

2024

BESTBUDDIES® ANNUAL REPORT

Gisselle, **Lily** and **Caroline**, Eunie's Buddies

BEST BUDDIES®



MISSION PILLARS

One-To-One Friendships	Integrated Employment	Leadership Development	Inclusive Living	Family Support

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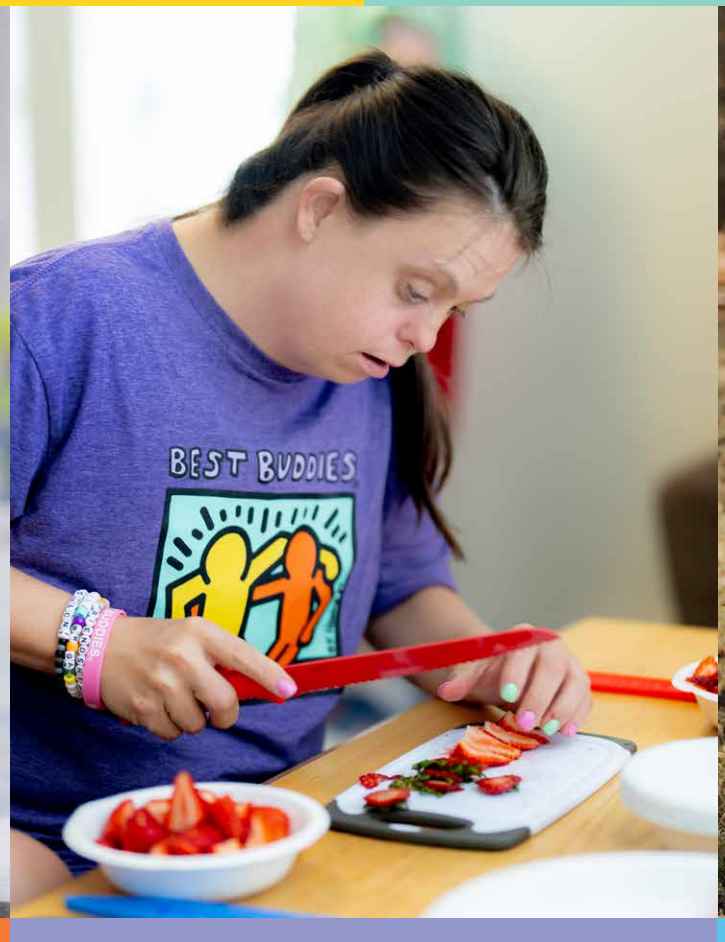
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BEST BUDDIES




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Anthony K. Shriver, and Best Buddies participant Matt Davies at the *2024 Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port, presented by Shaw's and Star Market Foundation and the TJX Companies, Inc.*

Message From Our Chairman

Dear Best Buddies Family,

As we reflect on 2024, I am filled with immense pride and gratitude for the incredible progress we've made together in building a more inclusive world for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This year marked a major turning point for our organization, as we deepened our impact, expanded our reach, and launched powerful new initiatives that will transform the lives of countless individuals and families for years to come.

One of the most significant and impactful initiatives of 2024 was the introduction of Best Buddies Family Support, our fifth mission pillar. This program is designed to provide families raising children with IDD access to mentors and meaningful connections, critical resources, and a strong community of support. To officially announce this launch, I had the honor of joining Best Buddies Global Ambassador and Today Show host Savannah Guthrie for a live interview on NBC in May. Together, we introduced the world to Eunie's Buddies, our new initiative supporting families and caregivers and I could not be prouder of what this represents for the future of inclusion.

This year also brought extraordinary momentum from our corporate partners, whose generosity and commitment to our mission elevated our work on every level. Best Buddies and the global iconic brand The Coca-Cola Company entered a five-year partnership, with the company becoming the "Official Beverage Partner" of Best Buddies through its BODYARMOR and Coca-Cola brands. Their $1 million grant will allow us to grow our supported employment program and place participants with IDD in meaningful jobs.

Our partnership with Jersey Mike's Subs also reached new heights. In just two days, their nationwide campaign raised $5.3 million to benefit Best Buddies! Their continued investment in inclusive hiring supports our work toward an ambitious goal: 3,000 job placements for individuals with IDD over the next 5 to 7 years.

Thanks to your support, 2024 has proven what is possible when community, commitment, and compassion come together. We are not only changing lives, we are building a sustainable movement of inclusion that empowers people with IDD to thrive.

To our participants, families, staff, donors, and volunteers: thank you for your belief in this mission and for walking alongside us. We know there is still more work to do but with your continued support, we are rising to meet the moment.

Together, we are shaping a world where everyone is seen, valued, and included.

In Friendship,

Anthony K. Shriver, Founder, Chairman & CEO, Best Buddies International

Why We Matter

Society has made undeniable progress in improving the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Yet, we still have a long way to go. Many people with IDD remain unemployed and do not experience the simple joys of genuine friendships and a significant portion of the IDD community still faces access barriers, pervasive social isolation, and discrimination.

This is where Best Buddies International plays a vital role as a model of inclusion and catalyst for change. Best Buddies is the world's largest organization committed to ending the social, physical and economic isolation that 200 million individuals with IDD often experience. For those within the IDD community, Best Buddies represents a pathway to forging lifelong friendships, securing gainful employment, achieving independent living and gaining the skills and confidence to advocate for themselves.

An estimated 84%* of adults (18+) with IDD do not have a paid job in the community. This is where the Best Buddies' Jobs program steps in. The Best Buddies Jobs program has participants employed full time who each have the potential to earn a total income upwards of $1mm over 30 years and contribute $250k in taxes back into the economy, rather than costing the government approximately $750k each in Federal SSI and Medicaid support during that time period.

This is just one of the countless ways Best Buddies improves the lives of individuals with IDD while simultaneously improving whole-of-society outcomes. Through the cultivation of meaningful one-on-one friendships, the pursuit of integrated employment, the provision of inclusive living arrangements and the nurturing of leadership skills, Best Buddies is fostering a world that is full of opportunity for individuals with IDD.

For more information, please visit **BESTBUDDIES.ORG**

Together, we can build a world where everyone belongs.



Livi and **William**, winners of the *2024 Best Buddies Champion of The Year Gala: Central Texas*



From left: **Brent**, **Kai**, **Garrett**, and **Mitch**

A Parent's Perspective

Mitch Holeve is a mentor in our new Eunie's Buddies program which offers families the support and resources needed to navigate the journey of raising a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Recently, Mitch was paired with Brent, a new dad just starting out on this journey. The two fathers and their sons, Garrett and Kai, had the chance to meet in person at MOD Pizza, where Garrett works in a job he proudly secured through the Best Buddies Jobs program.

"Supporting new fathers has been one of the most rewarding and humbling experiences I've had. I know from experience that the early days can be overwhelming and filled with uncertainty, questions, and emotions that you really did not expect. I also know that no dad should have to go through that journey alone, like I did 35 years ago with my son Garrett. Supporting new dads is not about me having the right answers; it's about offering empathy, encouragement, and connection during a time that can be a bit tough, and they may feel alone.

Every father deserves to feel supported, and every child deserves to have a father who feels supported—so that dad can do a great job.

As a father, having three grown sons has brought me the most joy. It is wonderful to see each one become his own man and contribute to society in a meaningful way. Watching them grow and enjoy their lives has been incredibly fulfilling.

In my view, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities bring their unique abilities and personalities to the world, each in their own way.

Becoming a mentor in the Eunie's Buddies program brings immense joy by allowing me to support another parent. I hope to share our family's unique and everyday experiences of raising Garrett. By sharing these experiences, we hope others will gain a little knowledge and a lot of optimism for their child's future. We also want them to know that their path, compared to ours, offers plenty of support and opportunities for their child to learn and grow."

– Mitch Holeve, Eunie's Buddies Mentor

2024 Highlights

Launches

- In 2024, Best Buddies launches its fifth mission pillar BESTBUDDIES® Family Support, to offer families access to individual connections and community resources that assist them on their journey of raising a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- On May 21, Anthony K. Shriver, Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Best Buddies International, appeared on NBC's Today Show in New York City for an exclusive interview with Best Buddies Global Ambassador and Today Show host Savannah Guthrie. They discussed the impact of Best Buddies' mission to foster inclusion for the IDD community and officially announced the launch of Eunie's Buddies, the organization's new initiative supporting families raising children with intellectual and developmental disabilities

New Partnerships

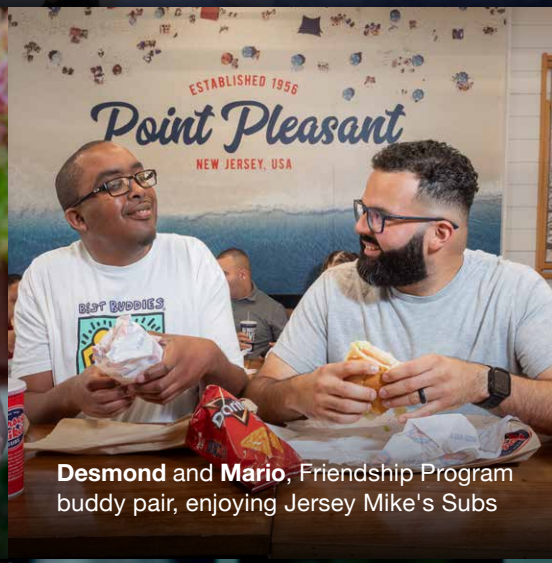
- **The Coca-Cola Company** amplified their BODYARMOR hydration sponsorship with a more comprehensive 5-year partnership that encompassed soft drinks and made them the "Official Beverage Partner" of Best Buddies. Coca-Cola soft drink products and branding were featured across Best Buddies Challenges, Breakaway Camps, and the Miami Gala. Additionally, they announced a $1MM grant to expand Best Buddies' supported employment program, providing job opportunities for participants with IDD during FIFA World Cup activations.
- **Jersey Mike's Subs** launched a 2-day campaign donating 20% of nationwide sales to Best Buddies, raising $5.3MM overall. In its second year of partnership, the brand continued to advance inclusive hiring initiatives through the Best Buddies Jobs program, aiming for 3,000 placements in 5-7 years.
- **Miracle Recreation** committed to developing Best Buddies commercial playgrounds and Buddy Benches, designed to provide a new standard of best-in-class inclusive and accessible playground equipment for all ages and abilities.
- **Shutterfly** partnered with Best Buddies to highlight the magic of the Friendship Walk through a national photo scavenger hunt, encouraging participants to capture authentic moments of connection. Winning photos and Leadership Conference videos were shared on social media on July 30 to celebrate International Friendship Day
- **Sky Zone** welcomed Best Buddies as a national "Do-Good Partner", committing to host a series of private "Friendship Tuesday" events exclusively for program participants at 6 trampoline park locations annually. BOGO coupons were also furnished for national Best Buddies distribution, so that program participants across the country could enjoy their local park with peers at their convenience.



Jonathan and **Veronica** with son **Benjamin**, Eunie's Buddies program participants



Kiontis Gallion, Best Buddies Global Ambassador



Desmond and **Mario**, Friendship Program buddy pair, enjoying Jersey Mike's Subs



Best Buddies participants **Lena**, **Charlie**, **Isla** and **Mia**

Milestones

1987 - 1996

- In 1987, Anthony Kennedy Shriver launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Colleges by founding the first Best Buddies chapter at Georgetown University.
- In 1988,w the iconic Best Buddies logo was donated to Best Buddies by legendary pop-artist, Keith Haring.
- On January 19, 1989, Best Buddies is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, becoming America's first national, unified, social and recreational program for people with IDD.
- In 1992, Best Buddies Global Headquarters office moves to Miami, FL.
- In 1993, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Citizens to pair adults with IDD in one-to-one friendships with their working peers who do not have disabilities.
- In 1994, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Jobs, a supported employment program targeting high-paying, corporate jobs for people with IDD.
- In 1995, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® High Schools to pair special education students in one-to-one friendships with high school volunteers.
- In 1996, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Middle Schools to pair students with IDD in one-to-one friendships with middle school volunteers.

1999 - 2011

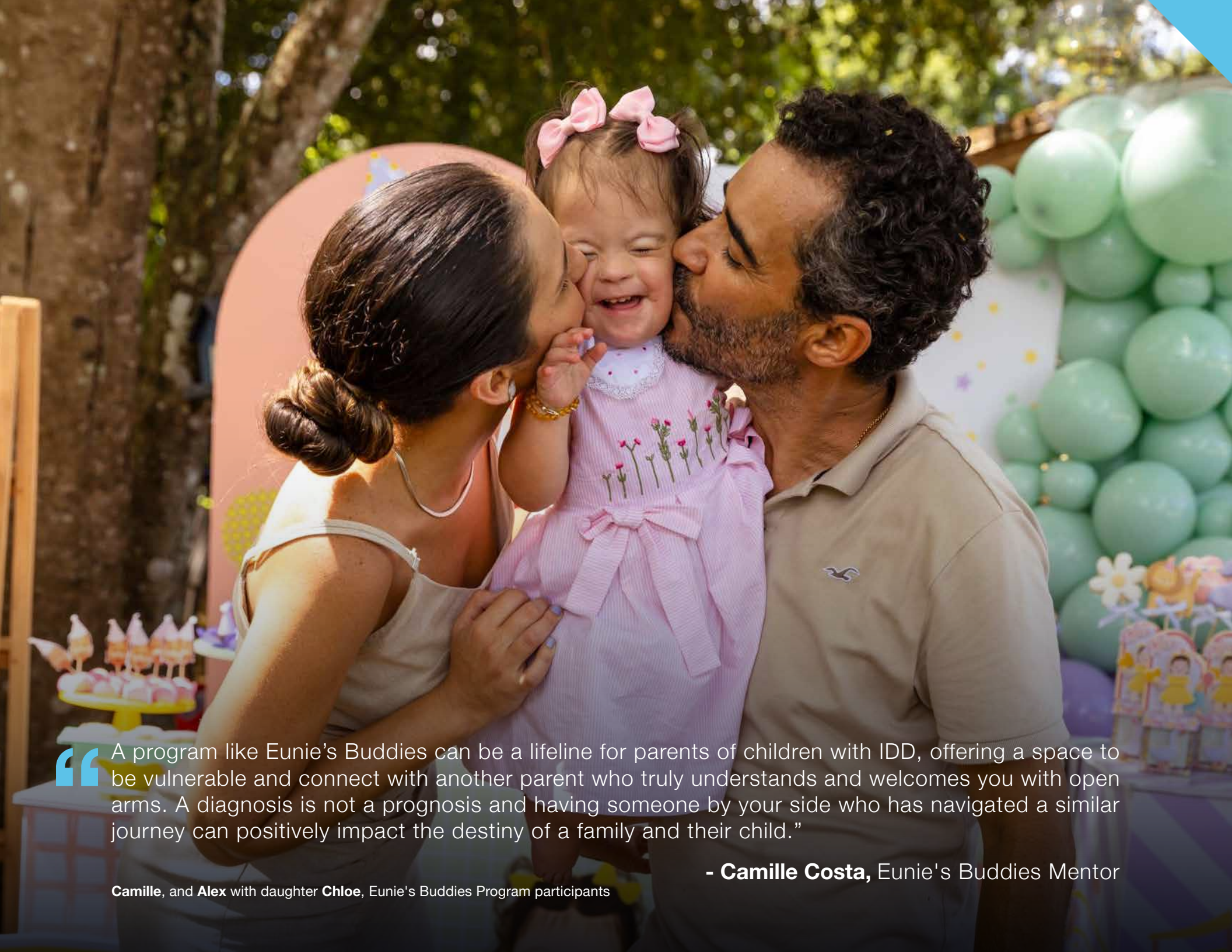
- In 1998, Best Buddies hosts the first *Best Buddies Miami Gala.*
- In 1999, Best Buddies launches e-**BUDDIES**®, a cutting-edge online friendship program.
- In 2000, Best Buddies holds the inaugural *Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port*, a 100-mile bike ride from Boston to Hyannis Port.
- In 2003, Best Buddies has participants in all 50 states on the US.
- In 2004, Best Buddies launches the nationally televised inaugural *Volvo Best Buddies Challenge: Hearst Castle*, a 100-mile bike ride along the Pacific Coast Highway.
- In 2009, Best Buddies launches *Best Buddies Friendship Walk.*
- In 2010, Best Buddies has programs in 50 countries around the world.
- In 2011, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Ambassadors to teach participants with IDD communication and self-advocacy skills.

2012 - 2019

- In 2012, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Promoters, the first Best Buddies program open to elementary schools; the inaugural of the *Best Buddies Challenge: Miami* takes place and the first *Best Buddies Champion of The Year Gala* is hosted.
- In 2014, Best Buddies celebrates its 25th anniversary and also celebrates 25 years of the *Best Buddies Leadership Conference*.
- in 2017, Best Buddies holds the first *Best Buddies Breakaway Camp: Malibu* and hosts the inaugural *Best Buddies' Celebrating Mothers* in Malibu, CA, with Global Ambassador Cindy Crawford and her daughter, Kaia Gerber.
- In 2019, Best Buddies launches its fourth mission pillar, BEST**BUDDIES**® Inclusive Living, to provide individuals with and without IDD an opportunity to live independently in a dynamic environment where they can learn, grow and thrive.

2020 - Current

- In 2020, Best Buddies introduces BEST**BUDDIES**® Ventures, with the first launch being BEST**BUDDIES**® X Rosetta Bakery in Miami, FL, creates jobs for individuals with IDD and operates as a profit center via a bakery and coffee shop partnership.
- In 2020, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Transitions to help prepare young adults with IDD for independence and inclusion in their communities as they move from school into adulthood.
- In 2022, Best Buddies launches BEST**BUDDIES**® Elementary Schools to teach inclusion to a younger age group to create a lasting effect on societal norms for the next generation.In 2023, as part of the organization's 2030 Initiative to impact 4 million people globally, Best Buddies continues to partner with Global Ambassadors such as Tom Brady and Cindy Crawford to further expand its mission of inclusion and the 5-star BEST**BUDDIES**® X Rosetta Bakery.
- In 2024, Best Buddies launches its fifth mission pillar BEST**BUDDIES**® Family Support, to offer families access to individual connections and community resources that assist them on their journey of raising a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



“A program like Eunie’s Buddies can be a lifeline for parents of children with IDD, offering a space to be vulnerable and connect with another parent who truly understands and welcomes you with open arms. A diagnosis is not a prognosis and having someone by your side who has navigated a similar journey can positively impact the destiny of a family and their child.”

