



education issues

FINDING FRIENDSHIP AND ACCEPTANCE

By Carrie Smoot

Caitlin Donovan and Rachel Hope are friends who attend Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, VA. They love all subjects, especially math, and plan to attend George Mason University when they graduate. Donovan wants to be a teacher's aide. Hope plans to be a kindergarten teacher.

Hope loves to sing and is in the choir, while Donovan, very outgoing, enjoys her school office job taking attendance and her after-school job assembling boat lanterns.

Like all teens, they enjoy getting together with other friends for ice cream, sports events and pep rallies. And the fact that both young women have mental retardation doesn't stop them from enjoying these activities with their high school friends.

Caitlin and Rachel attend Paul VI's Options program for students with special needs, currently a class of 13. The curriculum is adapted and tailored to their abilities, and they each have separate electives in regular education classrooms.

The teenage years are difficult and awkward for anyone, but especially so if you have a physical or intellectual disability. Making friends, even in an inclusive environment, can be challenging. However, there are many programs locally and nationally that are easy to join, and little by little, the isolation goes away. Many programs match students with disabilities to teenagers who do not have disabilities, promoting understanding and real

friendship. In some cases, young people are inspired to enter special education careers.

The Options program at Paul VI, now in its eighth year, is the only educational program in Fairfax County for students with intellectual disabilities. Many parents embrace it as the best high school experience for their teens and encourage it in other schools.

One of the reasons Options is such a success is because Paul VI asks its typically-abled students to be peer mentors for Options students. The peer mentors rotate periodically, giving all students a chance to know each other. The Options classroom is in the middle of everything, along the hallway leading to the cafeteria, so there's no sense of isolation. Each peer mentor gives up four study halls in a grading period to work with an Options student in reading, math or any subject. Peer mentors

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accompany students to their elective classes, modeling good behavior, and offering support and advice when needed.

"It's about kids doing normal things," says Mary Donovan, Caitlin's mother. During Caitlin's middle school years, she says, she ate by herself, and the phone didn't ring. Now school life is completely different and better. "The kids are learning how to be a friend to someone and building life skills. It's not babysit-

ting. As a parent, I try to model good social behavior for Caitlin, and then make sure she gets to be in situations where she can practice those skills. The Options Program is great, because everyone from the administration on down has said, 'You can and you will accept these kids,' and everyone has embraced that philosophy. Because of it, every student has the opportunity and the option to become the best that they can be."

"Options is a gift to all students in so many ways," says Christina Desmarais, Options director. "The kids do it because they want to, not because they have to."

"Options might be a little overwhelming at first if a new student isn't used to the culture here," says Paul VI sophomore Annie Desmarais, a peer mentor and Christina Desmarais' daughter. "But give it a chance and keep going with it. Be friendly and be yourself. Somebody has to make the first move. The Options kids are very friendly and make everyone else comfortable."

Mary Jo Gregory is a special education teacher at Paul VI who is amazed by the peer-mentoring program, which has helped some students with social skills like not talking while someone else is speaking, paying attention, waiting their turns and not making any strange noises. "The kids also really support the friendships and stick up for each other," she says. "If someone notices bad behavior or rude comments, he or she is called on it right away. We want these kids to be able to advocate for themselves and to get and keep their jobs. The Options program and peer

mentoring are good training for life.”

In 2005, Options partnered with the new national offices of Best Buddies, located in Tysons Corner, to enhance their similar after-school social program. Founded by the Kennedy family, Best Buddies is an after-school, student-run social program for regular education teens and students with intellectual disabilities in middle schools, high schools and colleges. Other Best Buddies programs include the Citizens Program, employment programs and e-Buddies. Desmarais says it's a nice marriage between the two groups.

Best Buddies VA program manager Andrew Frazzano says that the mission of Best Buddies is to enrich the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. Best Buddies, which has programs in 18 states, matches Buddy and Peer Buddy pairs for a year, allowing for longer and stronger friendships. “Each Buddy pair is special and unique. This program changes not one, but two lives,” Frazzano says. Now in 10 high schools and 10 colleges in Virginia, it is expanding into Loudoun County high schools as well as colleges across the state. Frazzano says that there's been a lot of interest in the Citizens program, where community mentors are matched with Buddies over 22.

“It's all about inclusion,” says Best Buddies State Director Susan D. Garvey. “Parents want their children to have friends at any age. They want to end the isolation. Parents say, 'Help my son find a friend. He's 32 and he doesn't have anything outside of work. Parents are our best advocates, and we can start more chapters with their help.’”

Special education teacher Rebecca Cousins works with a regular-education colleague to plan Best Buddies activities at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Burke. The

program has been in place for two years. Cousins says for Best Buddies to succeed within a school, everyone must support it — the principal, teachers and students. “Once the kids see student government officers involved, they will want to join,” she says. “My students will be very excited about doing things outside of school with their friends in class or their families, but with no one else. That's why it's so great to have Best Buddies here. It's a reason to get together. I always try to push my shy

ORGANIZATIONS

Best Buddies Virginia

Check the Web site's Virginia section for upcoming local events and the main site for national events.

*March is Best Buddies Awareness Month.
703-734-6426 • www.BestBuddies.org*

www.SpringfieldChallenger.org

www.paulvi.net/options

www.eddiesclub.org

www.SpecialOlympics.org

students into the program, but it's always up to the student and his or her interests.” For students looking for other activities, she suggests Eddie's Club, Project Success or Challenger Baseball.

Eddie's Club at Washington Irving Middle School in Springfield, Va., matches student volunteers with students who have disabilities for friendship and sports activities. Designed for students with disabilities and medical issues that make participation in other programs impossible, it's a unique mix of family activities, movies and special events in the area. A teen center offers dances and parties and time to be away from Mom and Dad. “Socialization is very important, and all parents need to practice it,” Garretson says. “Volunteers are the mainstay of the program.”

Seniors Brooke Postlewaite and Ashleigh Garner have known each other for a long time and have been matched for two years in the Best Buddies program at Lake Braddock. Postlewaite is SGA vice-president, and Garner sometimes helps her with things she needs to do for that. Together, they made a “haunted float” for homecoming, with Garner helping to crinkle paper. They communicate through the school's Blackboard computer system, regularly attend Best Buddies activities and check in with each other three times a week.

Another Lake Braddock student and Peer Buddy, Jaclynn Foster-Wittig, says her Buddy, also named Caitlin, teaches her amazing things. They first met in P.E. class where Foster-Wittig would throw Caitlin the ball so she would be able to catch it. “I'm learning a lot about '80s rock bands through Caitlin — she loves them — especially Mötley Crue and Nikki Sixx,” Foster-Wittig says. “We have fun blasting the music in the car sometimes.”

The best times, though, are just spent sitting and talking, seeing how things are going. “Caitlin is very optimistic and happy. It almost seems like nothing would get her down,” says Foster-Wittig, reflecting on her friend's insights about life. “Something she said once changed my outlook, and now I'm getting along better with my family.”

Best Buddies staff would love to see more people getting involved. “It's hard for some people to grasp that we're simply building friendships — just young people meeting, having fun and getting to know one another,” says Susan D. Garvey. “I had a call from a parent recently who said that the first phone call her daughter ever received was from her Peer Buddy, and that she was really excited.” ■