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The Best Buddies Program

 Growing up I went to four elementary schools, two middle schools, and two highschools. I don’t have a single person in my life that I can say has been my friend since kindergarten, let alone since sixth grade. I know what it feels like to be lonely, I know what it feels like to literally have no friends. I know what it feels like to feel alone in a room full of people but also have to watch everyone have at least someone. I didn’t think I knew what consistency felt like but looking back now I’ve discovered that I do. While my friend groups and settings were constantly changing, my love for and desire to help disabled peers has stayed consistent. I honestly could not tell you why I’m so drawn to them; It might be the fact that I know what being an outsider feels like, because I know they won’t judge me, or maybe I just like the company. Regardless of the why, I know that I am. I spent all of middle school and high school coaching a special education cheerleading team and even went on to be a teacher’s assistant in their classroom during my junior and senior years. When I graduated highschool, I didn’t imagine that there would be a way I could continue this passion of mine until I discovered Best Buddies. Being an out of state student, it’s easy to get homesick and miss the people you once shared a zip code with; But knowing a community like the Best Buddies program exists here at Florida State University makes Tallahassee feel a lot more like home.

Best Buddies is an international organization created in 1989 at Georgetown University by a man named Anthony Shriver. He wanted the organization to create one on one relationships between people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities. Since then the organization has grown to be the largest mentor organization in the world and reaches 6 continents, 54 countries, and continues to promote inclusivity. The program has chapters at over 1,500 college, high school, and middle school campuses. Best Buddies hosts major events across the United States to fundraise and spread awareness; The individual chapters host unique events at their respective campus. Luckily for me, Florida State has an amazing Best Buddies program and I got the opportunity to speak with Lara Stebbing, a junior here at FSU that’s on the Best Buddies leadership team. She invited me to come to one of the monthly meetings they hold to inform members and buddies of upcoming events, fundraising opportunities, and more. A guest speaker from the FSU American Sign Language Club came to the meeting and taught all of us how to sign some commonly used words; This meant a lot to the entire Best Buddies chapter because a few of the buddies are deaf. I got to meet some of the buddies involved with the FSU chapter and hear about how much they love hanging out with their mentors. I asked Lara about her and her buddy’s relationship and she told me that they spend an incredible amount of time together outside of the Best Buddies events. She said that being a member (now leader) of the chapter has been one of the best experiences of her life. She told me about how happy her buddy gets everytime they first meet up and that the look on her face is truly priceless. During my research on Best Buddies and peer mentor programs, I came across a multitude of studies that were focused on the effects of relationships between people with and without disabilities. A cross sectional survey done by the University of Utah states in its results that, “One measure of the success of Best Buddies in accomplishing its mission is that 8 of 10 college students, as a result of participation in the program, reported they had a more positive attitude about people with intellectual disabilities and a better understanding of the challenges they face” (Hardman 2005). Although I grew up in an area where special education students are treated very kindly, people often don’t consider disabled students as “regular people” and label them as “different”, “challenged”, or “slow”. People typically don’t understand the minds of disabled students so they’re often isolated from social scenes; Which in return makes every-day communication a struggle. The study also concluded that, “half reported that as a result of Best Buddies they [the disabled buddies] were more comfortable participating in social settings within the community and in speaking up for themselves...Given there had been prior opportunities for friendships among the vast majority of the Buddies [7 out of 10 reported previous mixed friendships], the fact that nearly half of respondents reported being more comfortable in community settings as a result of participation in Best Buddies is a significant finding” (Hardman 2005). Best Buddies is not just about simply creating a friendship between two people. It’s been proven that inclusivity increases disabled students’ communication skills, motivation levels, and allows them to feel like a part of the community. Every time I came across a new study, the conclusion was that these programs really do have positive benefits and effects on both the disabled and non disbaled persons lives. Best Buddies has created a way to give disabled people a little normalcy.