- Camille Costa, Eunie's Buddies Mentor

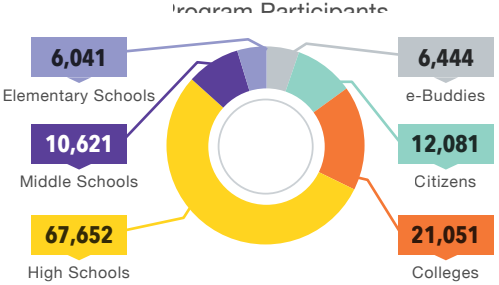
Camille, and **Alex** with daughter **Chloe**, Eunie's Buddies Program participants

Our Impact

3,738 Chapters | **147,663*** Participants | **1,476,630** Impacted | **50** States | **43** Countries

One-To-One Friendship

- **130** Elementary School Chapters
- **1,675** igh School
- **513** Middle School Chapters
- **483** College Chapters



Integrated Employment

- **2,279** Participants Employed

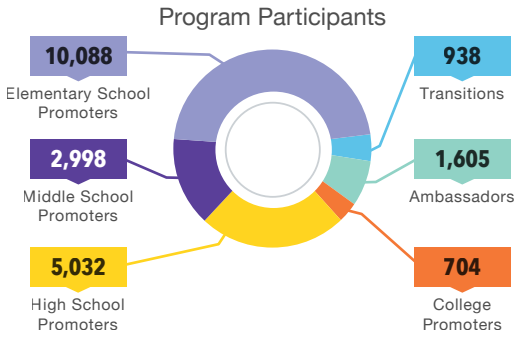
Average Total Participant Stats

44,486	2,179,818	$6,875,146	$34,375,729
Weekly Hrs. Worked	Yearly Hrs. Worked	Yearly Taxes Paid	Yearly Wages Earned

Avg. hrs worked per week 19.52, Avg. hrly wage $15.77 (in the U.S.).

Leadership Development

- **455** Elementary Schools Promoters Chapters
- **172** Middle School Promoters Chapters
- **271** High School Promoters Chapters
- **39** College Promoters Chapters



Inclusive Living

- **10** Living Residences
- **71** Living Participants

Family Support

- **58** Eunie's Buddies Participants

*All program stats are as of 12/31/2024, and reflect the most recent Best Buddies program year (July 1, 2024 – June 30,2025).



Matilde and **Antonio**, Friendship program participants
Best Buddies Portugal



One-To-One Friendships



Integrated Employment



Leadership Development



Inclusive Living



Family Support

We are BEST**BUDDIES**®

Best Buddies is the largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical, and economic isolation of the 200 million people worldwide with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Our programs empower people with IDD to form meaningful friendships with their peers, secure jobs, improve communication and advocacy skills, and live independently, while also offering support for their families.

Mission

Best Buddies International is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, inclusive living, and family support for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Who We Serve

Best Buddies serves individuals with IDD and their families. The IDD community includes, but is not limited to, people with Down syndrome, autism, Fragile X, Williams syndrome, and other undiagnosed disabilities.

Programs

Best Buddies programs sit on the five key mission pillars below:

- One-to-One Friendships
- Integrated Employment
- Leadership Development
- Inclusive Living
- Family Support

One-To-One Friendships

Builds friendships between people with and without IDD, offering social mentoring while improving the quality of life and level of inclusion for a population that is often isolated and excluded.

BESTBUDDIES® Elementary Schools, Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges, & Citizens

Creates an inclusive community for students and adults with IDD, helping them become socially integrated with their peers at every age.

e-BUDDIES®

Provides opportunities for participants with and without IDD to form virtual one-to-one friendships, create connections in the e-Buddies social platform, and attend social events online.

Integrated Employment

Secures jobs for people with IDD, empowering them to earn an income, pay taxes, and independently support themselves through their professional accomplishments.

BESTBUDDIES® Jobs

Matches skilled, qualified individuals with IDD with businesses seeking enthusiastic and dedicated employees. Through the Jobs program, Best Buddies develops partnerships with employers, assists with the hiring process and provides ongoing support to the employee and employer.

Leadership Development

Educates and empowers people with and without IDD to become leaders, public speakers, and advocates.

BESTBUDDIES® Ambassadors

Offers people with and without IDD the opportunity to gain the public speaking skills, self-esteem, and confidence needed to successfully advocate for themselves, their peers, and Best Buddies in communities and workplaces.

BESTBUDDIES® Promoters

Empowers youth to become advocates for people with IDD and helps chapters organize special events that promote inclusion and bring awareness to the disability rights movement.

BESTBUDDIES® Transitions

Offers a combination of classroom-based training, experiential learning, and corporate mentorship to help students with IDD explore post-secondary options, prepare for independent living, and identify career ambitions.

Inclusive Living

Provides an integrated experience in which people with and without IDD are active, contributing citizens – living independently in a dynamic environment where they can learn, grow, and thrive.

BESTBUDDIES® Living

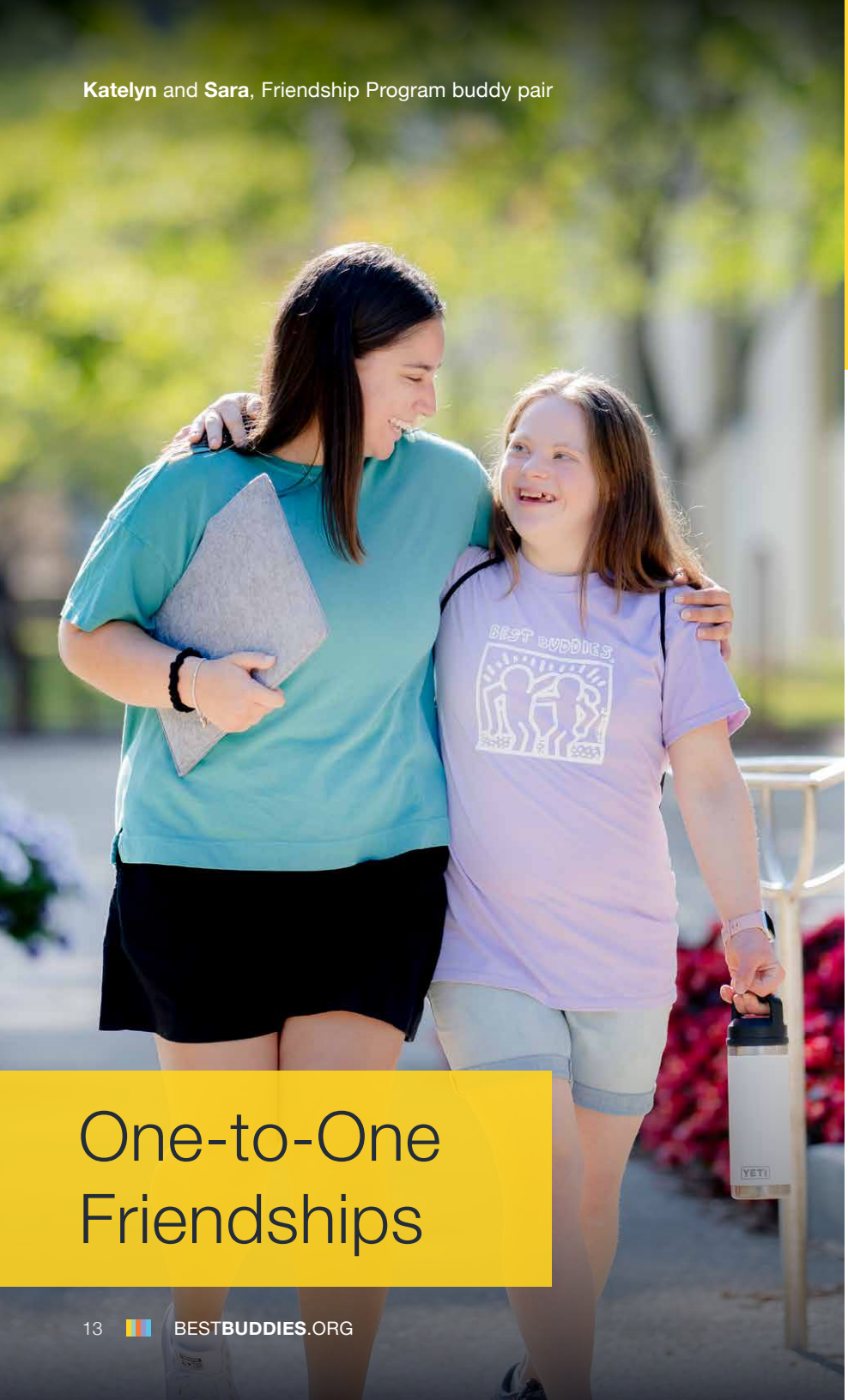
Offers individuals with and without IDD an opportunity to live together in a vibrant, educational community that supports all residents in advancing their employment, financial literacy, continued education, and life skills as they work to achieve their personal goals.

Family Support

Provides families access to individual connections and community resources that assist them on their journey of supporting a family member with IDD.

Eunie's BUDDIES®

Connects families who are expecting or have a young child with IDD to experienced parents of a child with IDD, encouraging a genuine relationship rooted in mentorship, resource-sharing, and guidance.



Katelyn and **Sara**, Friendship Program buddy pair

One-to-One Friendships

Without love, support, and friends, life may feel isolating – this is a reality people with IDD have faced throughout history. Best Buddies offers people with IDD the chance to have a friend, gain self-confidence and self-esteem and share interests, experiences, and activities that many other individuals enjoy.

BESTBUDDIES® Elementary Schools, Middle Schools, High Schools & Colleges

Best Buddies offers students with IDD the opportunity to have a friend and enjoy common interests, experiences, and social activities in the Middle School, High School, and College programs. Each friendship pair commits to speaking and spending time together every week throughout the year. These programs create lasting friendships and help facilitate an environment of inclusion throughout the school and in the community.

BESTBUDDIES® Citizens

For people with IDD, the absence of meaningful friendships extends into adulthood. Best Buddies Citizens pairs adults with IDD in one-to-one friendships with adults without IDD in corporate and civic communities. Citizen buddy pairs commit to a one-year friendship in which they will talk once a week and see each other twice a month. These relationships commonly grow into friendships that last a lifetime.

e-BUDDIES®

This program creates social inclusion and friendships for people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in a virtual space. Technology is an integral part of society and by participating in e-Buddies, participants can develop the skills needed to communicate across a variety of platforms.



Emma and **Harrell**, Friendship Program buddy pair

Emma & Harrell

One-To-One Friendships

Souhegan High School, Amherst, NH

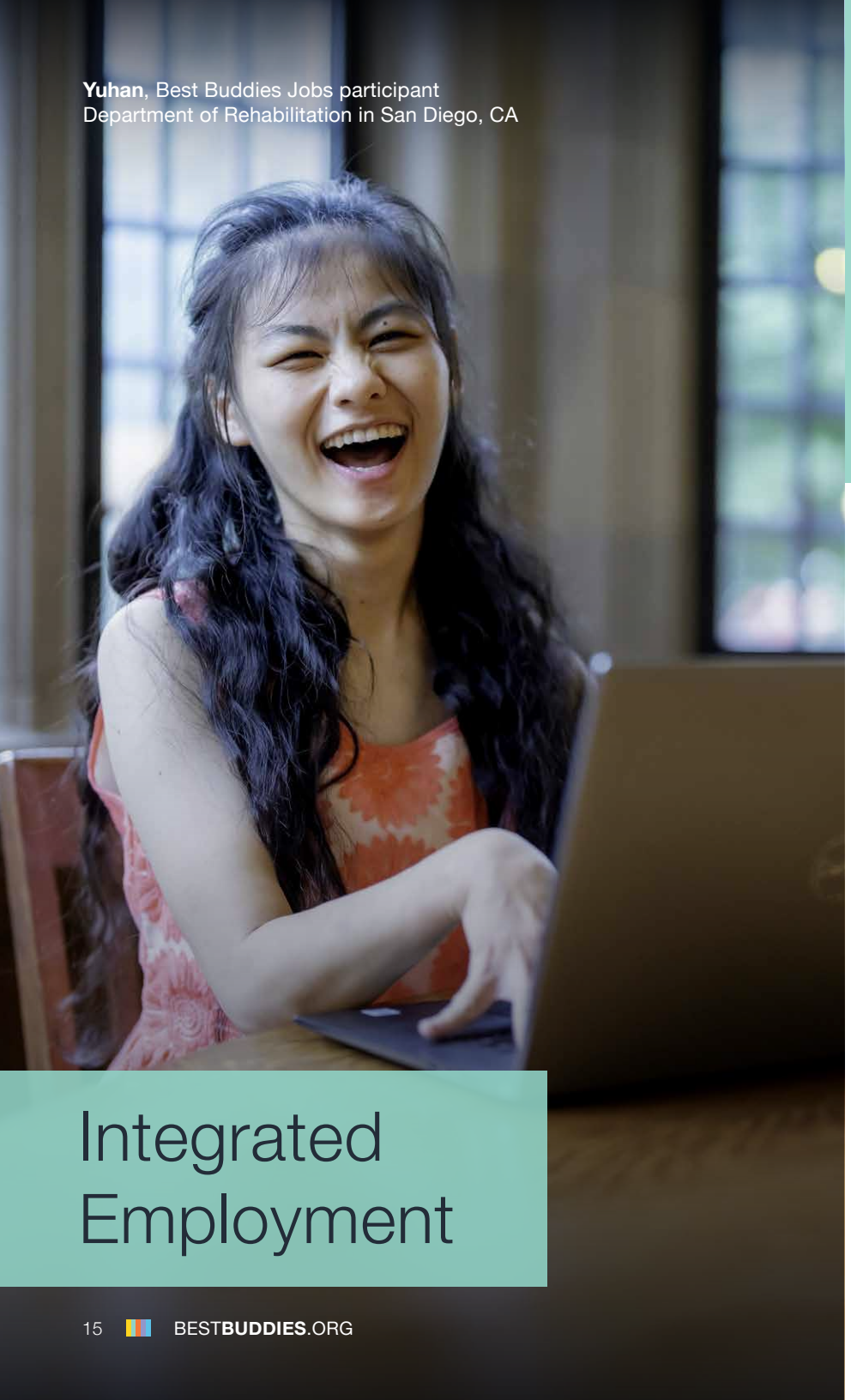
For the past three years, the halls of Souhegan High School have been brightened by the presence of one extraordinary friendship. Emma and Harrell, now seniors, met when they were first-year Sabres at the school in Amherst and were matched in the Best Buddies program. Being matched in a one-to-one friendship has enhanced the high school experience for both Emma and Harrell. Emma explains that while many high schoolers worry about the opinions of their peers and whether they are "popular," she feels that the bond she has with Harrell is more than enough to make her feel like she belongs.

Harrell lists off some fun things he and Emma have done together, including foosball, Candyland, popcorn with movies, petting horses, and bracelet making. His learning specialist, Katie, describes that Harrell's communication skills and confidence have both blossomed as a result of being part of Best Buddies and having a friend like Emma to bond with. He is more apt to seek out close friendships now that he has experienced such a meaningful one with Emma for the past three years.

Emma and Harrell have had a lasting impact on their school's chapter, constantly bringing their energy and positivity to meetings, from dance parties to unified basketball games. Emma tells Harrell, "You're the reason I'm sad to leave high school!" Harrell reinforces those feelings calling Emma his best friend and encouraging individuals in New Hampshire and beyond to "join Best Buddies!"

"I love our friendship because I know Harrell will always be there." - Emma

> "I love our friendship because I know Harrell will always be there." **- Emma**



Yuhan, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Department of Rehabilitation in San Diego, CA

Integrated Employment

Best Buddies Jobs assists participants in finding meaningful employment, earning a competitive income, receiving benefits, and working alongside others in the community. The program offers people with IDD the opportunity to become financially independent, removing the need for government assistance or parental support. A focus on competitive, professional opportunities is what sets the Best Buddies Jobs program apart from other employment services.

BESTBUDDIES® Jobs

Best Buddies Jobs furthers the integration of people with IDD into the community through supported employment. The focus is on facilitating competitive, integrated job placements that allow participants to earn an income, pay taxes, and work in an environment alongside their peers in the community, leading to full inclusion and independence. Coaching is provided in essential job interviewing skills, and once employment is secured, there is assistance with on-the-job training.

The Jobs program prides itself on developing employment opportunities in professional environments and focuses on white-collar jobs such as receptionists, mail room assistants, file clerks, office assistants, front desk assistants, and retail associates. Employers range from some of the top law firms and talent agencies to well-known retail businesses and luxury hotels.



Jeet, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Ally Financial

> “I feel secure and safe in my work environment and, my job gives me opportunities to be social and continue advancing my professional skills.” **- Jeet**

Jeet

Integrated Employment

Ally Financial

Chicago, IL

Jeet Dave was diagnosed with Autism during his school years and was placed under a partial IEP program. Before becoming involved with Best Buddies, he began pursuing an associate degree in Accounting at Oakton Community College with support from the IEP program. During this time, he experienced feelings of insecurity and concern about securing a job in accounting. It was around this period that he was introduced to Best Buddies through Ms. Eileen Morrison.

In his final year of college, Jeet started working with Best Buddies to find a job in accounting. Initially, Best Buddies connected him with a position as a merchandise associate at a large retailer. He continued working with the organization to achieve his long-term goal of securing an accounting role. Simultaneously, he found an office assistant job at the office of a family friend. Recognizing the importance of stability, he decided to pursue a full-time office position that could support his disabilities and offer future career growth.

