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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
August 21, 2008

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Faster, Higher, Stronger
by: Senator Larry Craig

The spirit of the Olympics is alive in Idaho as we celebrate the accomplishments of our Olympians who hail from the Gem State. Over the past two weeks athletes like Ian Waltz and Matt Brown from the northern reaches of our State, and Debbie McDonald and Nick Symmonds from its heart have given their all to live up to the motto of the games, 'Citius, Altius, Fortius' or 'Faster, Higher, Stronger.' Boise's Kristin Armstrong achieved just that, as her years of preparation culminated in a gold medal in cycling, but she wasn't the only Idahoan winning medals in August. Just this past week 34 others were honored for their achievements with a Congressional Award, the award for young Americans authorized by the U.S. Congress.

The Congressional Award program is relatively young when compared with the long history of the Olympics, but I couldn't help but notice many similarities between the two. Both programs focus on physical fitness and personal development, both require tremendous efforts in goal setting and follow-through, and both award those who achieve with gold, silver and bronze medals.

There are, of course, differences between the programs, as well. In the Olympics the competition is against others, while Congressional Awards are individualized. Only the top three finishers in each event receive gold, silver or bronze medals in the Olympics, while there's no limit to the number of medals that can be won in each Congressional Award category. The Congressional Awards also focus on public service and exploring new interests, two areas that can, but are not required to be part of an Olympian's preparation. That being said, these two great programs share a key common thread in pushing Idahoans faster, higher and stronger.

Congressional gold medalist Amanda McGehee from Ahsahka demonstrates this. She started a program called "Bridging the Gap," in which she counseled pre-teen and teenage girls in life skills and academics. She also assisted two elderly women in the community with shopping and doctors' appointments, and even helped them plant and take care of a garden. Amanda summed up her Congressional Award experience with this: "I have learned how one individual can affect a community by performing a few simple everyday jobs."

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Silver medalist Kristi Sandven from Boise set a goal to master the violin and invested thousands of hours to achieve it. Along the way she won several awards and earned superior ratings, only to be forced to give the violin up due to a joint disorder. Undaunted, Kristi shifted her focus to vocal performance, which allowed her to heal from her loss of the violin. Kristi had this to say about her experience: “I learned that realizing a limitation doesn't necessarily mean the realization of an end.”

Dylan Dobbs from Twin Falls improved his athletic skills while working toward his bronze medal. After hours on the baseball diamond, his batting average reached twice his original goal. His effort and skill were recognized when he made the all-star team. About his experiences during his first year in the program, Dylan said, “I learned to be more responsible, to set and complete my goals and to keep track of my performance.”

As one of the Senators who introduced the Congressional Award program to our state fifteen years ago, I am proud to see the remarkable accomplishments of Dylan, Kristi, Amanda and the thousands of others just like them. I congratulate each of them for their tremendous efforts, just as I do our Olympians, and encourage more of Idaho's younger generation to seize the opportunities provided by the Congressional Award program to go ‘faster, higher, stronger.’