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## FAAer Earns His Title As a Truly Special Olympian

**February 20, 2008** – You've seen video of snowmobilers. Flying over moguls through the air, exploring the backwoods of the north country, and churning up the snow sure looks like fun. But what if you had to lead a group of snowmobilers — many inexperienced — 300 miles across a frozen landscape over two days in temperatures that often dip lower than zero.



Marc Williams is ready to ride.

For Marc Williams, that's even better!

Williams, a Tech Ops employee in the Farmington (Minn.) System Support Center, has been guiding snowmobilers for the past 20 years as part of the Northland 300, a fundraising event for Special Olympics.

This year's ride, which ended Jan. 26, took Williams and his group of 10 from Two Harbors, Minn., 150 miles north to Ely, near the Canadian border. A day of rest is followed by the return trip. The temperature: a relatively sultry 10 degrees. Williams tells of riding through blizzards, in temperatures 25 to 30 below zero. Why would he subject himself to such weather?

"You've got a foot of snow on the ground, and it's zero degrees out there. There's not so much you can do except go out and have some fun," he explains.

But there's an altruistic side to Williams' participation, as well. Through the money he has helped raise for Special Olympics — more than \$100,000 so far — and the personal time he has spent with disabled athletes, Williams might well be considered an Olympian himself.

Kathy Karkula, volunteer event director for the Northland 300, seems to think so. She recalls the first time she met Williams 20 years ago. He showed up a week before the event wanting to join the ride, said Karkula, who is also director of development for Special Olympics. He was told he needed to raise \$300 to participate. He came back the next week with \$1,200. "I'm thinking, 'Where did we get this guy,'" said Karkula. "We need to keep him."

When she saw that "he was one heck of a good snowmobiler as well," Williams had ascended Mount Olympus in Karkula's mind. The next year he became a group leader, guiding less experienced riders along trails he had traversed for decades (Williams started snowmobiling at age 12).

So Williams hit the ground sledding. He raised ever increasing amounts of money, topping off at \$11,000 one year. Then he convinced his major donor, the local Eagles Club, to become the

ride sponsor. Now he averages about \$7,000 per year in donations.

Williams rides Polaris snowmobiles. Long and flat with handlebars and a throttle, the snowmobile can reach speeds of 100 mph. But Williams tries to keep the ride under 50 mph when he's with beginners. A snowmobile safety instructor for 15 years, Williams tries to keep the going smooth.

Besides, after nearly four decades of sledding, the real thrill for Williams is not speed, but meeting people. "We're bringing new people on an adventure they've never [experienced before].

We've got coming back almost as long as I have," said Williams. "It's a real good time catching up after a year of being apart. It's gotten to be a very close group."

Perhaps the only thing that tops the ride's social aspect is working with the Special Olympians. "He lives Special Olympics," said Karkula. "He is one of our best representatives."



Williams and Karkula display their colors at the end of another successful ride.



Williams hands the torch to a Special Olympics athlete at the torch-lighting ceremony for the Northland 300.

Williams has taken Special Olympics athletes skiing and sledding, and has arranged for several athletes to participate in the Northland 300's torch-lighting opening ceremony. "It's fun to be a part of [the Special Olympics]" said Williams. They have such a great time. They're living their lives."

So is Williams. Says Karkula, "I just look to Marc anytime I'm facing a dilemma. There's no problem too big, no problem too small. He always has a smile on his face."

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