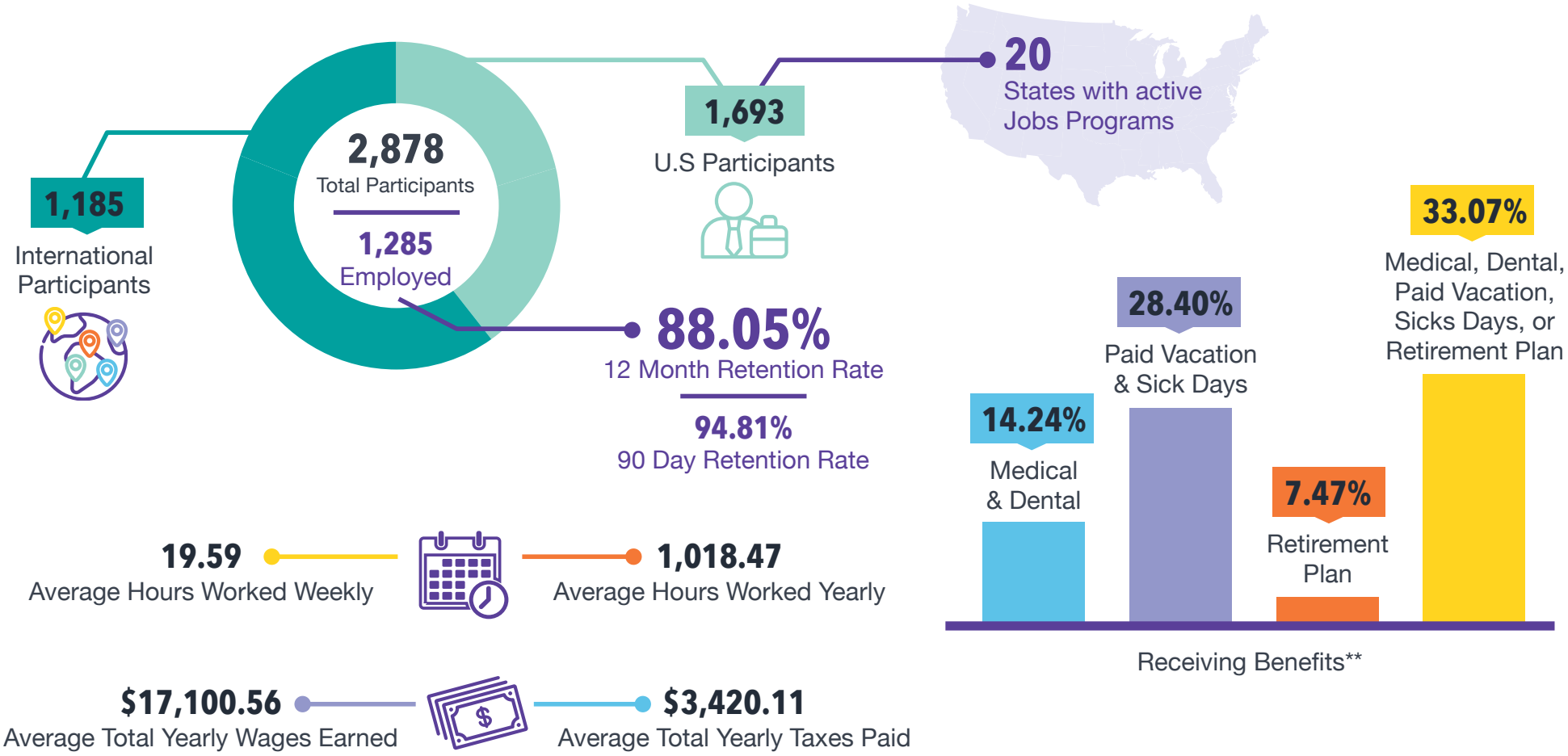
“Best Buddies worked hard to find me a job and provided accommodations throughout the hiring process in support of my disabilities,” said Jeet. “My life improved, not only economically but mentally and socially.”

Ultimately, Jeet was hired at Ally Financial with the assistance of Best Buddies and over two years of office work experience.

“The part I love most about my job is that my colleagues are very nice, friendly, and cooperative,” said Jeet. “I feel secure and safe in my work environment and, my job gives me opportunities to be social and continue advancing my professional skills.”

With a stable job and a steady income, Jeet has taken on personal financial responsibilities, including credit card payments and other necessary expenses. Looking ahead, he envisions getting married and starting a family.

Key Jobs Program Stats



Top 4 Jobs Participants Highest Salaries With Benefits

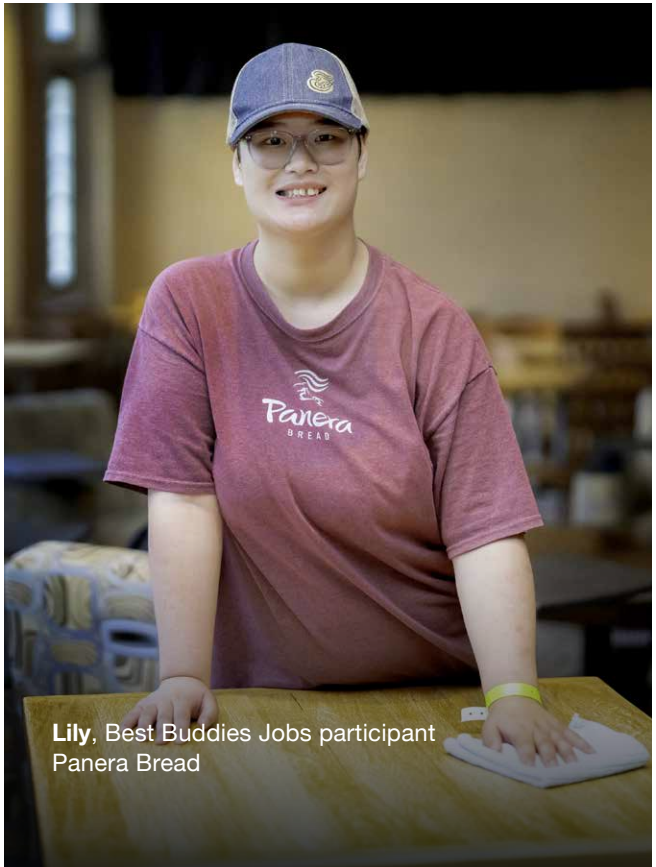
Salary	$71,780.80	$71,011.20	$69,992	$68,432
Name/ State	Andrew K. Los Angeles, CA	Nicole K. Los Angeles, CA	Nathaniel M. San Francisco, CA	Miguel H. Miami, FL
Benefits	Holiday Pay, Medical Care	Vacation Pay, Medical Care, Sick Leave, Sick Pay	Vacation Pay, Holiday Pay, Medical Care, Dental Care, Vision Care, Sick Pay	Vacation Pay, Holiday Pay, Medical Care, Retirement Plans, Dental Care, Vision Care, Sick Pay

Top 4 Jobs Participants Highest Hourly Rates

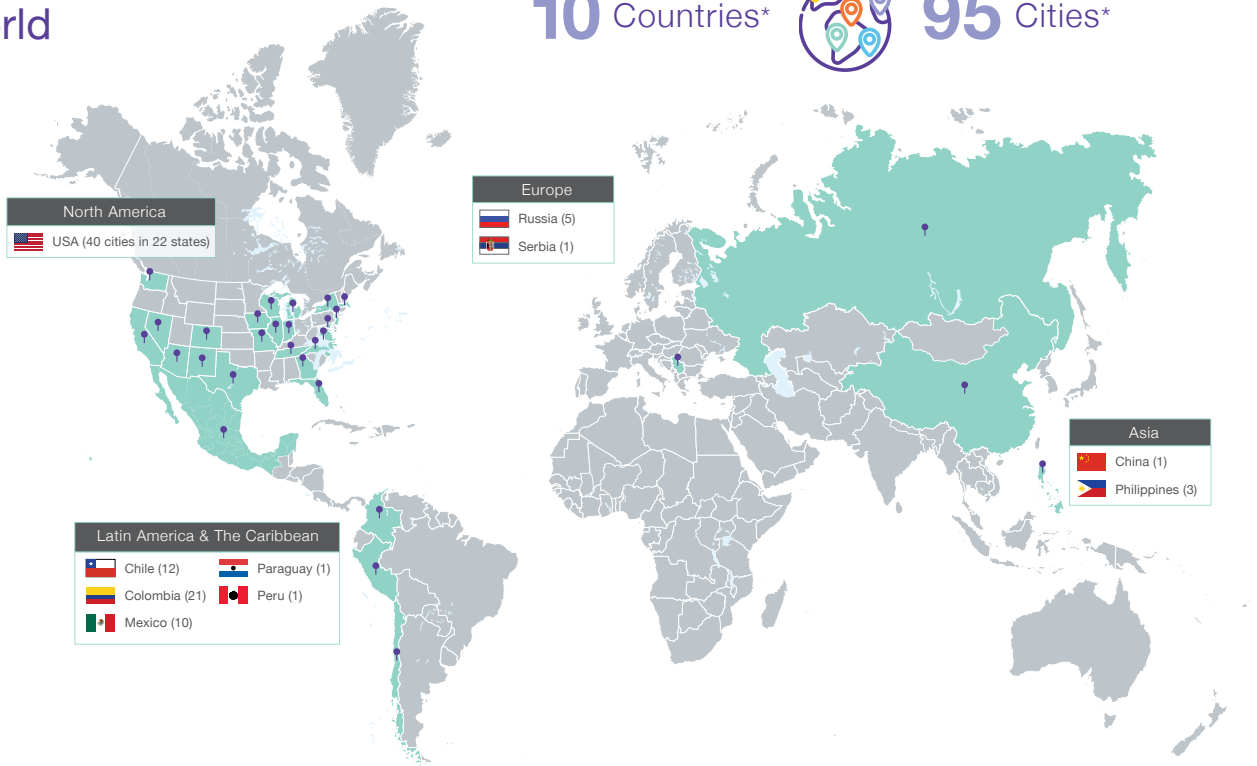


Best Buddies Jobs Around The World

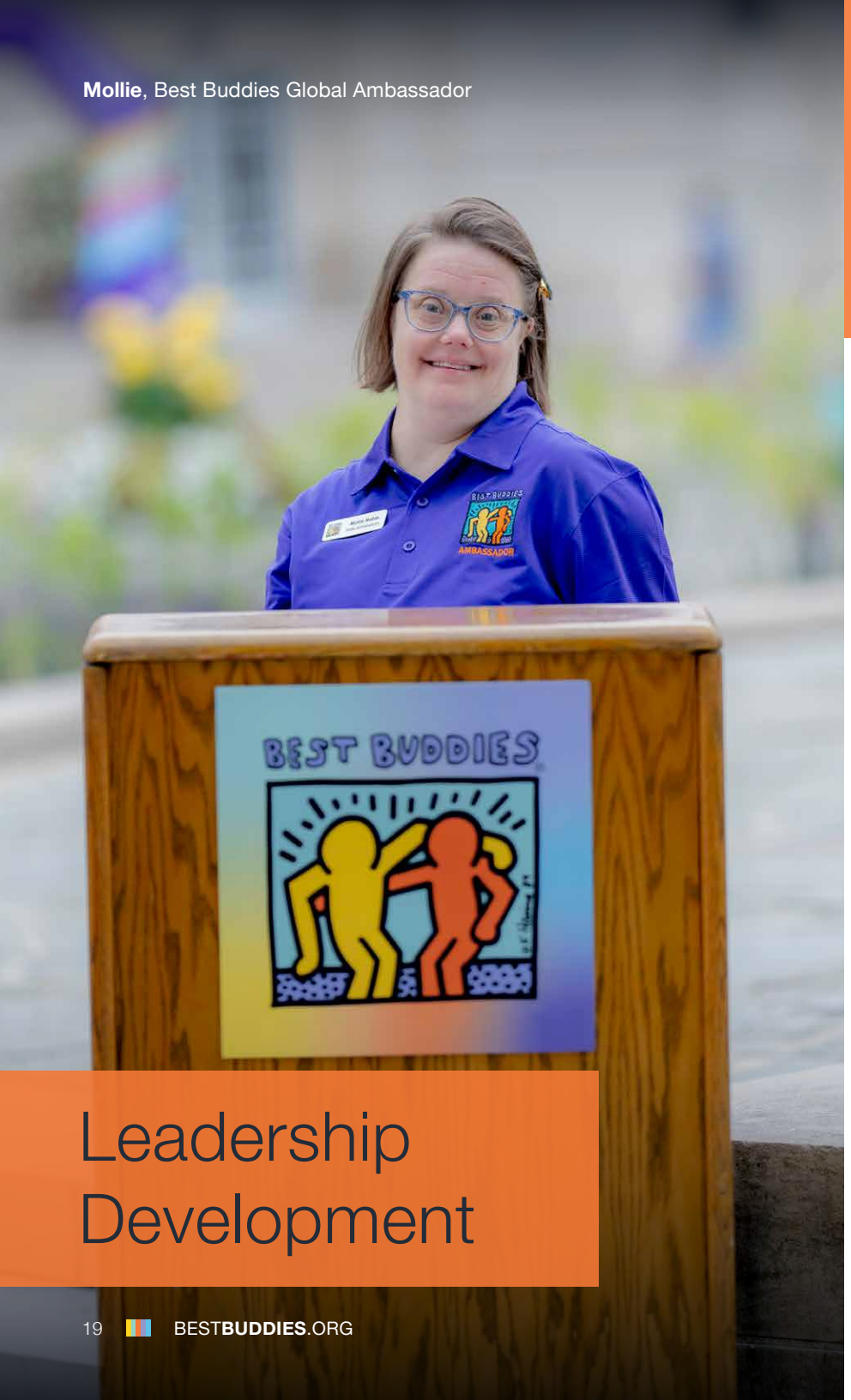
10 Countries* **95** Cities*



Lily, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Panera Bread



** Global jobs stats are calculated based on total jobs participants and U.S. Average hours and wages.*
*** Represents benefits received by US BB Job participants.*
**** All Jobs Program stats are as of 12/31/2024*



Mollie, Best Buddies Global Ambassador

Leadership Development

Best Buddies educates and empowers people with and without IDD to become leaders, public speakers and change agents. Through the Ambassadors and Promoters programs, participants inspire their communities to build a more inclusive world for people with IDD.

BESTBUDDIES® Ambassadors

Best Buddies Ambassadors is a program that provides training for participants with and without IDD in speech writing, public speaking, and self-advocacy. Ambassadors develop the skills to share their life stories, promote Best Buddies programs, network, and, most importantly, advocate.

Ambassadors participate in trainings focused on the art of public speaking and advocacy. Once trained, they share their stories and become more involved and empowered as citizens. Ambassadors are encouraged to speak about opportunities for people with IDD, present at recruitment fairs and Best Buddies events, and develop partnerships in the community.

BESTBUDDIES® Promoters

Best Buddies Promoters empowers youth to become advocates for people with IDD by organizing and attending special events that promote inclusion. Students attending a school without a special education program can join a Promoters chapter to develop connections with people with IDD or can start one by contacting their local Best Buddies state office.

Each Promoters chapter is led by a chapter president from the student body and a faculty advisor and is assigned a Best Buddies staff person who offers regular support and guidance. Once formed, Promoters chapters host events, activities, and fundraisers where they advocate for people with IDD, and promote the Best Buddies mission.



Kiontis, Best Buddies Global Ambassador

Kiontis

Leadership Development

Global Ambassador

My name is Kiontis Gallion, also known as Kid Autistic, and I am proud to call the great state of Wisconsin my home. My journey began at West Allis Central High School, where I faced many challenges—loneliness, bullying, and a search for belonging. For a long time, I struggled to see my own worth.

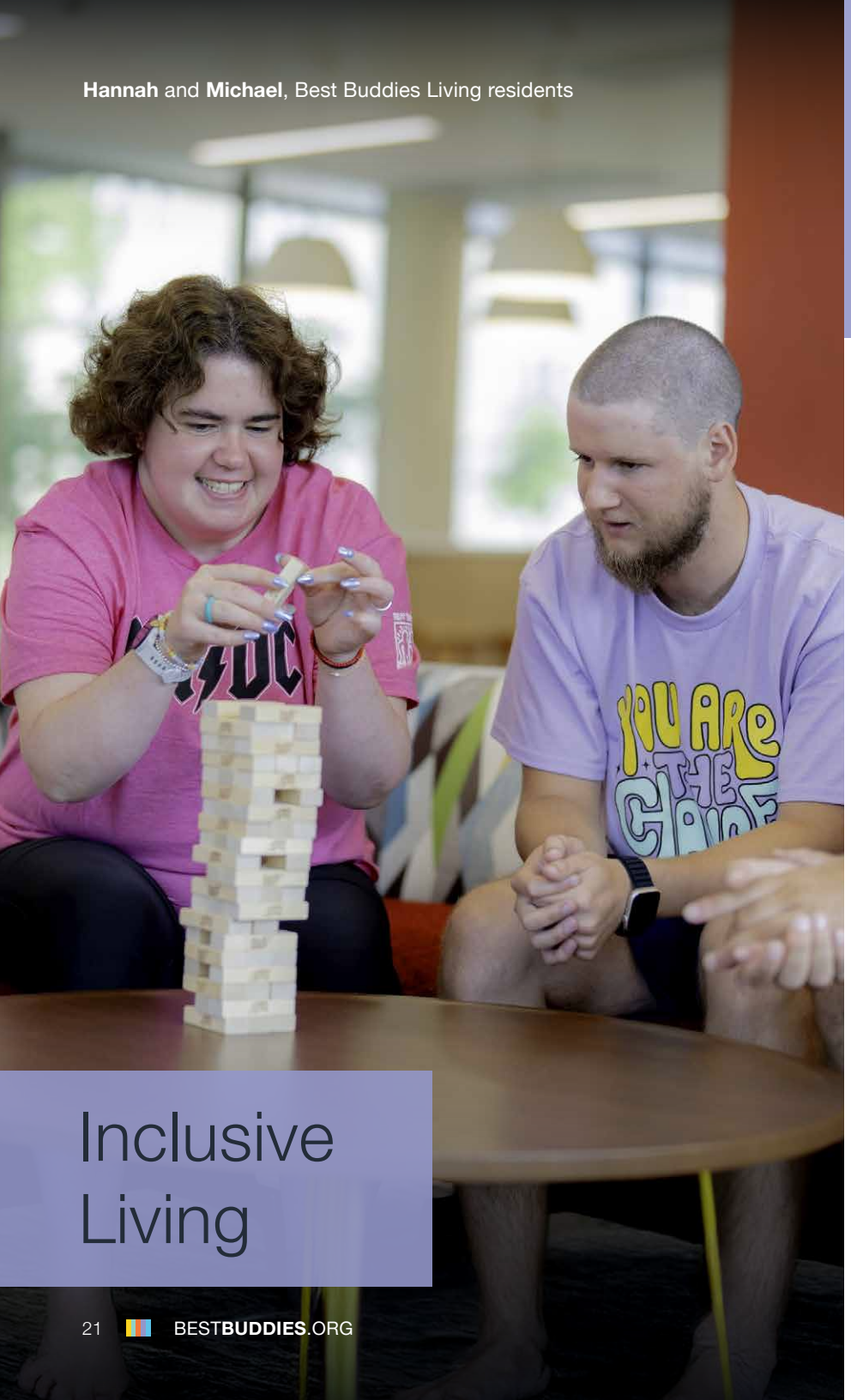
But then, something remarkable happened. A teacher saw in me what I couldn't yet see in myself—my potential to help others. She encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and join Best Buddies, an organization dedicated to fostering inclusion and friendship. That decision changed everything. The unexpected happened: I became the chapter president. This role gave me a sense of purpose, expanded my circle of friends, and helped me realize something profound—my autism is not a disability but a special ability.

At the end of the day, real change begins with our mindset. As Michael Jackson once said, "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make that change." Change is not about waiting for the perfect moment—it's about taking action now.

Anthony Shiver reminds us that we are not defined by limitations but by our strengths. Every person in this world has a unique gift, a talent meant to be shared. We don't need magic to make a difference; we only need the courage to be ourselves. So why wait to be a leader? Why wait to step into your greatness? No matter how many obstacles stand in your way, know what you want and go after it. We are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who can make a brighter day, so let's start giving.

