

'Buddies' System at CHS

Program gets students new perspective

KENDRA LEIGH MILLER
kmillerr@ricentral.com

COVENTRY — A handful of students at Coventry High School are reaching out to their peers with disabilities in an effort to form close bonds and to show that everyone is not so different after all.

The program is called the Best Buddies Program and the local Coventry Chapter in the high school falls under the Rhode Island chapter.

It began when Coventry High School Assistant Principal Brook Macomber selected eight students who she knew had an interest in helping those students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

The program is focused 100 percent on pairing up the students chosen by Macomber with a student who is intellectually and developmentally disabled.

The match is usually made during an initial party when the students all get together and as student Jason Hoskins explained, things take their natural course at the gathering when students just find their buddies through natural conversation.

"I have an older brother who has severe epilepsy and when I attended the Best Buddy Leadership Conference Training where they trained me to start a new chapter for the high school, I knew it was definitely something I wanted to be involved in where I knew it would be a great experience," he said.

See BUDDIES, Page A-5



Students at Coventry High have begun their own chapter of the Best Buddies program, which pairs developmentally- or intellectually-disabled students with students throughout the school. Sophomore Jason Hoskins (right photo, far left, with CHS Principal Michael Hobin and fellow Best Buddies participant Gregory Washington) began the program, which will be raffling off two recliners from Cardie's at halftime of today's football game.

Submitted photos



Buddies program a hit

Continued from Page A-1

Macomber explained how these students recently had the opportunity to attend a conference at the Omni Biltmore Hotel in Providence and meet other students from around the state, who, like them, are part of the Best Buddies Program.

Hoskins said each month, the students at CHS have a get-together where they have a party or group activity and when the state chapter meets up, they hold a ball and host programs such as "Spread the Word, End the Word," which is geared toward stopping the use of the word "retarded."

Another member, Bridget Cronin, a freshman, said she was very excited when Hoskins approached her to see if she was going to take part; her response was "Heck yes!"

"I have a sibling with MS and I know this program really helps," she said. "There was a matching party to see who interacted with whom the best and we all just sort of fell into place."

While the students attended the conference, they had the opportunity to hear a speaker who was an amazing athlete and scholar but whose world changed after his wife gave birth to their child, who was born with challenges.

"Here was this guy who had accomplished all these amazing things and at first, felt he couldn't have a child with differences but explained to the crowd that once that child was born, he felt so much love for the child that the differences didn't matter at all and I thought that was incredible," Hoskins said.

Another member, McKenzie Haynes, shared how at first, her buddy was pretty shy and hesitated to go sit with her and talk but it didn't take long for that to shift.

"She comes right over to me now and sits with me in the lunch room and she talks to me all the time about her family," she said. "It's all very natural now."

Cronin said the experience has been great all around because everyone has the chance to make a whole other group of friends.

"The circle of friends expands when the groups start hanging out together and if you have siblings, then your siblings friends can become your friends," she said.

The group is having a fundraiser to help pay for the activities they take part in and through



Submitted photo

The Best Buddies program held a ball in Providence.

that effort, they will be raffling off two new recliners from Cardi's Furniture at the rivalry game against neighboring West Warwick on Thanksgiving.

The winner of the chairs will not only get to take them home, of course, but they'll be invited to move them down to the best seats in the house and have families join them.

Macomber is so proud of the students for forming these close bonds.

"It's been a huge change in culture, seeing these kids mix in the lunch room," she said.

"It's been an amazing thing to see grow and see these kids all spending time with each other," said special education teacher Michael Palumbo. "I hope West Warwick sees this and decides to start their own chapter too."

Macomber said the other piece that ties in with this program is the Unified Sports Program through Special Olympics.

Unified sports is about paring up young people with and without intellectual disabilities through education and sports-related activities, that provide them with the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to create and sustain school communities that promote acceptance and respect.

There will be a school-wide assembly at 9 a.m. on December 19 when members of the Best Buddy Program will present the student body with the program's goal's and ideas.