments during the year, and we host regional workshops and national conferences."



"This is very competitive sports."

KARIN KORB
Former director of
Sport Partnerships and
Community Relations for
BlazeSports America