Never give up on your dreams just because someone says you can't achieve them. You have an incredible gift—let it shine. Stars don't shine because they seek attention; they shine because that's simply what they are meant to do. The same is true for you. You have the power to use your voice, to inspire, to motivate, and to create change. The more you believe in your dreams, the more they will become reality. Because bold is beautiful—and bold is you. You are a champion in your own domain, capable of making a lasting impact in this world.

> "We don't need magic to change the world, just us. Why wait to change? Why wait to be a leader? I don't care if the whole world is against or teasing you; know what you want and go get it." **- Kiontis**



Hannah and **Michael**, Best Buddies Living residents

Inclusive Living

Supporting and empowering individuals with IDD to live as integrated, contributing members in the larger community is the next frontier in the movement to create a more inclusive society. Best Buddies Living fosters a dynamic environment where people with IDD can learn, grow and thrive.

BESTBUDDIES® Living

The Best Buddies Living program encourages people with and without IDD to live together in a vibrant community that focuses on supporting residents in accomplishing their life goals and dreams.

The Best Buddies Living program supports inclusion by:

• Developing programs that foster an opportunity for residents to experience living with friends and colleagues. Programs include weekly shared meals, fitness classes, cultural events, holiday parties, social activities, and sports.

• Offering an environment that encourages the development of independent living skills, life-changing relationships, and educational pursuits in connection with a college or university. Through an affiliation with a nearby school, all residents can immerse themselves in campus life, attending sporting events and enjoying fitness and dining facilities alongside their student peers.

• Matching people with and without IDD in a residential experience, and providing a supportive environment that encourages full-time or part-time employment.



Yvenie, Best Buddies Living resident

> “Best Buddies gave me a stable place to live and helped me get back on my feet. This is the first time I’ve ever had my own room.” **- Yvenie**

Yvenie

Inclusive Living

Best Buddies Living Resident

Los Angeles, CA

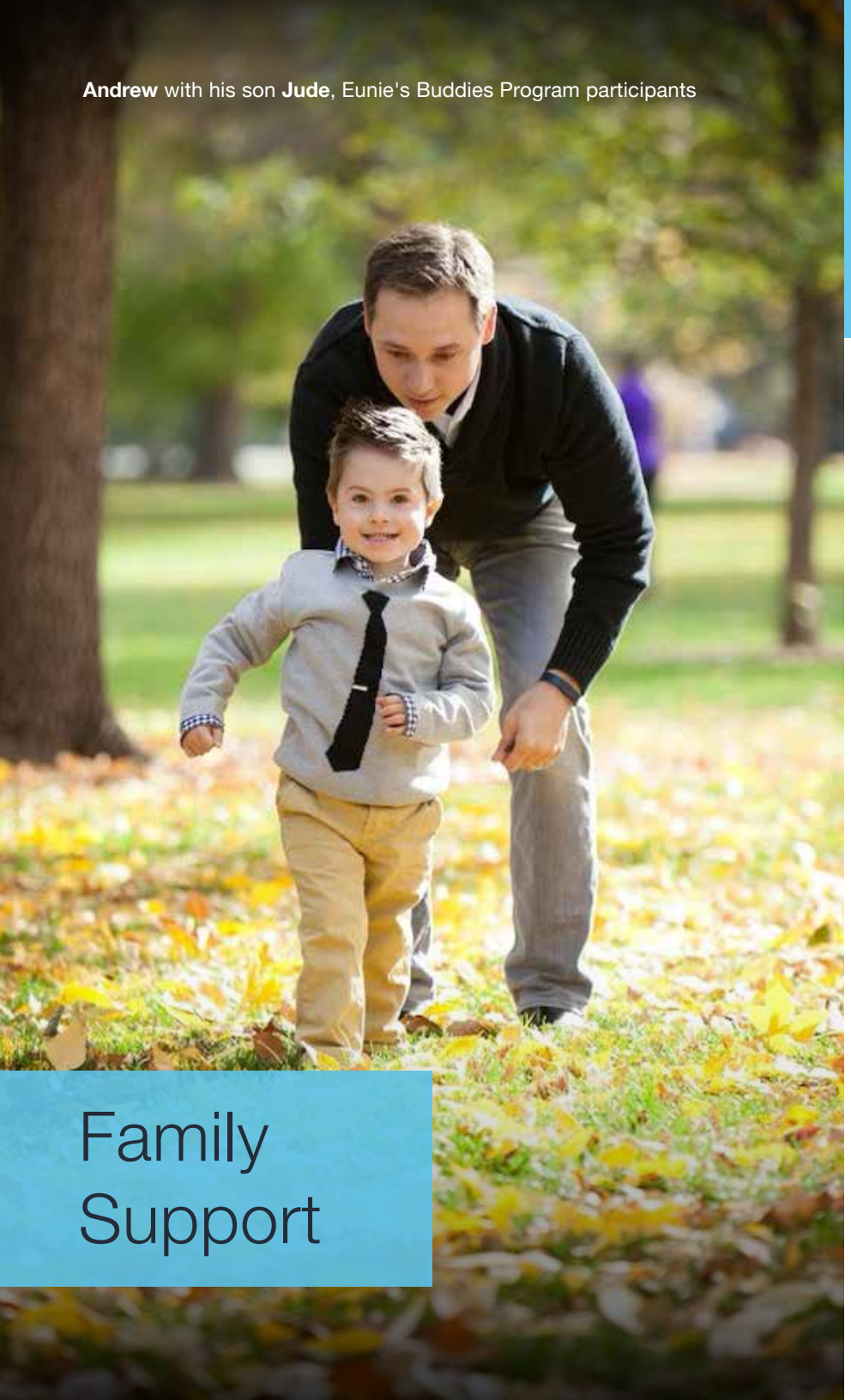
For Yvenie Joseph, becoming a resident of Best Buddies Living in Los Angeles has been truly life-changing. Before joining the program in January 2024, she faced immense challenges—moving from place to place without family support, struggling with her mental health, and ultimately living in a homeless shelter. She longed for stability, independence, and a place to call home. Best Buddies Living provided her with exactly that and more. Now, for the first time in her life, she has her own room, a steady job, and a supportive community that empowers her to thrive.

“I joined the program in January, and before Best Buddies, my life was a rollercoaster,” Yvenie shares. “I was living in a homeless shelter, struggling with my mental health, and constantly moving with no family support.”

“Best Buddies gave me a stable place to live and helped me get back on my feet. This is the first time I’ve ever had my own room. Now, I have a stable job and understand the responsibilities of being an adult. I’ve learned how to be responsible and make sure my bills are paid. I’ve learned how to budget and save money.”

One of Yvenie’s favorite aspects of Best Buddies Living is the weekly group dinners, where residents come together to share meals and connect. “There are so many different personalities, and at first, I was nervous to talk. But over time, I’ve learned to embrace everyone,” she says. “I also feel a sense of peace at home with my roommates. The weekly meetings and group dinners encourage personal growth and provide a strong support system.”

For others with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), Yvenie hopes to inspire confidence and self-acceptance. “I want people with IDD to surround themselves with those who understand their disabilities. You shouldn’t feel bad because of your disability—you can still achieve all your goals and dreams.”



Andrew with his son **Jude**, Eunie's Buddies Program participants

Family Support

Best Buddies Family Support offers families the support and resources needed to navigate the journey of raising a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Eunie's **BUDDIES**®

Eunie's Buddies serves as the pioneering program within the Family Support initiative. It is named affectionately in honor of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder of Special Olympics and a true hero who advocated tirelessly for positive change in the lives of individuals with IDD.

Eunie's Buddies pairs experienced parents of a child with an IDD with new parents who are expecting, have just welcomed a baby, or are raising a child up to the age of eight years old who has been recently diagnosed with an IDD. This pairing creates a mentor–mentee connection and friendship. Eunie's Buddies provides a framework offering parents and caregivers encouragement, emotional support, and valuable resources. Participation in Eunie's Buddies helps families pave the way for a child with IDD to have an education, gainful employment, and a fulfilled life.



Mentee **Tata** with Mentor **Nikki**,
Eunie's Buddies Program participants

Tata & Nikki

Family Support

Eunie's Buddies Mentee and Mentor

Miami, FL

"I joined the Eunie's Buddies program while searching for more support, especially from people who just get it. My mentor Tata and I were matched almost immediately, and I still remember our first phone call —it lasted almost two hours! Although she's in Florida and I'm in Washington State, with a three-hour time difference, we hit it off right away.

Since joining Eunie's Buddies, life has felt less lonely. It has been more supportive, more loving, and more positive. Even my perspective has started to shift, and honestly, it's all because of this incredible woman who is so uplifting and full of positivity!

Taking the first step is always the scariest, but Eunie's Buddies has got you. You can feel confident knowing they will match you with someone who truly has your best interests at heart without you having to over-explain why your journey is more challenging. You can do this." – **Nikki Rhoades**, Mentee, Eunie's Buddies

"Eunie's Buddies has had a profoundly positive impact on me, allowing me to share, relate, and connect with another mother going through the same experience. It provides a sense of companionship and reinforces the idea that it truly takes a village to raise a child.

My first connection with Nikki was an instant connection and it felt as if we were speaking the same language, understanding each other's emotions without explanation. In many ways, our children are the true mentors, and we, as parents, are the mentees, learning and supporting each other along the way.

Eunie's Buddies has created a space where families of children with different abilities can come together to form the village we all need. A village of connection, support, understanding, and shared experiences. It's a learning journey, and the best part is, we don't have to do it alone." **- Tata Yanguas**, Mentor, Eunie's Buddies

> "Eunie's Buddies has had a profoundly positive impact on me, allowing me to share, relate, and connect with another mother going through the same experience." **- Tata**

International Programs

In 2024, the newly formed International Programs and Incubator Teams set out to strengthen global Best Buddies operations through expanded funding opportunities, strategic guidance, social media support, and training. Their primary goal was to deepen the impact of country programs by aligning efforts and resources, especially in areas of employment programming, operational development, and donor engagement.

Over the year, the team made significant strides. On the funding front, they secured major U.S. State Department grants—$100,000 for Korea and $250,000 for Russia—and began cultivating direct relationships with the State Department beyond the formal application process. Corporate partnerships with JLL and Colgate-Palmolive remained strong, while new global funding conversations were initiated with the MAPFRE Foundation. Expansion plans for the Middle East were solidified with new funding secured to launch Best Buddies UAE in 2025.

Strategically, the team developed a revised Intellectual Property (IP) Strategic Plan to guide countries by development stage, and created a business plan template to help countries explore launching Best Buddies Jobs. Operationally, they introduced new IP systems, enhanced alignment through quarterly team meetings, and worked closely with the Incubator Team to support growing programs. They also contributed to key events, including the Best Buddies Board of Directors meeting in Madrid and thought leadership engagements with IAAPA and Colgate.

In 2024, the Jobs program continued to operate actively in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia.

Looking ahead, 2025 will mark a new chapter as the International Programs and Incubator Teams merge to form the International Programs and Development (IPD) Department. This unified team of seven will begin the year by auditing all 45 country programs to assess needs and priorities. They will also conduct a benchmarking study with peer nonprofits to shape strategy and best practices. Key goals for 2025 include improving data systems, launching an online training platform (BUDs), expanding funding streams, enhancing compliance and reporting, and increasing international representation at the annual Best Buddies Leadership Conference.



Best Buddies International program participants with **Anthony K. Shriver** at the *2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference*



Best Buddies Jobs participant from Best Buddies Colombia



Best Buddies Dominican Republic match up party



Best Buddies Servia country director and Best Buddies Jobs participant



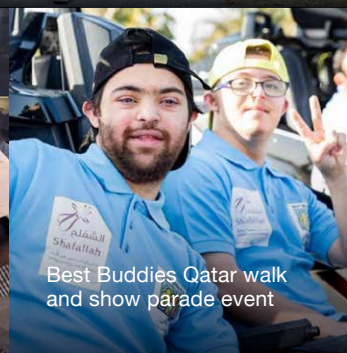
2024 BBFW: Canada



Best Buddies Philippines PEP Session on Tech/AI



Best Buddies Panama cooking class



Best Buddies Qatar walk and show parade event

Best Buddies Around The World

43 Countries & Territories

5 Continents



Revised 1.30.25

Signature Events



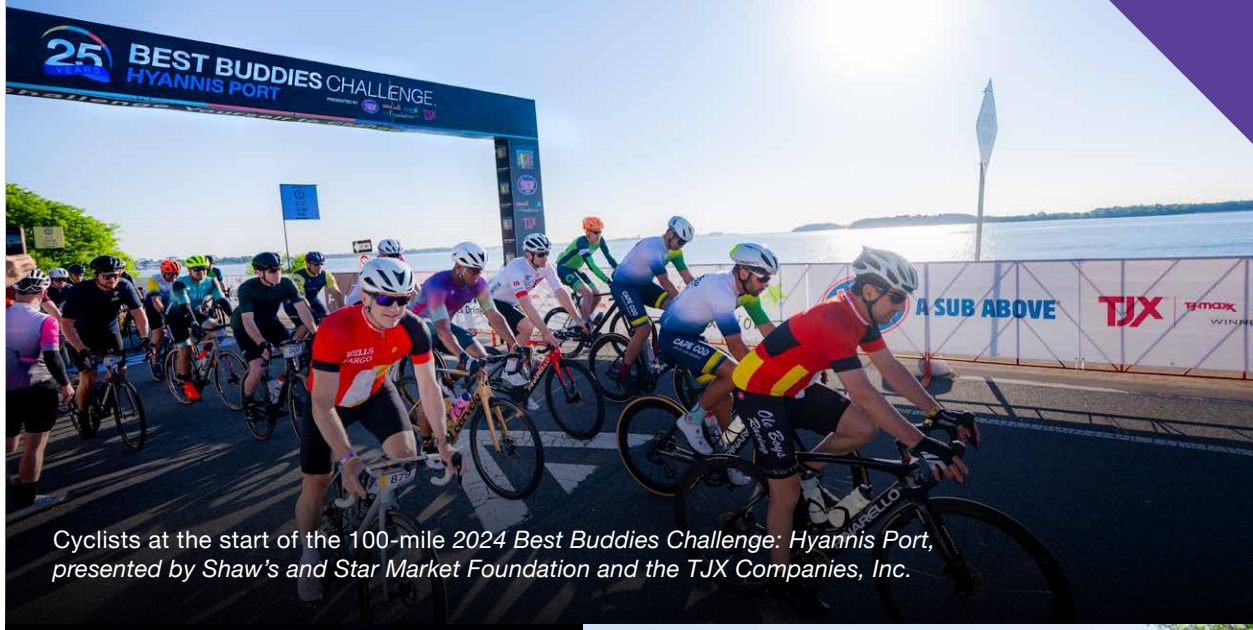
Best Buddies Global Ambassador **Caley Versfelt** with, from left, former World Tour Pro Andrew Talansky, Argentine Olympian and mountain bike legend Jimena Florit-Dolzadelli, and professional cyclists Alberto Contador and Cam Wurf at the 100-mile start line of thee *2024 Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port, presented by Shaw's and Star Market Foundation and the TJX Companies, Inc.*

The purpose of special events is to garner support, funds, and awareness for the Best Buddies mission. There are numerous ways to get involved with Best Buddies events including attending events, volunteering, and pursuing sponsorship opportunities.

Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port

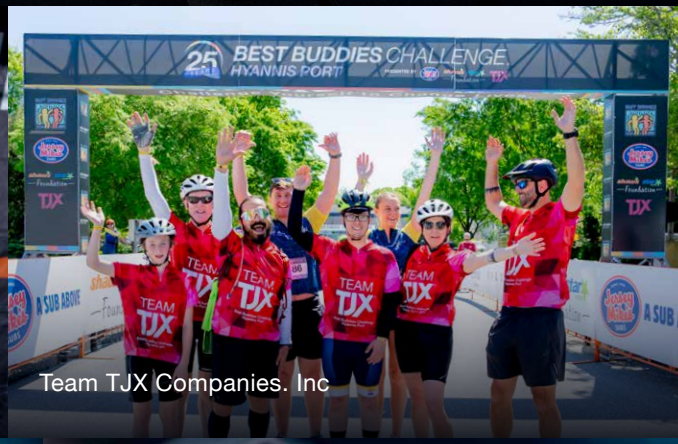
May 31 - June 1, 2024 | Boston to Hyannis Port

The *Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port, presented by Shaw's and Star Market Foundation and the TJX Companies, Inc.* returned to Massachusetts for its 25th Anniversary. The Challenge weekend kicked off Friday, May 31 with a dinner reception at John F. Kennedy Presidential Museum & Library. On Saturday, June 1, hundreds of riders took to the start line at the JFK Library for the picturesque 100-mile ride portion of the event, from Boston to Hyannis Port. The Challenge was capped off by a celebratory clambake and included a special musical performance by guitar legend Don Felder, formerly of the Eagles, at Craigville Beach. In total, the event raised $4 million for Best Buddies programs.



Cyclists at the start of the 100-mile *2024 Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port, presented by Shaw's and Star Market Foundation and the TJX Companies, Inc.*


Best Buddies Founder, Chairman & CEO **Anthony K. Shriver** and Best Buddies Global Ambassador **Caley**



Team TJX Companies. Inc



Best Buddies Founder **Anthony K. Shriver** accepting a $435,000 donation check from Shaw's and Star Market Foundation on stage at the 25th Anniversary *Best Buddies Challenge: Hyannis Port*


New England Patriots Quarterback **Drake Maye** during the legendary football toss inside the Clambake



Cyclists at the *2024 Best Buddies Challenge: California, presented by the Safeway Foundation*

Best Buddies Challenge: California

October 18-19, 2024 | Marin, CA

The *Best Buddies Challenge: California, presented by the Safeway Foundation* returned to California for its 20th year. The event kicked off with the welcome reception at the iconic Summit Skywalker Ranch on Friday, October 18, where guests enjoyed cocktails, dinner and a program hosted by Best Buddies International Founder, Chairman & CEO Anthony K. Shriver that highlighted the achievements of the Best Buddies Global Ambassadors and key supporters. On Saturday, October 19, hundreds of cyclists took to the starting line at the Summit Skywalker Ranch for an 80 or 38-mile ride through Tomales Bay, Point Reyes, and the Marin countryside led by pro-cyclists Geraint Thomas and Alberto Contador. The event was capped off with a gourmet lunch, wine tasting and live entertainment and raised $2.5 million for Best Buddies programs.

