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Kristin Fields '12
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Students Find Ways to Be a Best Buddy

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Track Star, Ashley Wertz and Clown, Amanda Kessel '12 share a hug at the Best Buddies Halloween party.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For the average college student, the many demands faced throughout the year – papers, presentations, exams – are more than enough. While each student finds his or her own way to deal with these stresses, some students have found enriching experiences through organizations such as Best Buddies International.

Promoting social inclusion and leadership opportunities through one-on-one friendships, as well as job opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), Best Buddies International is a not-for-profit organization found in all 50 states and 50 countries worldwide. Positively impacting nearly 700,000 individuals with and without disabilities, the organization was established in 1989 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver. What began with one chapter has now blossomed into a worldwide organization of 1,500 chapters, varying from middle schools, to high schools, to universities and communities through adult programs.

At Illinois Wesleyan, the chapter is comprised of students of all years and majors, and people with IDD, or buddies, from the community. Each buddy is paired with a college student; this year there are 14 matches and 19 associate members, who are not paired with buddies but still attend meetings and events. Recently, the group met in Buck Memorial Library for a Halloween party, which included trick-or-treating around the campus. Later in the year, they will attend a football game together and fundraise, as well. Outside of planned events, the group members and their buddies talk weekly and get together in order to create life-long friendships.

For Jordan Stewart, junior psychology major and president of the Best Buddies chapter at IWU, interacting with people who have IDD began in high school and continued well into college. “I am personally involved with this program because my life was changed in high school while working with students who have IDD through various clubs,” said Stewart. “The friendships I made with those students impacted me in such a significant way.”

Best Buddies Halloween party gathers for a mummy wrap game on the IWU quad.

This summer, Stewart attended a leadership conference for Best Buddies International, where chapter presidents and buddies from all over the world joined together to learn how to bring about social change in their communities back home.

“Seeing first-hand the impact that our organization has on everyone, people with and without disabilities, was something I could never imagine. It was a life-changing experience,” said Stewart.

Part of the social change needed in communities begins with an open mind, Stewart said. She explained that people with IDD are no different from people without disabilities – they have friends and jobs like everyone else.

“Because of organizations like Best Buddies, it is possible for people with IDD to secure jobs, live on their own and become inspirational leaders,” she said.

One of the group’s major campaigns is “Spread the Word to End the Word,” which works to put an end to the use of the word “retard” in derogatory references to people with disabilities. “People need to let others know not to use that word, as it is hurtful to those with and without disabilities,” said Stewart.

While Stewart’s interactions with programs like Best Buddies began in high school, junior mathematics major Kari Randick’s experience stems from home. “Growing up with my brother Ryan, who has a disability, I learned some of life’s greatest lessons. He made me who I am today and I felt that the best way I could give back to the community was by spreading this love,” said Randick, who is the activities coordinator of the Best Buddies IWU chapter.

Randick sees that love returned and at its best during the gatherings the group hosts. “I can honestly say that at each of our parties we have thrown, I have caught myself admiring my surroundings,” she said. “The happiness that illuminates from every member of the organization is unreal.”

The effect the group has on students is one that Randick has taken note of. “There have been IWU students who walked into a party to give Best Buddies a chance and have come away with an undeniable connection,” she said. “I could not have asked for a better group of people to share these experiences with, and can only hope for these friendships to continue to grow everlasting.”

*Contact: Kristin Fields, ’12, (309) 556-3181, **univcomm@iwu.edu***