B3 Coffee (Best Buddies Brews) is a pop-up coffee stand dedicated to serving specialty coffee while promoting inclusivity. The shop was founded by members of UNC Chapel Hill's Best Buddies chapter, and was recently expanded to San Diego State University's Best Buddies chapter. They are partnered with “HÆRFEST COFFEE”, a coffee outreach company that utilizes the “HÆRFEST” of coffee to impact lives, create employment opportunities and skills, and influence positive social change. Buddies have the opportunity to work as a barista, server, prep team, and customer service. B3 Coffee has created a very detailed and aesthetically appealing website (www.b3coffeestand.com) to promote the coffee stand and they look forward to opening more stands at campuses across the country. The website’s homepage showcases a photo of the B3 Coffee shop located at UNC Chapel Hill and simply reads, “Creating a space where everyone belongs, one cup at a time.” When you scroll down, there are short but efficient descriptions telling what B3 coffee’s purpose is, who they are, and a quick shout-out to HÆRFEST COFFEE for their partnership. Below this is a short promotional video. The video opens with a compilation of clips showing the working UNC chapter buddies in action. Max, one of the dedicated baristas, is seen serving a cup of freshly brewed drip coffee to a man with a bright smile on his face. A photo of the menu then flashes onto the screen and gives viewers a sneak peek of B3’s specialties. The scene then switches to Jacklyn Googins, 2019 graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, founder, and project manager of B3 Coffee. She begins to explain what B3 Coffee is and the ways it continues to positively impact the Buddies’ lives: providing opportunities for adults with disabilities to showcase the importance of their contributions, develop marketable skills, form friendships, and engage in the community in a meaningful way. More clips of the B3 staff are shown including a scene of pour-over specialist Lucia, a previously experienced barista (who now trains fellow buddies), pouring coffee for a customer. Sam Wagner, B3 Coffee cashier, is then interviewed and he explains how much he loves being apart of B3 Coffee. Sam states that,“it’s really fun getting to know the community and advocating and telling people about his struggle.” Clips of him pouring cups of coffee, making transactions, and serving and conversing with customers play while he speaks. Sam states how it’s, “really hard to get people to see how he matters too and he really wishes that others could see that people like him and his co-worker buddies live around campus every day.” The spotlight then shifts back onto Jacklyn and she explains that her idea to start the shop sparked from past experience as a barista. She was constantly seeing the way coffee brings people together and was inspired to use coffee to spark change. More scenes of buddies serving customers, smiling, laughing, and engaging in conversations are shown. Jacklyn mentions that the shop pops up across campus multiple times a month in order to maximize the skills that the buddies come away with. She goes into detail about the different brewing methods taught to the barista buddies: french press, pour over, regular drip coffee. The video closes with Jacklyn stating that, “through our efforts to make inclusion the norm, we are creating a culture that is anticipating, valuing and celebrating diversity in all forms.” The website also includes a “menu” tab that presents a full list of the items they serve and the prices, a “booking” tab that allows people to book B3 at any of their on-campus venues, an “order tab” that highlights HÆRFEST COFFEE and is embedded with a link to purchase their packaged coffee, a “media coverage” tab that’s flooded with articles about B3, and a “meet our team” tab that’s made up of detailed profiles for every member involved with B3. B3 Coffee is a start to the beginning of disabled adults being a part of the workforce. For the most part, people who live with intellectual and developmental disabilities don’t really have much of a life after completing highschool. Disabled or not, human beings need human connection and interaction to survive. With programs like Best Buddies and B3 Coffee specifically, disabled adults actually have the opportunity to be involved in their surrounding community and be a part of something bigger than themselves.

 After spending the semester researching Best Buddies and mentor programs, learning about B3 Coffee, and spending time with the FSU chapter, I can say without a doubt that I will be joining our Best Buddies community. As previously mentioned, most of my adolescent life was spent working with, leading, teaching, and learning from my disabled peers. Discovering the way to continue this passion of mine has been a wonderful and eye opening experience. Unfortunately, even though I would love to be an active member of the Best Buddies community, social anxiety has made it difficult for me. After growing up in a town where it was never okay to be yourself, meeting new people (and keeping those connections) is something that seems like an impossible task more often than not. Joining the community would alter my comfortable, familiar routine and I am still slowly learning how to accept and appreciate change. I know that joining the community would give me human connection, motivation, and most importantly a purpose; I know I need all of those things desperately, but simply just knowing what’s good for me isn’t enough to stop the anxiety from taking over my body when I have to speak with someone new. It wouldn’t be difficult for me to develop a relationship with a disabled buddy. The challenge would be getting to know my fellow mentors, being consistently involved, and following through with plans. While I attempt to work on myself and silence the voices in my head, I can use wanting to be a part of Best Buddies as motivation to get better. My first semester at Florida State hasn’t been one filled with friendship or purpose; But knowing I can join a community like Best Buddies comforts me when I imagine myself living here for 4 more years. Best Buddies and other mentor programs don’t exist solely for social purposes. These programs provide the opportunity for people like us to make a meaningful contribution to others, it is truly our obligation to follow it to conclusion.

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