Best Buddies Challenge: Miami

November 16, 2024 | Miami, FL

The *Best Buddies Challenge: Miami, chaired by Kenneth C. Griffin Charitable Fund and presented by Andrew P. Barowsky Foundation and Mack Cycle & Fitness*, brought together cycling legends for an unforgettable ride through the Magic City. Led by four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome, alongside professional cyclists Mark Cavendish, Alberto Contador, Geraint Thomas, and Cam Wurf, participants journeyed through some of Miami's most iconic and scenic areas, including South Beach and Key Biscayne. Riders experienced a Tour de France-style, police-escorted peloton, with 100- and 75-mile route options, both starting and finishing at the Four Seasons Hotel Miami. The day culminated with the Jersey Mike's Subs Best Buddies Miami Gala, an evening of celebration in support of inclusion for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



Cyclists at the *2024 Best Buddies Challenge: Miami, chaired by Kenneth C. Griffin Charitable Fund and presented by Andrew P. Barowsky Foundation and Mack Cycle & Fitness*



2024 Spirit of Leadership Award recipient **Guy Fieri** with Best Buddies Ambassadors **Chris Harrington**, **Michael Jaxtimer-Barry** and **Cassidy Bauer**



Jersey Mike's Subs Founder and CEO **Peter Cancro** and Best Buddies Global Ambassador **Fran Sheinberg**



Olympic Legend **Carl Lewis**, Latin artist **ADSO** and Best Buddies Founder **Anthony K. Shriver**



Emmy and Grammy Award-winning artist Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson





2024 Miss America Teen **Hanley House,** Pop Artist **Romero Britto**, Best Buddies Founder **Anthony K. Shriver**, and 2024 Miss America **Madison Marsh**

Jersey Mike's Subs Best Buddies Miami Gala

November 16, 2024 | Miami, FL

The Jersey Mike's Subs Best Buddies Miami Gala was a vibrant celebration of the Best Buddies mission, honoring the incredible dedication of Best Buddies supporters, participants, and volunteers.

The 2024 Miami Gala honored celebrity chef and Best Buddies Global Ambassador Guy Fieri with the Spirit of Leadership Award in recognition of his leadership, generosity, and support of Best Buddies since 2010.

Guests enjoyed an unforgettable evening featuring a cocktail hour, gourmet dinner, live and silent auctions, and a high-energy performance by Emmy and Grammy Award-winning artist Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson.

Thanks to the generosity of our community, this year's Gala raised a record-breaking $7.2 million in support of Best Buddies programs!

Best Buddies Breakaway Camps

Malibu, CA *Spring* April 24-28, 2024

Aspen, CO *Fall* September 4-8, 2024

Malibu, CA *Winter* December 4-8, 2024

In 2024, Best Buddies hosted two *Best Buddies Breakaway Camp: Malibu* events —one in April and another in December—offering 20 cyclists a pro-level training experience in the scenic Santa Monica Mountains. Based at the Four Seasons Westlake Village and supported by Pinarello, the camps featured expert coaching, Tour de France mechanics, and a focus on nutrition, recovery, and sustainable wellness.

The inaugural *Best Buddies Breakaway Camp: Aspen* brought riders to the stunning Rocky Mountains for a week of world-class cycling, Olympic-level recovery, and chef-prepared meals, led by pro cyclists Cam Wurf and Andrew Talansky. Guests experienced a five-star blend of fitness, adventure, and philanthropy. Each camp helped raise funds and awareness for Best Buddies' global mission to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.





Best Buddies' 2024 Mother of the Year, **Ellen Boyer**, with **David Quilleon**, Grammy-winning and Emmy-nominated songwriter **Desmond Child**, **Catherine Anne Hennessy**, Best Buddies Founder **Anthony K. Shriver**, and Best Buddies Global Ambassadors **Marlana VanHoose** and **Fran Sheinberg** at the 7th Annual *Best Buddies Celebrating Mothers* event in Nashville, TN

Best Buddies' Celebrating Mothers

May 4, 2024 | Nashville, TN

The 6th Annual *Best Buddies' Celebrating Mothers,* honored advocate Ellen Boyer, founder and president of the Nashville-based Brett Boyer Foundation, that focuses on funding congenital heart disease research, supporting affected families, and promoting inclusion within the Down syndrome community.

During the event, Best Buddies officially launched its newest mission pillar, Family Support. This initiative offers families the support and resources needed to navigate the journey of raising a child with IDD through the Eunie's Buddies program. Guests enjoyed an afternoon filled with delicious cocktails, a gourmet lunch, and unforgettable live performances by Grammy-winning and Emmy-nominated songwriter Desmond Child and Best Buddies Ambassador Marlana VanHoose.

Best Buddies Friendship Balls & Proms

Best Buddies Friendship Balls and Proms are annual events for program members with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities to celebrate inclusion, joy, and friendship. Held at more than 50 venues across the country with thousands of attendees, these events bring together people of all abilities to share an evening of fun, laughter, dancing, and memorable experiences. The events feature a variety of lively and creative themes, including an 80s Night, Under the Sea, Western, and Red Carpet/Hollywood. Attendees form meaningful connections on the dance floor with old friends and new, while also enjoying a variety of activities like carnival games with prizes, arts & crafts, food & drinks, sensory spaces, and photo booths. The events are a wonderful display of the Best Buddies mission in action and highlight the impact of meaningful friendships between people with and without disabilities. We look forward to these events continuing again in 2025, as well as the addition of new events.



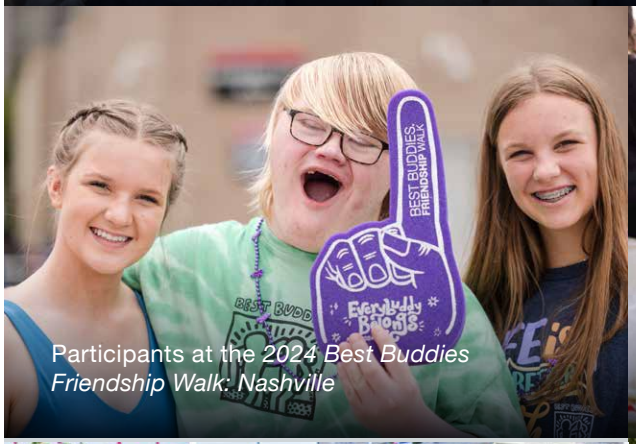
Guests at the *2024 Best Buddies Prom in Eastern Pennsylvania*

Best Buddies Friendship Walk

The *Best Buddies Friendship Walks* continued to grow and expand, serving as a significant platform for raising awareness and funds in support of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In 2024, more than 48,000 participants across 76 cities joined the cause, collectively raising over $5.8 million. These walks have positively impacted communities nationwide, creating spaces for new friendships, unlocking promising opportunities, and, above all, promoting inclusion for all.



Participants at the *2024 Best Buddies Friendship Walk: VA & DC*



Participants at the *2024 Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Nashville*


Participants at the *2024 Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Portland*


Participants at the *2024 Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Tampa Bay*



Participants at the *2024 Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Alabama*

Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala

Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala is a competitive fundraising campaign that brings together and celebrates leaders of inclusion in local communities across the nation. Champion Candidates dedicate themselves to raising funds and awareness for Best Buddies during their campaigns. The culmination of these efforts is the Champion of the Year celebration, where the Champions are honored, and the individual who raises the most funds is named the *Champion of the Year*.

In 2024, *Champion of the Year* achieved a record-breaking milestone, hosting 52 events nationwide, with over 405 Champion Candidates, exceeding the fundraising goal by raising over $10.3 million for Best Buddies. This year the Top 10 Champion Candidates raised a collective $1.4 million. Nathan Dean, in Tennessee, emerged as the National Grand Champion by raising $369,216 setting a record for the most raised ever by a Champion Candidate. Looking ahead to 2025, the goal is to recruit 450 Champions and raise $11 million through 54 events, which will continue to raise critical funds for Best Buddies and empower community leaders to advocate for inclusion.



Champions and mission partners at the *2024 Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala: Bay Area, CA*




2024 Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala: North Texas


Best Buddies Global Ambassador **Mollie Noble**


2024 Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala: Minnesota


2024 Best Buddies Champion of the Year Candidates for Best Buddies in Tampa, FL

Best Buddies Leadership Conference

July 19-21, 2024 | Bloomington, IN

The *2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference* brought together nearly 2,000 students from across the U.S. and around the world from July 19–21 at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, under the theme “Every Buddy Belongs.”

Over the weekend, participants took part in dynamic educational sessions and interactive workshops aimed at empowering them to advance the Best Buddies mission in their communities. A highlight of the conference was a TED Talk-style roundtable featuring inspiring speakers who shared innovative ideas for creating inclusion. The event concluded with a celebratory Closing Ceremonies, honoring the powerful impact of student leaders with and without IDD.



Attendees of the *2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference: Every Buddy Belongs*















Special Olympics Founder **Eunice Kennedy Shriver** and Special Olympics participants

EKS Day

Created in 2010, Eunice Kennedy Shriver (EKS) Day serves as a unique opportunity to celebrate her legacy, indomitable spirit and life-long commitment to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Even during a time when society did not, Eunice Kennedy Shriver believed in the abilities of people with IDD and led the effort to end the physical and social isolation they endured. EKS Day promotes a global call for individuals to commit to actions of change, inclusion, and acceptance for people with IDD. Across the United States and in 100 countries, EKS Day is celebrated with love, justice, faith, hope, and courage – her five key values. Activities included sports clinics, picnics, leadership trainings, and disability rights awareness efforts.

March
Best Buddies Month

What began as a one-day celebration of the Best Buddies mission evolved into a month-long festivity to reflect on the importance of inclusion and acceptance for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities every March. In 2023, the celebration began with the annual *Spread the Word: Inclusion* campaign that encouraged participants to showcase how they promote inclusion in their communities. Throughout the month, participants hosted virtual chapter parties, awareness activities, and engagement campaigns to honor their unity in advancing opportunities for friendship, employment, leadership development, and inclusive living.



Andreas, Best Buddies Volunteer and **Joshua Felder**, Best Buddies Global Ambassador and Actor from the film "Champions"

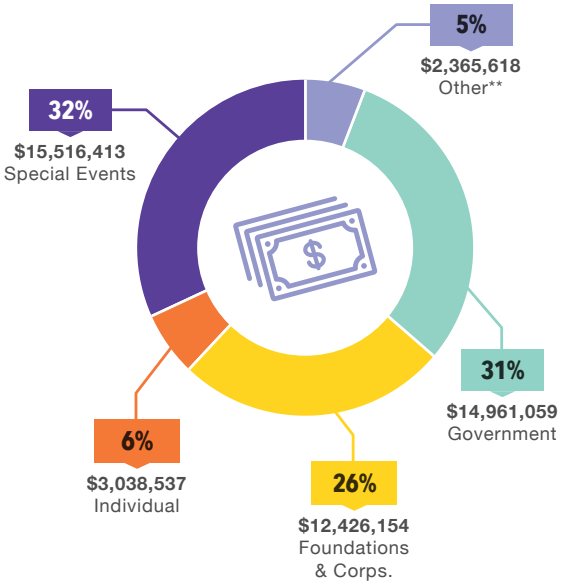


Matthew Von Der Ahe, Best Buddies Global Ambassador and actor from the film "Champions"

Financials

Consolidated Statement of Activities* (as of 12.31.24)

Domestic Revenue

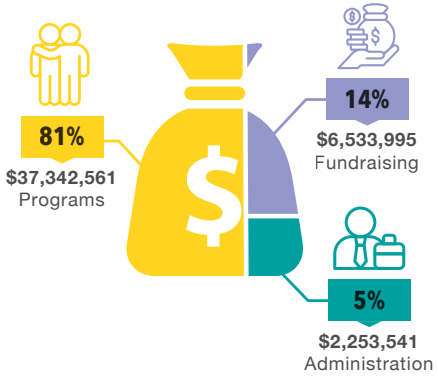


$48,307,781
Total Domestic Revenue

$30,000,000
Total International Revenue***

$78,307,781
Total Gross Revenue

Domestic Expenses



$46,130,097
Total Domestic Expenses

Domestic Net Asset Summary

Net Assets (beginning of year)	$35,604,831
Change in Net Assets	$2,177,684
Net Unrealized Gains (Losses) on Investments	$1,651,652
Net Assets (end of year)	**$39,434,167**

** Statement of Activities for calendar year 2023 based on Best Buddies International's Form 990*
*** "Other" represents revenue generated from a collection of sources including; Chapter Dues, Annual Best Buddies Leadership Conference, Investment Income and Cause-Related Marketing.*
**** Gross consolidation of International Licensees that operate as their own NGOs.*

Financials

Balance Sheet (as of 12.31.24)

Assets

Current Assets

Cash and cash equivalents	$5,761,354
Investments, short-term	$12,276,825
Accounts receivable	$74,643
Contributions receivable, net	$686,602
Grants receivable	$3,492,661
Prepaid expenses	$1,195,113
Total Current Assets	**$23,487,198**

Property and Equipment

Computers	$461,647
Furniture and equipment	$85,104
Auto	$61,522
Land	$1,152,473
Total Property and Equipment, Cost	$1,760,746
Less Accumulated Depreciation	($578,759)
Total Property and Equipment, Net	**$1,181,987**

Right-of-Use Assets

Financing lease right-of-use, net of amortization	$72,983
Operating lease right-of-use, net of amortization	$2,899,208
Total Right-of-Use Assets	**$2,972,191**

Other Assets

Investments, Long-term	$16,077,404
Long-term contributions receivable, net	$1,765,924
Inventory artwork	$58,361
Security deposits	$134,871
Investments - Rosetta Bakery x Best Buddies	$23,752
Total Other Assets	**$18,060,312**
Total Assets	**$45,701,688**

Liabilities and Net Assets

Current Liabilities

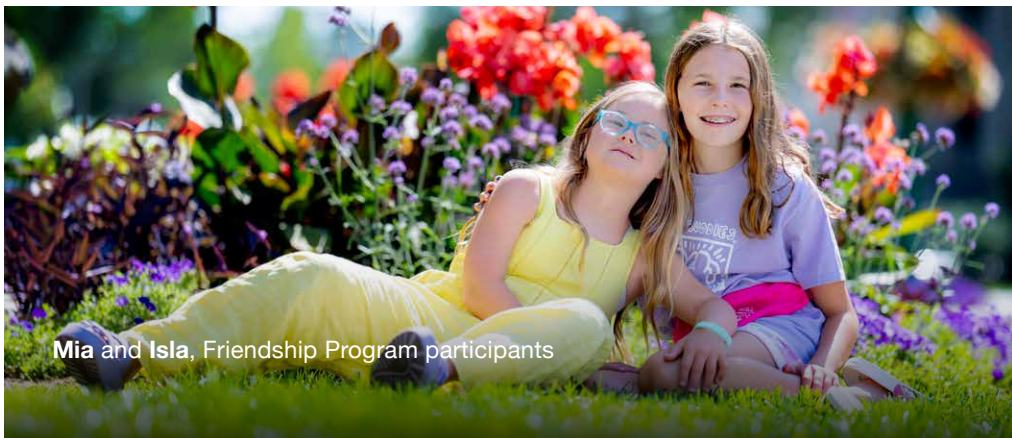
Accounts payable	$1,598,003
Deferred revenue	$1,365,552
Compensated absences payable	$276,511
Line of credit	$13,940
Current portion of financing lease liabilities	$27,797
Current portion of operating lease liabilities	$1,555,683
Total Current Liabilities	**$4,837,486**

Long-Term Liabilities

Security deposit	$55,508
Long-term portion of financing lease liabilities	$46,879
Long-term portion of operating lease liabilities	$1,327,648
Total Long-Term Liabilities	$1,430,035
Total Liabilities	**$6,267,521**

Net Assets

With donor restriction	$5,945,187
Without donor restriction	$33,488,980
Total Net Assets	**$39,434,167**
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	**$45,701,688**



Mia and **Isla**, Friendship Program participants

Board of Directors



Cory Alexander
Founder & Chief Executive Officer
Alexander Consulting



Brad Blank
President/Attorney
Brad Blank & Associates, Inc.



Olivia Culpo
Actress



Mark DeVincentis
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“I hope more people with disabilities will see it's possible to achieve their dream job! And that employers will give us a chance. My job brings so much light to my life.”

