

Britt Andres and Ines Arana enjoy being part of the Best Buddies Programs at Seven Lakes High School which pairs general education students with special needs students

Best Buddies in Katy

Caring Katy area high school students form lasting friendships with their special needs counterparts

Written by Noreen Stavinoha | Photography by Juliana Evans & Jason Lehecka

The Best Buddies program was the invention of Anthony K. Shriver while he was a student at Georgetown University in 1987. The son of Sargeant Schriver, who founded the Peace Corps, and Eunice Shriver, founder of the Special Olympics, Anthony was destined to make his own mark in the world. The inspiration behind being inspired to improve the lives of special needs individuals can be accredited to Eunice's mentally handicapped sister, Rosemary Kennedy.

Since the first chapter of the organization was built in Georgetown, it has grown to include 1,500 chapters in middle schools, high schools, and colleges worldwide.

A Unique Program

"I was determined to make my kids visible," says Shannon Womack, the special education instructor at Seven Lakes High School, "and they are." That sentiment is as heartfelt as it is universal among the teachers in Katy ISD who utilize this unique program to pair high school students up with special needs students.

The Best Buddies Program has been adopted at all six of Katy's high schools. Angela Angel of Katy High explains, "It helps them to be more accepted and involved in things, and for our general education students, it helps them to accept everybody."

Maccie Hardin, Special Needs Paraprofessional at Mayde Creek High School, was involved with Best Buddies all four years of high school which led her to the decision of working with them as her career. She has returned to her alma mater to do just that. "The love they give, you can't replace with anything," she relates. "Friendship is different with special needs kids. General ed kids may not see one another every day, and it's no big deal, but if these kids don't see



Brittany Scofield finds great reward in being the president of the Seven Lakes Best Buddies program

their buddy every day, they're devastated. It really does change who you are as a person."

Powerful Friendships

An application process is used to pair potential buddies and students with similar interests and personalities. Upon becoming a member, each student is given a packet with information about the various disabilities they may encounter and their causes, as well as an etiquette and behavior guide, to facilitate communication in these new relationships.

Ample opportunities for these relationships to grow and flourish are provided to the students by way of group activities on a regular basis. These can include anything from a night out at a local restaurant or an after school ice cream party. "When you first sign on to Best Buddies, I don't think you realize how much someone can mean to you. You have friends among your peers, but there is a different level of friendship with someone with special needs. Your buddy is a genuine friend forever," shares Hanna Perepeluk a student at Mayde Creek.

School Improvement

Before Best Buddies came on the scene, special needs students were often isolated from other students and missed out on memorable high school experiences. Thanks in part to the awareness this program has created, they are now involved in Homecoming, sporting events, and prom.

The Katy community has been very accepting and cooperative with the special needs students and the Best Buddies program. The Katy Elks Club sponsors a Christmas party every year for Best Buddies from all six high schools as well as an end of the school year party. Restaurants accommodate the groups



Best Buddies form powerful bonds and lasting friendships



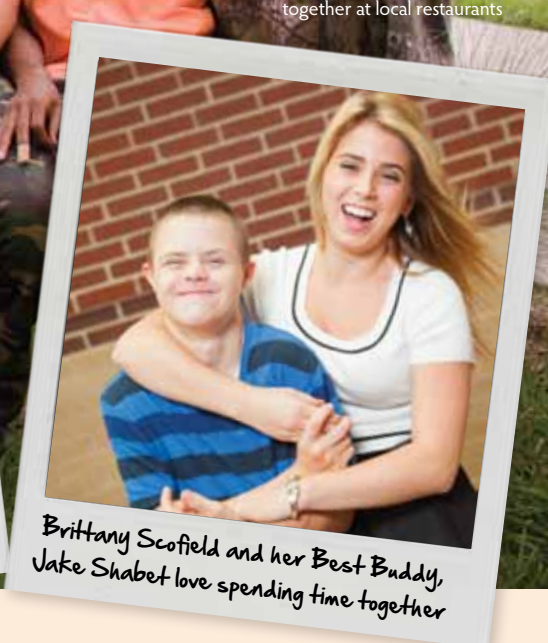
Cinco Ranch High School Best Buddies enjoy activities such as ice cream socials, craft projects, and group dinners together at local restaurants



Best Buddies often assist their counterparts with schoolwork and other related projects



Best Buddies at Taylor High School enjoy getting together to play games and socialize



Brittany Scofield and her Best Buddy, Jake Shabet love spending time together



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“When you first sign on to Best Buddies, I don’t think you realize how much someone can mean to you. Your buddy is a genuine friend forever.”

- Hanna Perepeluk of Mayde Creek

for pizza parties and other outings. Many Katy area businesses also employ special needs students.

Keep Holding On

The Best Buddy sponsors report a remarkable rapport between the students and their assigned buddies, even outside of the program. It is not unusual to see them chatting in the halls, exchanging high fives as they walk by, or even sitting together at lunch.

Some students that have taken part in the Best Buddies program, have gone on to pursue careers that will allow them to work with special needs students in some way. And, most will continue the friendships after graduation. After all, it’s hard to forget smiles and hugs received when you walk into a buddy’s room, that is the kind of love that is worth holding onto. **KM**



NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy, and loves writing the amazing stories of some of Katy’s most interesting citizens.



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