



Creekside named Best Buddies Illinois Chapter of the Year

In sixth-grade, staff at Creekside Middle School believed Daniel Garcia could benefit from the school's Best Buddies program. But his autism made him extremely shy. He hid in bathrooms and feigned illness when it was time to meet with his buddy.

This year Daniel was paired up with eighth-grader Julian Arreguin-Menchaca, and the new match opened a whole new social world for both young men who eat lunch together most days and play Fortnite online many evenings.

"He made me feel good, like a true friend. When I was with him, it was the best part of the day," Daniel said. "He made me feel great every time I was with him. He made me feel normal."

Matches like Daniel and Julian's are a big part of the reason the Creekside Middle School program was recognized as the Best Buddies Illinois Middle School Chapter of the Year. It's the third time the program earned the award and the Creekside program is applying for Best Buddies International Middle School Chapter of the Year, which it won in 2012.

"Seeing our students interact with one another in this program is truly special. We're very proud of these kids and this program here at Creekside. They create an atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance that you can really feel throughout District 200 and in the community," Creekside Principal Michael Wheatley said.

Best Buddies pairs students with fellow students with disabilities such as Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy or fragile medical conditions. The goal is to teach the importance of inclusion and that friendship knows no barriers.

"The Best Buddies Chapter at Creekside Middle School has always shown that kindness and inclusion matter most. This is seen at all of their meetings and events," said Erika Sodergren, program manager for volunteers at Best Buddies Illinois.

The Creekside program boasts more than 100 members, according to faculty adviser Julie Stone. In addition to the one-on-one friendships, group activities are held throughout the year including a scavenger hunt, decorating pumpkins and a neighborhood roadside cleanup.

Buddies are carefully screened including interviews, questionnaires, and two staff reference letters until they are assigned a match, Stone said.

Eighth-grader Grace Murphy enjoys eating lunch and playing games with her buddy Jeremy Ruffin. She said she sometimes helps him with his grooming and communication skills.

"I love his smile and his laugh. He has a really great laugh," Grace said.

Chapter President Shea Behrens, an eighth-grader, has been with the program for three years and is now paired with 5th-grader Ryley Nelson.

"He's nonverbal, but we still find a way to talk to each other. He's always active. You can always hear him. He's a little loud. He'll let you know how he feels," Shea joked.

Stone runs the program with assistance from Creekside special education advisers Stephanie Tate and Morgan Hettermann.

"Julie has an admirable and inspiring passion for Best Buddies. With this, she helps organize events in which the chapter can experience the fullness of what Best Buddies has to offer," Sodergren said.

Stone said the Best Buddies message of what can be accomplished when barriers are removed is clear to participants and even non-participants at Creekside.

"We're all dedicated to it, and we know that being friends doesn't change based on your abilities," Shea Behrens said.

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(L to R) Creekside Middle School eighth-graders Grace Murphy and Shea Behrens play a game with fifth-graders Dominic Campoli and Ryley Nelson. The students are all part of the school's Best Buddies program, which was recently named Best Buddies Middle School Chapter of the Year in Illinois.



Julie Stone, faculty adviser for the Best Buddies program at Creekside Middle School, tells seventh-grader Daniel Garcia and eighth-grader Julian Arreguin-Menchaca that they've been chosen as the match of the year. The school's program was chosen as the Best Buddies Middle School Chapter of the Year in Illinois.