- Fran Sheinberg, Global Ambassador

Best Buddies Global Ambassadors, **Jada Thompson** and **Fran Sheinberg**, with 2024 Miss Texas **Annette Addo-Yobo**

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Alex Simpson
Robert R. Kane
Jonathan M. Mings
Kendra Scott LLC
Kenneth Gordon
Andrew Fowler
Chris Doherty
Jeremy Camp
John Adams
Andrew Watson-Hogan
Archbishop Edward A. McCarthy High School
Big Blue Sky Foundation
Community Foundation of West Alabama
Field Family Foundation
Lithia Ramsey Subaru #384
Wiremold Company
Joseph P. Parisi
Greater Houston Community Foundation
Sheila Stabile
Derek Reformat
Hanover Reserve LLC
John Vezina
Sam Gough
Michael Serpa
Steve Cronin
Eein McGuire
Admiral Transfer & Rigging
Daniel Buettner
Carl Bloms
Zeeann Kane
Robert C. Walker
Stephanie Webb
Luuk Remmen
Heather Fath
Adam Petrzelka
Blue Grass Community Foundation
Capital Markets Company
Child Development Foundation
Colliers International - WA
Commonwealth Edison Company
Evolution Risk Advisors, Inc.
Fontainebleau Development LLC
IMC Financial Markets
Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation
Shopping Center Management
Swire Properties Inc., Miami
The Bloedorn Foundation
The Bob and Marie Gallo Foundation
The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation
The Katharine Matthies Foundation
The Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation
Universal Insurance Holdings
Vanguard Charitable
David Herro
Donald Hoffman
Melanie Nussdorf
Shannon Sloop
Ben Silverman
Tami James
Boundless Health
Brandon H. Elledge
Shirley Phelan
Matthew Mingus
Sumeet V. Singh
Brent L. Brooks
Jones Lang LaSalle
Scott Resnick
Bethany Vietmeier
David L. Lanier
Devin DeStefano
Maureen DeStefano
Mandy Welgos
Scott Markovich
The Michael and Denise Dubyak Charitable Fund
Ryan Gaetz
J.C. Edwards Corporation
Cigna Health Insurance
Loan Pronto, Inc
Mac Haik Ford
The Feigenbaum Foundation
The Martino Family Foundation
Trends International Charitable Foundation Inc.
Catherine Anne Hennessy
Vishal Verma
Michael Stein
Elizabeth Romp
John S. Peters
Sandra L. Holmgren
Kathryn Klimek
Larry E. Ott
Butler Family Foundation
Charles & M R Shapiro Foundation Inc
Confluence Wealth Services, Inc.
Dade County Federal Credit Union
Florida Power & Light Company
Margaret M. Spalding
Charlene Huard-Marcoux
The J.M. Smucker Company
Dan Cash
Benjamin Ballard
Trulieve Inc
Luke Allen
Steven Feller
Anthem Blue Cross & Blue Shield
Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, Inc.
The Whiting-Turner Contracting Company
Leslie Little
Sanofi US Services, Inc.
Rob Cancro
Wesco Distribution, Inc
Waukesha County Community Foundation
Katherine Reed
Katherine Jones
MOD Super Fast Pizza, LLC
Grapevine Giving Foundation
JOH Kids 360
Geoffrey Carroll
Vanessa J. Manners
Meryl Wolfson - Friedman
Robert J. Friedman
Brian Henry

Givinga Foundation, Inc.
Emily Levine
Eliza Flug
Institute for Corporate Productivity, Inc.
David Ferdman

FOUNDATIONS

$250,000 to $499,000
Diane and Bruce Halle Foundation
Taft Foundation
The Golisano Foundation

$100,000 to $249,999
Fundacion MAPFRE
May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust
Nike, Inc.
The American Gift Fund
Tulsa Community Foundation
YourCause, LLC

$50,000 to $99,999
Community Foundation for Northern Virginia
Fidelity Charitable
John H. and Ethel G. Noble Charitable Trust
JTMF Foundation
Kaiser Permanente Honolulu
Liberty Mutual Foundation
M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust
PHLY Foundation
PWC Charitable Foundation, Inc.
PWC Charitable Foundation, Inc.
St. Louis Blues for Kids Foundation
Stavros Niarchos Foundation
The Batchelor Foundation, Inc.
The Genentech Foundation
The Jim Moran Foundation
The Mouse Trap Foundation
The Sharon D. Lund Foundation
The Tepper Foundation
United Way of North Central New Mexico
Vegas Golden Knights Foundation Inc.
VoLo Foundation
Wealth Management & Trust

$25,000 to $49,999
Accenture
Bader Philanthropies, Inc.
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas
CenterPoint Energy Foundation
Greater Green Bay Community Foundation Inc.
Jabil
Kimsey Foundation
Macys Foundation
ManpowerGroup Foundation Inc.
Memorial Foundation
MoneyGram Foundation
Orchid Giving Circle
Saint Joseph's Catholic School
TD Charitable Foundation
The Anthony R. Abraham Foundation
The Columbus Foundation (CF)
The Dr. P. Phillips Foundation
The Healthcare Foundation of NJ
The Mosaic Company
The Rees-Jones Foundation
Thunderbirds Charities
William S. Abell Foundation

$10,000 to $24,999
Accenture
Albuquerque Community Foundation
Aspen Community Foundation
Bank of Hawaii
Boston Bruins Foundation
Charter Oak Federal Credit Union
Comcast Financial Agency Corporation
Community Foundation of Greater New Britain
Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts
Donald B and Dorothy L Stabler Foundation
DuPage Foundation
Enterprise Holdings
Ernest and Mae Sanctis Foundation
Fichtenbaum Charitable Trust
Fiduciary Trust International
Florida Panthers
Frost Foundation
Greater Milwaukee Foundation
Harper Family Foundation
IPA Foundation
James & Abigail Campbell Family Foundation
Jana Foundation Inc.
Kelly Foundation
KOVAR
Libra Foundation
Longwood Foundation Incorporated
Maine Community Foundation
Maximus Foundation
May Ellen and Gerald Ritter Foundation
Merrill Family Foundation Inc
MGM Resorts Foundation
Nora Roberts Foundation Inc
Nordson Corporation Foundation
Nusenda Foundation
OrthoIndy Foundation
PNC Private Bank
PNM Resources Foundation
Potawatomi Bingo Casino
Prairie Meadows
Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
Rochester Area Community Foundation Depository, Inc.
Roles Family Foundation
Sandia National Laboratories
Speedway Children's Charities
State Farm Companies Foundation
Suncoast Federal Credit Union Foundation
Tempe Diablos Charities, Inc.
The American Eagle Outfitters Foundation
The American Tower Charitable Foundation
The Bishop Family Charitable Fund
The Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family Foundation
The George Preston Marshall F oundation
The Graham and Carolyn Holloway Family Foundation
The Hamilton Company Charitable Foundation
The Joseph Leroy and Ann C. Warner Fund, Inc.
The Laffey McHugh Foundation
The Lowell S. and Betty L. Dunn Family Foundation
The McSweeny Family Foundation, Inc.
The Merancas Foundation Inc
The Sorenson Legacy Foundation
The Thomas W. Bradley Foundation Inc.
The William & Sheila Konar Foundation
United Jewish Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit
Valley Community Foundation
Variety - the Children's Charity
Wilmington Trust

$5,000 to $9,999
A. J. and Sigismunda Palumbo Charitable Trust
Albemarle Foundation
American Online Giving Foundation, Inc.
Ayres Foundation, Inc.
Blue Grass Community Foundation
BNY Mellon
Boston Celtics Shamrock Foundation, Inc.
Cardinals Charities
Charles & M R Shapiro Foundation Inc
Child Development Foundation
Clarfeld Citizens Private Wealth
Cogswell Benevolent Trust
Commonwealth Edison Company
Community Chest of New Britain and Berlin, Inc.
Coop Bank of Cape Cod Foundation
Cralle Foundation Inc
Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, Inc.
G Russell and Constance P Lincoln Foundation
Geodis Foundation
George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation
George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Greater Washington Community Foundation
Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation
Jim Jacobson Charitable Fund
John Ruan Foundation Trust
June Rockwell Levy Foundation
Junior League of Indianapolis
Kiwanis Club of Ann Arbor Foundation, Inc.
Larry H. & Gail Miller Family Foundation
Liberty Bank Foundation
McLane Middleton Foundation
Nashville Predators Foundation
Nicor Gas Company
Pacific Life Foundation
Raymond James Global Account
Stackner Family Foundation Inc
The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Foundation
The Bloedorn Foundation
The Charro Foundation
The Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley
The Feigenbaum Foundation
The Fuller Foundation, Inc.
The Gheens Foundation
The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation
The James & Juli Boeheim Foundation
The John E. Fogarty Foundation
The Katharine Matthies Foundation
The M&T Charitable Foundation
The Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation
The PNC Charitable Trusts
Venable Foundation, Inc.
Wells Fargo Clearing SVCS, LLC

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

$250,000 to $375,000
Diane and Bruce Halle Foundation
The Golisano Foundation
Taft Foundation

$100,000 - $249,999
Nike, Inc.
Fundacion MAPFRE
Tulsa Community Foundation
YourCause, LLC
May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust
The American Gift Fund

$50,000 to $99,999
PHLY Foundation
PWC Charitable Foundation, Inc.
PWC Charitable Foundation, Inc.
St. Louis Blues for Kids Foundation
Stavros Niarchos Foundation
The Batchelor Foundation, Inc.
The Genentech Foundation
The Mouse Trap Foundation
The Sharon D. Lund Foundation
Wealth Management & Trust
United Way of North Central New Mexico
Fidelity Charitable
Community Foundation for Northern Virginia
John H. and Ethel G. Noble Charitable Trust
The Jim Moran Foundation
Vegas Golden Knights Foundation Inc.
VoLo Foundation
Kaiser Permanente Honolulu
Liberty Mutual Foundation
JTMF Foundation
The Tepper Foundation
M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust

$25,000 to $49,999
CenterPoint Energy Foundation
Greater Green Bay Community Foundation Inc.
Jabil
Kimsey Foundation
ManpowerGroup Foundation Inc.
Memorial Foundation
The Columbus Foundation (CF)
The Dr. P. Phillips Foundation

The Healthcare Foundation of NJ
The Rees-Jones Foundation
Thunderbirds Charities
William S. Abell Foundation
MoneyGram Foundation
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas
Macys Foundation
Orchid Giving Circle
TD Charitable Foundation
The Mosaic Company
Saint Joseph's Catholic School
The Anthony R. Abraham Foundation
Accenture
Bader Philanthropies, Inc.

$10,000 to $24,999

Comcast Financial Agency Corporation
Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts
Donald B and Dorothy L Stabler Foundation
DuPage Foundation
Ernest and Mae Sanctis Foundation
Fiduciary Trust International
Florida Panthers
Frost Foundation
Harper Family Foundation
Jana Foundation Inc.
Kelly Foundation
Libra Foundation
Maine Community Foundation
Maximus Foundation
May Ellen and Gerald Ritter Foundation
MGM Resorts Foundation
Nora Roberts Foundation Inc
PNC Private Bank
Prairie Meadows
Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
Sandia National Laboratories
Speedway Children's Charities
State Farm Companies Foundation
The American Eagle Outfitters Foundation
The American Tower Charitable Foundation
The Bishop Family Charitable Fund
The Graham and Carolyn Holloway Family Foundation
The Hamilton Company Charitable Foundation
The Laffey McHugh Foundation
The McSweeny Family Foundation, Inc.
The Sorenson Legacy Foundation
The Thomas W. Bradley Foundation Inc.
Valley Community Foundation
Variety - the Children's Charity
Boston Bruins Foundation
Bank of Hawaii
Charter Oak Federal Credit Union
Nusenda Foundation
Roles Family Foundation
James & Abigail Campbell Family Foundation
Accenture
Aspen Community Foundation
Community Foundation of Greater New Britain
Fichtenbaum Charitable Trust
IPA Foundation
PNM Resources Foundation
Tempe Diablos Charities, Inc.
The Joseph Leroy and Ann C. Warner Fund, Inc.
Wilmington Trust
The George Preston Marshall Foundation
Albuquerque Community Foundation
Greater Milwaukee Foundation
KOVAR
Longwood Foundation Incorporated
Merrill Family Foundation Inc
OrthoIndy Foundation
Rochester Area Community Foundation Depository, Inc.
Suncoast Federal Credit Union Foundation
The Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family Foundation
The Lowell S. and Betty L. Dunn Family Foundation
The Merancas Foundation Inc
The William & Sheila Konar Foundation
United Jewish Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit
Nordson Corporation Foundation
Potawatomi Bingo Casino
Enterprise Holdings

$5,000 to $9,999

A. J. and Sigismunda Palumbo Charitable Trust
Albemarle Foundation
American Online Giving Foundation, Inc.
Ayres Foundation, Inc.
BNY Mellon
Cardinals Charities
Clarfeld Citizens Private Wealth
Cogswell Benevolent Trust
Coop Bank of Cape Cod Foundation
Cralle Foundation Inc
G Russell and Constance P Lincoln Foundation
Geodis Foundation
George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation
George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Greater Washington Community Foundation
Jim Jacobson Charitable Fund
John Ruan Foundation Trust
June Rockwell Levy Foundation
Junior League of Indianapolis
Kiwanis Club of Ann Arbor Foundation, Inc.
Larry H. & Gail Miller Family Foundation
Liberty Bank Foundation
McLane Middleton Foundation
Nashville Predators Foundation
Nicor Gas Company
Pacific Life Foundation
Raymond James Global Account
Stackner Family Foundation Inc
The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Foundation
The Charro Foundation
The Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley
The Fuller Foundation, Inc.
The Gheens Foundation
The James & Juli Boeheim Foundation
The John E. Fogarty Foundation
The PNC Charitable Trusts
Venable Foundation, Inc.
Wells Fargo Clearing SVCS, LLC
Community Chest of New Britain and Berlin, Inc.
Boston Celtics Shamrock Foundation, Inc.
Blue Grass Community Foundation
Child Development Foundation
Commonwealth Edison Company
Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, Inc.
Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation
The Bloedorn Foundation
The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation
The Katharine Matthies Foundation
The Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation
The Feigenbaum Foundation
The M&T Charitable Foundation
Charles & M R Shapiro Foundation Inc

TOP RIDE TEAMS

$250,000 and Above

Team Frazier Life Sciences

$100,000 to $249,000

Team Natixis
Team King James Buddies
Team Morgan Stanley

$50,000 to 99,000

Team Snyk
Team ServiceNow

$25,000 to $49,000

Team Papa Wheelies
Team Gallo/G3
Team Greenberg Traurig
Team Volvo
Team Henry
Team Wyatt - Domestiques
Team Mal's Pals
Team MACK Cycle
Team Susan G
Team SVB/FC
Team Sunshine

$10,000 to $24,000

Team Evergreen
Team Bike Zone of Cape Cod
Team Amundi
The Big Guava
Team Mark's Buddies
Team Louis Miguel
Team Kendra
Team Blach Construction
Team Sobah Ridahs
Team The James Gang
Team 603 Pride
Team Holland & Knight
Team KIDS 360
Team Harrington
Team UBS
Team Flat Top Johnny's
Team Cheshire Loves Best Buddies
Team Mali
Team PDC Inc
Team Xcitebike Racing

TOP BBFW TEAMS

$25,000 to $49,000

Team Diego V.
Team Macon Friends for Makin' Friends
Team Miami Country Day School
Team OneJLL - Stronger Together
Team TCNJ!
Team Roman Josi

$10,000 to $24,000

Team Academy of the Holy Names
Team Ben Orent
Team Best Buddies UA
Team Career Group Companies - Los Angeles
Team Champa Bay Jobs Program
Team Creekside High School
Team Danielle & Coley's Buddies
Team DNI Corp
Team Dylan's Dominators
Team Emeritus
Team FSU Best Buddies
Team Garrett's Fight
Team Holland & Knight
Team Mission Possible
Team Navy Federal
Team Palm Beach Orthodontics
Team Peeps With A Purpose
Team PH.
Team RS&H_2024
Team Seminole Ridge High School
Team Seretta Construction
Team Shulman Rogers
Team GOAT
Team KellieBoo 2024!
Team Sephora Distribution Center - Las Vegas
Team Sephora Distribution Center - Olive Branch
Team Special Events
Team Walk with Wylie
Team West Broward High School

PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

Agriculture

Alameda Greenhouse
Empower Farms

Animal Services

Barkin' Creek the Village
Camp Run-A-Mutt
Doggie Daycare & More
Dogtopia
Elite Suites Pet Resort
Good Dog Hotel and Spa
Nauset Canine Club
Nova Animal Hospital
Petco

PetSmart
Pompano Pet Lodge
Zionsville Country Vet Clinic

Aquaculture
ARC Shellfish Hatchery

Arts/Culture
Aurora Hill Library
Broadway at Music Circus
Capital One Hall
Georgia Aquarium
Houston Museum of Natural Science
Lyric Opera of Chicago
Museum of Contemporary Art
New Jersey Symphony Orchestra
9/11 Museum
Old Sturbridge Village
Park West Gallery
Sacramento Children's Museum
Shedd Aquarium
The Children's Museum of Indianapolis
Tradewinds Studio

Automotive
Evanston Subaru
Findlay Toyota
Herb Chambers – Land Rover Jaguar
Koons Tysons Toyota
Miami Lakes Automall
Mister Car Wash
Ocean Mazda

Communications
AActiveCampaign
Civic Edge Consulting
Conill Advertising
i4cp
Kubik
Quad Graphics

Construction
Fortis Construction
Johnson Mirmiran & Thompson
MasTec
Whiting Turner

E-Comerce
Amazon

Education
Alexandria City High School
Aemillian Preschool
Angier Elementary School
Ben Davis University High School
Bergen County Community
Bishop Moore Catholic High School
Bright Horizons
Building Block Academy
Catholic University
Center for Research Libraries
Childtime of Huntersville
Clark County School District
Curley Academy
Curry College
Dana Middle School
Dean College
Dunlap High School
Elk Grove School District
Genesee Community Services
Holy Spirit School
ISP Management at Northeastern
JRE Lee Educational Center
Montessori Schools at Holmes Run
Montgomery County Public Schools
NYC Board of Education
Peoria Public Schools
Port View Preparatory
Princeton University Athletics
Promise Child Development Center
Santa Margarita Catholic High School
Springstone Montessori
St John XXIII Catholic
UC Davis
UCNJ
UMass Lowell
Unit 5 School District
Wachusett Regional School District
Whitefish Bay High School
Worcester Public Schools

Facilities
ABM Industries
Ally Universal Security
Block by Block
CBRE Microsoft
PHD Services
S.A.F.E.
SBM
Vonachen Services, Inc.

