

[NDSS Home](#) > [News & Events](#) > [News](#) > [Human Interest](#) > [The Glacierz Will Truly C...](#)

- [NDSS News](#)
- [Human Interest](#)
- [Science & Research News](#)
- [Advocacy News](#)
- [Buddy Walk News](#)
- [Other](#)
- [News Archive](#)

## The Glacierz Will Truly Cheer You Up

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It never fails to put a lump in their throats, the mothers say. Every time their kids finish a performance, the audience rises to give the Glacierz cheer squad a standing ovation.

They clap a little longer and harder for the Special Olympics team of special needs kids from Simi Valley.

In the parking lot later, people always walk up to Andrew Harris, Caitie Tregembo, Elizabeth Erb and the other winners on this team to thank them personally.

"I can't tell you how thrilled it makes our kids feel to have strangers stop to tell them how awesome they are, and how they brought tears to their eyes watching them perform," Christie Harris says.

These are kids who are not used to accolades. Their physical challenges have always kept them in the wings, watching other kids get the applause.

Not anymore. They're the stars of the show now.

Becky Herrera, owner of CheerForce, pulled Christie Harris aside after a practice session last December to see what she thought of an idea she had.

Becky had just returned from judging a cheerleading competition out of state, and one of the teams performing was made up of special needs children, like Christie's 10-year-old son, Andrew, who has an immune system disorder.

For years she had watched Andrew tag along with his mother to cheerleading competitions all over the state to watch his older sister, Kacee, perform with the CheerForce team.

Maybe it was time to give Andrew and a team of special needs kids their own turn in the spotlight.

After the fliers went out on the Special Olympics team being formed, 10 kids - most of them with cerebral palsy and Down syndrome - showed up with their parents for the first practice.

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Andrew looked around and saw only girls. He smiled.

"It never bothered him to be the only boy on the team," Christie says, laughing. "He loves it.

"He's the first one out through the curtain, waving his arms for people to stand up and clap for them. That's his role."

But it was nerve-wracking at first, says Christie Harris and Jackie Erb, whose 11-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, with Down syndrome, is the "flier" on the team - the girl the other kids throw high in the air and hopefully catch.

As the team coaches worked with the new cheer squad, the mothers watched their kids doing cartwheels and somersaults - things they never imagined they could do.

"I've been so proud of Elizabeth showing the courage within herself to do all these things, but it is nerve-wracking worrying that they might drop her," Jackie says.

"I don't think she understands the fear part of it. She's having too much fun. Before this team was formed, there wasn't much for our kids to do.

"Now they're getting a chance to show everyone they're capable of so many things, if just given the chance and support."

So, let's hear it for Patricia Joran, Brittney Susim, Abigail Arnal, Katie Kelley, Erin Schleich, Heather Klumb, Catrina Marko, Caitie Tregembo, Elizabeth Erb, and the only boy on the Glacierz team, Andrew Harris.

They'll be performing in an all-star showcase today with other teams from CheerForce from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. at Royal High School, 1402 Royal Ave. in Simi Valley. Admission is free.

Drop by and clap a little longer and harder for the kids finally getting their turn in the spotlight.

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