Finance/Insurance
Ally
Amwins
BMO Harris Bank
Bank of America
Credit Union of Texas
Crescent Capital
First Citizens Bank
Five Star Federal Credit Union
H&R Block
H.I.G. Capital, L.L.C.
IMC Financial Markets
Kayne Anderson Capital Advisors LP
Klingman and Associates
Mapfre
Mastercard Worldwide
Morgan Stanley
Natixis Global Asset Management
PLAN Special Needs Trust
PNC Bank
SCN Accounting & Tax Services
Wells Fargo

Fitness
Blink Fitness
Four Seasons Health Club
LA Fitness
Planet Fitness
SPIRIT Club

Food/Beverage
Amazon Fresh
Aramark
Bahama Buck's
Best BuddiesX Rosetta Bakery
Big Bowl
Big Y
Blaze Pizza
Blono Pizza Co.
Bon Appetit @ Google
Bubba's 33
Cafe Blu
Cafe Joyeux
California Pizza Kitchen
Campus Catering Clovis Unified School
Candified
Canteen
CAVA
Centerville Pies
Chartwell's
Chase County Roasters
Chick-fil-A
Chili's
Constellation Culinary Group
Cotuit Fresh Market
Culver's
Davio's Restaurant
Dennis Public Market
Denny's
Dion's
El Pinto Restaurant
Farm Family Foods
Fazenda Coffee Roasters
Festival Foods
Fiji Water
Five Guys
Flik
Food 4 Less
Friends Marketplace
Fruit Center of Milton
Fry's Food
Gundalow Gourmet
HMS Host
Hannaford
Harris Teeter
Harvest Sensations
H-E-B
High Flying Foods @SFO
Jersey Mike's
Jimmy's Famous Seafood
Katella Bakery
Kenny's Westside Pub
Kroger
Lady Baker
Levy Restaurants
Market 32
Maschio's Food Service
McAlister's Deli
McDonald's
Milam's Markets
Misha's Cupcakes
MOD Pizza
New City Microcreamery
PDQ
Panera
Papa John's
Pemberton Farms Market
Pick N Save
Pieology
Piggly Wiggly
Pilo's Street Tacos
Pizza Hut
Price Chopper
Provider Contract Food Service
Publix
Rail Trail Flatbread
Ralph's Fresh Fare
Restoration Pizza
Roselli's Pizza
Rosetta X Bakery
Safeway
Seasons AARP
Shaw's Supermarket
Smart & Final
Sodexo
Sonny's BBQ
Sprouts
SSA Group, LLC
Star Market
Starbucks
Stone Creek Dining Company
Stop & Shop
Sunrise Health Food Stores
Sweet Cup
Sweetly Baked
Taziki's
Tedeschi Food Shops
Texas Road House
The Cheesecake Factory
The Fresh Market
The Merchant LB
The Paramount Group
The Popcorn Shoppe
Thomas Cuisine
Trader Joe's
Tropical Smoothie Cafe
Una Pizza Napoletana
Wegmans
Wendy's
Whitson's Culinary Group
Whole Foods Market
Wildfire

Government
Alexandria Library
Baltimore City Recreation and Parks
Cherrydale Library
City of Baltimore
City of Bal Harbour
City of Hialeah
City of Los Angeles
City of Miami Beach
City of Miami Parks & Recreation
City of New York
City of South San Francisco
Cosumnes Community Services District
Department of Rehab-Fresno
Department of Rehab-San Diego
Employee Development Department
Exchange-Nellis Air Force Base
MA-Developmental Disabilities Council
Marion County Prosecutor's Office
MVA-Annapolis
Navy Federal Credit Union
New York Public Library
OPR Sacramento

Health Care
Addgene
Addgene
Advent Health
Atrius Health

Bickford Senior Living
Calvin Community
Cambridge Nursing & Rehab Center
Cape Cod Hospital
CB Orthodontics
Cecelia Place Assisted Living
Cleveland Clinic
Clovis Community Medical Centers
Community Regional Medical Center
Decatur House
Dignity Healthcare
Enos Residence
Fairlawn Rehabilitation Hospital
Fort Harrison Senior Living
Goodman Campbell Brain and Spine
HealthStream
Hiatus Med Spa
Honeybee Healthcare
IU Health-North
Jackson Health System
Kaiser Permanente
Merck
Modern Salon and Spa
Nspire Healthcare
Palm Beach Dermatology
Pamilla Senior Living
PathGroup
PharmaLink
Somerby
Syntonic Systems, Inc.
Takeda Pharmaceuticals
The Christopher House
The Manhattan Psychiatric Center
Touchpoint
UC Davis Medical Center
UCLA Dept. of Pathology & Lab Medicine
UMass Memorial
UNM Hospital
Verus Healthcare
Vierra Falls

Hospitality

Aramark @Fenway
Chatham Bars Inn
Compass Group
Embassy Suites
Flagship @Facebook
Flik Hospitality
Genevieve N. Johnson Seniors Daycare Center
Grand Hyatt Nashville
Harvard Maintenance
Holiday Inn Express
Homewood Suites
Hotel Albuquerque
Live Casino Hotel
Loews Coral Gable
Longfellow's Wayside Inn
Marriott
Mayfair House Hotel & Garden
MGM Resorts International
Oakmont of Torrance
Restaurant Associates
Seaport Hotel
The Lodge
The Ritz-Carlton-Coconut Grove
UCLA Housing & Hospitality

Law

Barket Marion Epstein & Kearon, LLP
Chasen and Boscolo
Elder Law Firm of Kirson & Fuller
Envoy Global
Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson
Gelfand, Rennert, & Feldman
Holland & Knight
Latham & Watkins
Manatt, Phelps &Phillips, LLP
Pacific Workers' Compensation Law
Seyfarth Shaw
Shuffield Lowman
Special Needs Law Group of MA
The Ferraro Law Group

Manufacturing/Distribution

Baby K'tan
Boeing Distribution Services
Brunswick Land and Sea
Lake Country Manufacturing
Northrop Grumman
PCNA
Prime Source
Printing Partners
RDS Same Day Delivery
Sakura Finetek USA
Shipetze LLC
Telamon
Tuuci

Nonprofit/Foundations

Best Buddies International
Central Park Conservancy
Chicago Park District
Community Connections, Inc.
Good 360
Goodwill
Gordon Jewish Community Center
Harbor Regional Center
LA Habilitation House
National Aquarium
National Down Syndrome Society
Picket Fence Foundation
QSAC
Special Faces
Special Olympics
The Arc of Mercer
The Mentor Network
Think Together
Valley Life
Virtuous, Inc
Westside Regional Center
YMCA

Oil Industry/Energy/Mining

Schlumberger

Real Estate

Capital Properties
JLL-Jones Lang LaSalle
Network Community Management
Starwood Capital
Tavistock

Recreation

Cat Cay Yacht Club
Disneyland Park
Prairieville Park
Presidio Golf Course
Richland Country Club
Sunnyside Country Club
The Preserve at Eisenhower Golf Course
We Rock the Spectrum

Retail

Ace Hardware
Anthropologie
Aventura Mall
Bath and Body Works
BJ's Wholesale Club
BrandsMart
Build-A- Bear Workshop
Burlington
Cost Plus World
Crate & Barrel
CVS
Dillard's
Discount Welds
Disney Store
Gucci
Home Goods
HomeSense
Hope's Treasures
Hot Topic
Hy-Vee
Jewel Osco
Jondie
Kessler's Diamonds
Kohls
Lowes
Mack Cycle
Macy's Furniture Gallery
Malicious Women Candle Co.
Marshalls
Masks Y Mas
Michaels
Nike
99 Cent Only Store
Nouria Energy
Office Depot
OfficeMax
Ollie's Bargain Outlet
Once Upon a Child
Primark
Sam's Club
Sephora
Sierra
Sloomoo Institute
Target
The Home Depot
The Paper Store
The UPS Store
TJ Maxx
Urban Decay/L'Oreal
Walgreens
Walmart
Wawa
Weis

Sports/Entertainment

AEG Merchandising
AMC Theaters
Axe Hockey Group
Boston Red Sox
Century Rio 24
Charlotte FC
Citi Field
COSM
D.C. United
DCU Center
Entertainment Industry Foundation
Gillette Stadium
Golf N Stuff
Good Thomas Entertainment
Mercedes Benz Stadium
Milwaukee Brewers
Milwaukee Bucks
Monumental Sports & Entertainment
NFL
NY Islanders
NY Mets
NY Yankees
Oakland Athletics
Propagate Content
Range Media Partners
SeaWorld
Silva Lanes
Tepper Sports & Entertainment
UCLA Dept. of Intercollegiate Athletics
Universal Studios
Walt Disney Television
Woosox
Worcester Railers

Talent/Staffing

Career Group Companies
Career Group Companies
Job Options Inc.
K Force
William Morris Endeavor

Technology

Accenture
Avid
Avnet
CIC
Google
Insight
Palo Alto Networks
Rapid7
Xactly Corporation

Telecomunications

TCC

Transportation

ABF Freight
Brightline
Envoy Air
Fast Park
Fontainebleau Aviation
JFK Airport
Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd
SMS International
U-Haul Moving & Storage

Warehousing/Storage

American Lumper
Bollore
D.S. Hull Company, Inc.
Iron Mountain
TDS Logistics LLC
Value Store It

Alabama







Alabama Year in Review

Best Buddies in Alabama experienced unprecedented growth throughout the year, most notably in our school presence across the state. The organization expanded from nine to 30 chapters, including the groundbreaking launch of an entire district of schools in Tuscaloosa. Currently, we have 1,141 members fostering 183 one-to-one friendship matches. Best Buddies Alabama's presence at the Best Buddies Leadership Conference (BBLC) demonstrated this momentum, as we doubled attendance from five participants in 2023 to 10 representatives from five different chapters in 2024.

Our delegation to the Best Buddies Leadership Conference achieved several milestones, including having our first state ambassador, Ian Terry, and chapter advisor in attendance. During the conference, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) chapter received the prestigious Outstanding Chapter Award, while the University of Alabama was recognized for ranking among the Top 10 Fundraising Chapters for Best Buddies Friendship Walks in 2024.

The 3rd Annual Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Alabama raised a record-breaking $50,000 for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The event, presented by Joe Piper, Inc., took place at Patriot Park in Homewood with a satellite walk in Auburn, drawing over 385 participants on 48 teams. Notable achievements included recognition of Top Individual Fundraiser Kiley Krietz, Top Fundraising Chapter The University of Alabama, and Top Fundraising Team JM Smucker Co., while UAB earned Chapter of the Year honors.

Our Champion of the Year event at the Fennec in downtown Birmingham proved to be an inspiring celebration of friendship and community. The highlight of the evening was mission speaker Hope Benjamin, who delivered a touching message of how friendship can help us overcome our darkest of times. The event concluded with the outstanding talents of Marlana VanHoose, and through the efforts of 10 Champion candidates, the event raised over $111,000. Most notably, the JM Smucker duo of Jud Robinson and David Carter, alongside mission partner Judd Trimm, set a new fundraising record of $37,665!

Looking ahead to 2025, Best Buddies in Alabama plans to establish an Advisory Board and develop a structured local ambassador program. With plans to increase our Leadership Conference delegation and building on our current momentum, we are excited about the opportunities for expansion and deeper community impact across Alabama.

Grace Anne Maughan, Director of Mission Advancement, Alabama

Alabama Office
P.O. Box 2926, Tuscaloosa, AL 35403
E alabama@bestbuddies.org



Soleil and **Gary**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Soleil & Gary

One-To-One Friendships

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL

Before joining Best Buddies, I grew up in Connecticut, where I first discovered my passion for creating meaningful friendships with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I always knew I wanted to continue this journey, even when I made the significant decision to move 18 hours away from home to attend the University of Alabama.

My buddy Gary Davis and I were matched in 2022 after meeting at Alabama's Friendship Walk. We share a deep spiritual connection and spend our time praying together, listening to worship music, and going to the movies. As the chapter president of the University of Alabama's Best Buddies chapter, I've seen firsthand how these programs create lasting bonds between people.

Since joining Best Buddies eight years ago, my life has been transformed through genuine friendship and unconditional acceptance. Gary is the embodiment of kindness and selflessness, truly reflecting the character of Jesus in everything he does. Anyone who meets him, even briefly, can't help but walk away with a smile.

The impact of Best Buddies on my life extends far beyond any single location or time period. I still maintain a close friendship with my buddy from my high school years in Connecticut, and I know my friendship with Gary will continue long after my graduation this May. Despite moving so far from home, Best Buddies helped me find a best friend in Gary, and our connection is one I'll cherish forever. His presence in my life has made me a better person, and I'm eternally grateful for the friendship we've built.

One-To-One Friendships
Higley High School, Gilbert, AL

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
11 Chapters	**235** Participants	**5** Chapters	**37** Participants	**9** Chapters	**269** Participants

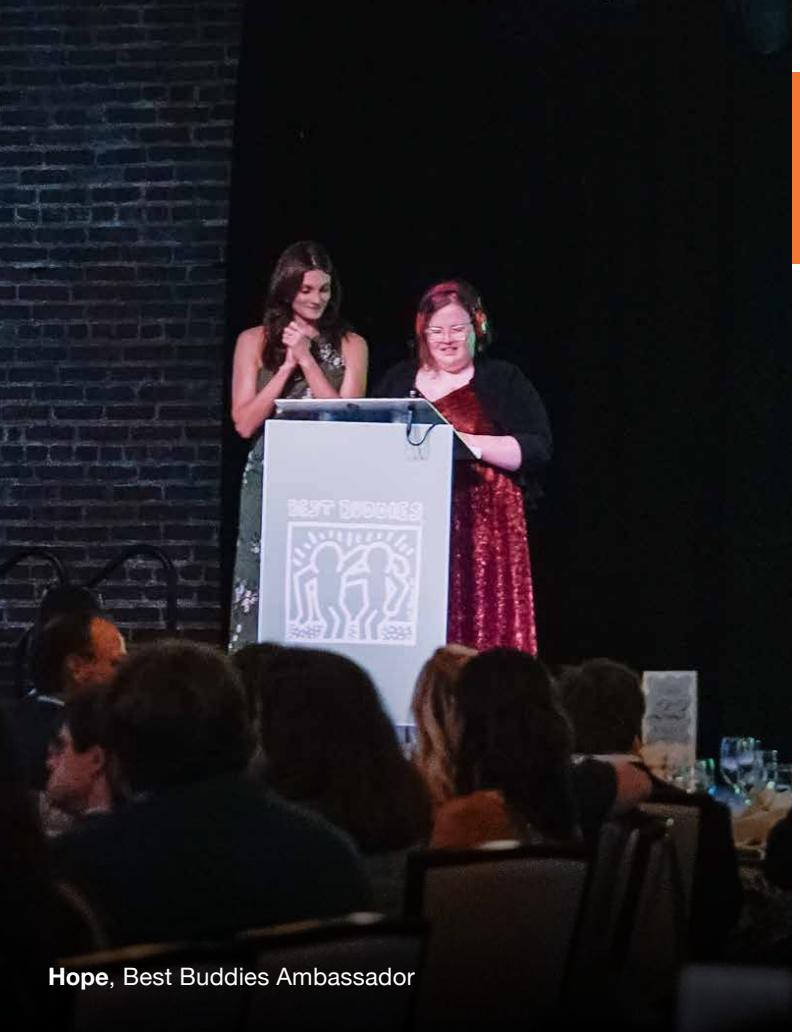
Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
5 Chapters	**620** Participants	**14** Participants	**18** Participants

> “Gary is the embodiment of kindness and selflessness, truly reflecting the character of Jesus in everything he does. Anyone who meets him, even briefly, can't help but walk away with a smile.” **- Soleil D.**



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Hope, Best Buddies Ambassador

Hope

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Before joining Best Buddies, my life was marked by confusion and loneliness. I was diagnosed with ADHD in second grade and misdiagnosed with Autism in middle school, making it difficult to explain why my brain worked differently. This past year, I finally received my true diagnosis - a rare genetic disorder called Houge Janssens Syndrome, which affects my speech, sensory processing, and emotional regulation. After high school, I enrolled in Crossing Points at the University of Alabama, a non-degree certificate program for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

I became involved with Best Buddies in 2018 when executive members presented at Crossing Points about the University of Alabama chapter. The decision to become a self-advocate was born from my desire to create positive change. Through my own non-profit, Finding Hope, I now work to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who have been victims of crime. My goal is to ensure that others with disabilities have the same support system that Best Buddies provided me with during my darkest times.

Since joining Best Buddies, my life has transformed from one of isolation to one filled with genuine friendships and purpose. My Best Buddies friends have become family, helping me feel safe and valued, especially after experiencing a violent attack in 2023. They've shown me what true friendship means and inspired me to give back to others. Through Best Buddies, I've found a place where I truly belong.

To others with IDD, I want you to know that you deserve to feel safe, valued, and understood. According to Disabled World, the statistics of assault against people with developmental disabilities are alarming, but organizations like Best Buddies create safe spaces where we can thrive. Don't give up hope - there are people and communities ready to support, accept, and celebrate you for exactly who you are.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats AL

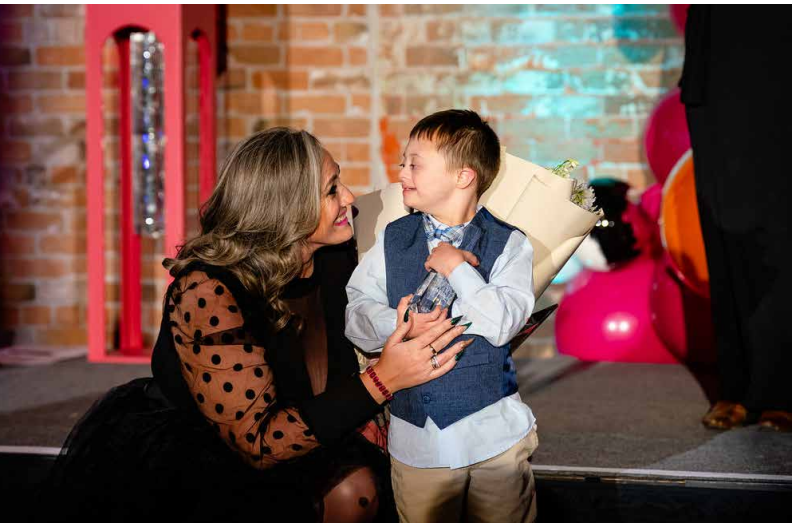
Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**11**	**236**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> “My Best Buddies friends have become family, helping me feel safe and valued…” **- Hope**

Arizona







Arizona Year in Review

This year has been marked by meaningful connections, increased awareness, and impactful programs and events that have enriched the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In doing so, Best Buddies in Arizona (BBAZ) fostered more inclusive communities.

Our Friendship program in 56 schools across Arizona reached 1,500 youth, with 209 one-to-one friendship matches. BBAZ also opened new friendship chapters in two new middle schools. The Citizens program, our adult friendship program, supported 122 members with 29 one-to-one friendship matches. This year the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) program provided training for over 70 young adults from 23 Arizona schools. Our Jobs program placed eight new individuals and continued to cultivate 19 employees with IDD in competitive and integrated employment with companies who see the value in hiring someone with IDD. The Leadership Development program provided trainings for 17 Ambassadors who acquired skills to self-advocate and, in turn, build the confidence to lead a happy and full life.

The incredible funds raised through our two signature events, the Friendship Walk and the Champion of the Year Gala, have been critical to Best Buddies in Arizona providing this lifetime of inclusion for people with IDD. In the Spring, our Friendship Walk raised over $139,000 with over 1,000 participants coming together as an inclusive community. This year's Champion of the Year Gala reached new heights, culminating in a record-breaking moment as Kendra Verdoni was crowned Champion of the Year. Kendra, alongside her mission partner Harrison and Campaign Manager Courtney Mistico, raised $138,755—the highest amount ever achieved by a Champion of the Year candidate in Arizona's history. With eight dedicated Champion candidates and 350 guests, the event raised over $374,000, making it the 5th top fundraising gala in the country!

We ended the year by remembering everything to be thankful for at our 3rd annual Friendsgiving event. Program participants, families and staff enjoyed a delicious meal together, as new friendships were formed, and old friendships were made stronger.

On behalf of our Advisory Board, Junior Advisory Board, and the staff at Best Buddies, I would like to thank our generous sponsors, volunteers, and selfless donors for their support. As we step into 2025, we're excited to build on the momentum generated by the success of our programs and events in 2024.

Lisa Cleary, State Director, Arizona

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Chloe and **Lucy**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Chloe & Lucy

One-To-One Friendships

Higley High School, Gilbert, AZ

Higley High School is one of Arizona's largest Friendship program chapters. Yet Chloe and Lucy's friendship stands out. Their relationship truly embodies our mission. They became friends naturally. They had an art class together, where their friendship began to form. Chloe started inviting Lucy to things outside of school, like going to the movies or the mall. A staff member noticed their natural connection and told Chloe about Best Buddies. She knew Best Buddies would take their friendship to the next level, so Chloe decided to join Best Buddies since Lucy was already involved. Lucy and Chloe were officially matched! Now they had more time to hang out both inside and outside of school. "I like to do everything with Chloe because she's fun. I enjoy spending time with her at lunch parties and outside of school", Lucy said. Their friendship is a great example of a natural friendship that became something more because of their Best Buddies connection. Higley's chapter advisor said, "Lucy and Chloe have an incredible bond of friendship that began organically and extends beyond Best Buddies."

Together at the Higley High School Best Buddies talent show, the duo was able to show off their amazing singing voices and perform the final act of the talent show. During their performance all the earlier performers came on stage and joined them, ending the show with a powerful show of inclusion and friendship. Chloe believes that "without Lucy I wouldn't have ever been a part of such a fun organization."

Higley High School's Best Buddies chapter has changed the school for the better. They host a huge annual inclusion carnival and invite Best Buddies chapters from across the state to attend. This event also has an inclusion assembly the day before that kicks off the fun and gets the whole school involved.

One-To-One Friendships
Higley High School, Gilbert, AZ

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**151** Participants	**13** Chapters	**195** Participants	**40** Chapters	**1096** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
3 Chapters	**36** Participants	**123** Participants	**127** Participants

> "without Lucy I wouldn't have ever been a part of such a fun organization" **- Chloe**



Poco C., Best Buddies Jobs participant
Aramark

Poco

Integrated Employment

Utility Worker Aramark – Arizona State University, Pitchforks Dining Tempe, AZ

Poco has been involved in Best Buddies Arizona for over 12 years, long before the Jobs Program existed. He discovered Best Buddies from a friend who invited him to the Friendship Walk, and he found his family. Poco had previously worked at a variety of jobs but joined the Jobs program in 2023 when he learned how it could offer long term support to ensure he remains a valuable member of the team. Poco is a people-person, so interaction was a vital component of success for his future job. “I really like to tell people about Best Buddies,” Poco noted to his Best Buddies Employment Consultant. “This organization has helped me so much and I want others to know how fun it is to make new friends!”

Poco and his Employment Consultant looked into the food service industry, led by the disability-friendly company Aramark, and found the perfect fit for Poco – Utility Services. In this role, Poco traverses the busy dining room filled with a diverse group of students, maintaining the area. Poco has been able to utilize his role to bring awareness of the Best Buddies mission. “I love to tell the students about our programs. I have made a lot of friends, and some of them are going to sign up to be in our Arizona State University chapter and come to our Friendship Walk!”

Poco gets to use his natural ability to speak to others and make them feel special; while also telling them how Best Buddies has enriched his life. Surrounded by a positive atmosphere and diverse people, he is thriving, and his employer consistently praises his contributions, emphasizing how invaluable he is. With his passion and positive spirit, Poco continues to make an impact and shows no signs of slowing down, making him a true asset to the team.

> “This organization has helped me so much and I want others to know how fun it is to make new friends!”
> **- Poco C.**

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats AZ

Jobs

25
Participants Employed

32
Participants



Whitney, Best Buddies Ambassador

Whitney

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Arizona

Whitney's journey with Best Buddies began nearly 20 years ago, during her high school years. She vividly remembers the challenges she faced before joining her school's chapter.

"Before Best Buddies, my social life was tough. I had just started high school and didn't know anyone. For the first few months, I ate lunch by myself."

Encouraged by one of her teachers, Whitney joined Best Buddies, where she discovered her lifelong passion for the mission of inclusion. This passion later inspired her to join the Ambassador program, where she could share her story and empower others to advocate for themselves.

"I wanted to become an ambassador to share how I overcame my struggles and inspire others who may be going through similar experiences. I want them to know they aren't alone and that they have a friend in me."

In 2024, Whitney received the annual Spirit of Courage Award, recognized for her warm and caring spirit, as well as her tireless activism within Best Buddies.

"Joining Best Buddies has been life changing. Over the years, I've built countless meaningful relationships, and some of my most cherished memories have been made through this organization. The days of eating lunch alone are now a distant memory."

> "Best Buddies has made me feel like a leader and a star for being just as I am." **- Whitney**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats AZ

Ambassadors

38
Ambassadors

Promoters

17
Chapters

346
Participants

Transitions

21
Participants

California







California Year in Review

As Best Buddies in California reflect on 2024, we are filled with gratitude for the incredible progress we have made together in advancing inclusion and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This past year has been one of growth, innovation, and impact.

One of the most significant milestones of the year was the expansion of our transitions program through the launch of Project SEARCH in Sacramento site at UC Davis Medical Center. This initiative provided nine individuals with disabilities with the opportunity to participate in three internship rotations across multiple departments, gaining valuable hands-on experience and workplace skills. This program is a testament to the power of collaboration and our shared commitment to fostering meaningful employment opportunities.

In addition, we proudly opened 29 new school friendship chapters, further expanding opportunities for connection and inclusion among students. Our adult matching program, Citizens, also experienced remarkable growth, with membership increasing by over 70%. We are also proud to share that we serve 265 individuals in integrated employment, helping them secure meaningful jobs and achieve greater independence. These milestones highlight our ongoing dedication to building strong, supportive communities at every stage of life.

Another exciting highlight of the year was our Champion of the Year gala in San Francisco, which achieved record-breaking revenue, raising over $235,000. Additionally, we successfully relaunched the Best Buddies Friendship Walk in Fresno, bringing together our community in a powerful display of unity and support. In total, our signature events generated over $918,000, a growth of 23% from the previous year.

Beyond this, we have continued to expand our outreach, strengthen community partnerships, and expand our outreach and strengthen community partnerships to promote accessibility and inclusion. Thanks to your unwavering support, we have been able to provide essential resources, training, and services that empower individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to lead fulfilling lives.

As we look ahead to 2025, we are excited to launch a Best Buddies Friendship Walk in Orange County and grow our programs and team in that area. We remain dedicated to breaking down barriers, creating inclusive pathways, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to thrive. Your generosity and commitment fuel our mission, and we are deeply appreciative of your continued support.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with us. Together, we are making a lasting impact.

Katelyn Quintero, State Director, California

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Diana and **Deeba**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Diana & Deeba

One-To-One Friendships

Tesoro High School, Las Flores, CA

At Tesoro High School, a friendship that began four years ago through Best Buddies has grown into something truly special. Seniors Diana and Deeba first met as freshmen, unsure of what to expect but open to the possibility of friendship. Now, as they prepare to graduate, they can't imagine life without each other. "I love Deeba because she always makes my day," Diana shares. "I love calling her and hanging out with her. She is my best friend."

For Deeba, this friendship has been life changing. "Diana has completely transformed my perspective on friendship," she says. "Before meeting her, I never imagined someone could be so genuinely kind. We talk at school every day, call each other every week, and spend time together often. Her compassion and love are truly unmatched and knowing her has changed my life in ways I never expected."

What started through a school program has become a lifelong connection built on trust, laughter, and unconditional support. Their chapter advisor, Mr. Corbett, recognizes their friendship as being one everyone should strive to have. "The relationship that Diana and Deeba have is what all Best Buddies friendships should be. Deeba spends time with Diana outside of school as well as every day at school. Deeba attends all of her birthdays as well as getting her small gifts for special occasions. Diana loves her like a big sister. Diana has muscular dystrophy and uses an electric wheelchair to get around. That doesn't stop Deeba from doing things with her. I know this friendship will last for many years to come."

Diana and Deeba's story is a testament to the power of inclusion and friendship—proof that when people are given the opportunity to connect, incredible bonds can form. As they look ahead to their next chapter, one thing is certain: their friendship will last long beyond high school.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats CA

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
15 Chapters	**141** Participants	**26** Chapters	**250** Participants	**140** Chapters	**3,273** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
19 Chapters	**667** Participants	**545** Participants	**924** Participants

> "Her compassion and love are truly unmatched and knowing her has changed my life in ways I never expected." **- Deeba**



Tanner, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Sacramento

Tanner

Integrated Employment

Cosumnes Community Services District, Sacramento, CA

Tanner made history as the first person with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) hired by the Cosumnes Community Services District, setting a powerful example of workplace inclusion. His journey began in the district's RAD (Recreation Adventures) program, where his positivity, dedication, and natural leadership quickly stood out. Seeing his potential, the district created an opportunity for him to join their team, and Tanner now thrives as a Maintenance Tech, proving that individuals with disabilities bring tremendous value to the workforce. When asked about his career, Tanner said, "I love my job! I have learned how to follow directions and work with other people. I like getting a paycheck."

In December 2024, Tanner was honored with a proclamation from the Cosumnes Board of Directors for International Day of Persons with Disabilities, recognizing both his achievements and the launch of the RAD Employment Program. His contributions have made a lasting impact—not only through his work but also by inspiring his employer to expand hiring opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Tanner's success has opened doors for others, demonstrating that meaningful employment is about more than just a job; it fosters independence, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Through the Best Buddies Jobs program, Tanner is leading the way in breaking down barriers and creating a more inclusive future. His story is a testament to the power of opportunity and the importance of workplaces that embrace all abilities.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats CA

Jobs

223
Participants Employed

285
Participants

> "I love my job! I have learned how to follow directions and work with other people. I like getting a paycheck."
> **- Tanner**



Brevin, Best Buddies Ambassador

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats CA

Ambassadors

40
Ambassadors

Promoters

53
Chapters

533
Participants

Transitions

40
Participants

Brevin
Leadership Development
Fresno, CA

For much of his life, Brevin felt misunderstood. Growing up in a rural California town, his autism often defined how others saw him. He faced bullying, misjudgment, and the painful reality that people with disabilities were often treated as less capable. But then, Brevin found Best Buddies—and everything changed.

“Until recently, I believed the only ‘interesting’ fact was that I had autism. For much of my life, I've faced challenges that come with having autism. There were times when I felt alone, misunderstood, and unsure of where I belonged. But then, I discovered Best Buddies, and it changed everything.

I went to high school in a rural area in California where disabilities like autism were not well understood. I was often bullied due to misinformation about my disability. People with autism are often seen as not smart or incapable of making true friendships.

My journey with Best Buddies began through the Jobs program, where I interned at a major hospital. My initial intention was just to get a good job, but from there, I was invited to Citizen Socials, where adults with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities have a space to be not only friends but — Best Buddies.

For the first time, I found myself in a community that embraced me—and others like me—for who we are, where our success and full inclusion truly mattered. Best Buddies is more than just a program; it's a lifeline. It's a place where genuine connections are made, where opportunities and relationships are built that transcend disabilities and labels.

Best Buddies didn't see limits; they saw possibilities. They didn't see differences; they saw strengths. They gave me a voice to share my belief: everyone, no matter how big or small, different, and or what, should have a fair chance at an amazing life!”

> “Best Buddies didn't see limits; they saw possibilities. They didn't see differences; they saw strengths.”
> **- Brevin**



Yvenie, Best Buddies Living resident

Yvenie

Best Buddies Living Resident

Los Angeles, CA

For Yvenie, becoming a resident of Best Buddies Living in Los Angeles has been truly life changing. Before joining the program in January 2024, she faced immense challenges—moving from place to place without family support, struggling with her mental health, and ultimately living in a homeless shelter. She longed for stability, independence, and a place to call home.

Best Buddies Living provided her with exactly that and more. Now, for the first time in her life, she has her own room, a steady job, and a supportive community that empowers her to thrive.

"I joined the program in January, and before Best Buddies, my life was a rollercoaster," Yvenie shares. "I was living in a homeless shelter, struggling with my mental health, and constantly moving with no family support."

"Best Buddies gave me a stable place to live and helped me get back on my feet. This is the first time I've ever had my own room. Now, I have a stable job and understand the responsibilities of being an adult. I've learned how to be responsible and make sure my bills are paid. I've learned how to budget and save money."

One of Yvenie's favorite aspects of Best Buddies Living is the weekly group dinners, where residents come together to share meals and connect.

"There are so many different personalities, and at first, I was nervous to talk. But over time, I've learned to embrace everyone," she says. "I also feel a sense of peace at home with my roommates. The weekly meetings and group dinners encourage personal growth and provide a strong support system."

For others with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), Yvenie hopes to inspire confidence and self-acceptance. "I want people with IDD to surround themselves with those who understand their disabilities. You shouldn't feel bad because of your disability—you can still achieve all your goals and dreams."

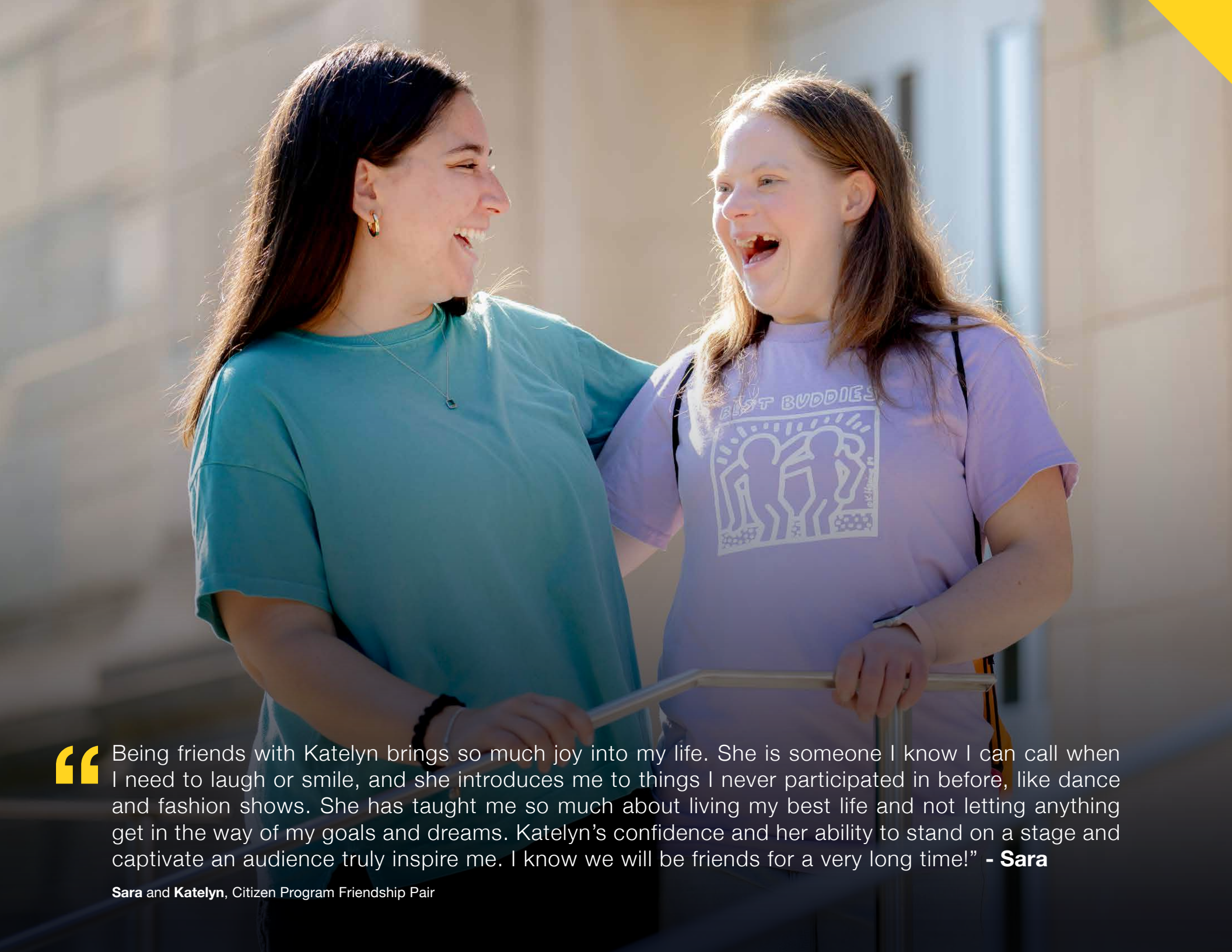
> "Best Buddies gave me a stable place to live and helped me get back on my feet. This is the first time I've ever had my own room" **- Yvenie**

Inclusive Living
Key Program Stats CA

Living

1
Residences

6
Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Capital Region







Virginia & D.C. Year in Review

Best Buddies in Virginia & Washington, D.C. experienced a year of remarkable growth and achievement for our Capital Region. With an expanding team, program enhancements, and broader outreach across all mission pillars, we have much to celebrate. This year, we had the privilege of growing in multiple dimensions—reaching more participants, families, employers and schools - impacting over 35,000 individuals across our region. Alongside our strong presence in the area, we extended our reach into previously underserved communities, notably launching our Jobs Program in Loudoun County, VA.

At the core of our mission is fostering one-to-one, meaningful friendships. This year, over 3,500 students participated in our Friendship Programs, with 20 new school chapters launched, including 12 at the elementary level. Our Citizens Friendship Program grew to 425 individuals across two chapters in the DC metro area and Richmond, VA. Our team also facilitated 600 new 1:1 matches, helping more students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) thrive in our inclusive programs.

In 2024, we launched Best Buddies Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) in Northern Virginia providing essential training to 48 young adults at two schools. Additionally, our Jobs Program continued to thrive, supporting 50 individuals with IDD in securing competitive and integrated employment at 24 employers who embrace the contributions of individuals with IDD. Our second annual Best Buddies Employer Partner Celebration, hosted by Capital One, honored Supervisor of the Year, Galy Torres of JLL, and Employer of the Year, CBRE.

Our Ambassador Leadership Program also expanded, with 17 new State Ambassadors. These leaders made 60 appearances and speeches, advocating for inclusion and spreading awareness of our mission.

Our hallmark events were pivotal in our success this year. The Best Buddies Friendship Walk on the National Mall in Washington, DC, remains the largest nationwide, attracting a record-breaking 1,900 participants and raising over $400,000 for local programs. We debuted the Richmond Friendship Walk at City Stadium, with over 200 participants celebrating in this new locale.

The Best Buddies Homecoming: Two Parties, One Purpose event was an unforgettable highlight. This joyous evening, which unites students, families, and adult supporters, raised $311,000—surpassing our fundraising goals—thanks to the generosity of our champions and their guests. With 330 adult attendees and 500 students, Homecoming was a true testament to the power of community.

As we reflect on our successes in 2024, we are more committed than ever to our mission. With empowered student leaders, strong community and advisory board support, and steadfast advocates, we look forward to continuing our work to create friendships, secure meaningful jobs, foster self-advocacy, and shape bright futures for our Best Buddies.

Molly L. Whalen, State Director, Capital Region
Virginia & Washington DC Office
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Izzy and **Alex**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Izzy & Alex

One-To-One Friendships

Washington DC & Northern Virginia Citizens

Izzy grew up in Northern Virginia and attended the Friendship Walks every year with her sister until she eventually decided the time was right to apply for Best Buddies Citizens and find a buddy. Alex was involved with Best Buddies on and off throughout high school and college and was excited to get reinvolved after finding more free time as her children grew up.

In May 2023, Izzy and Alex were matched in a one-to-one friendship, and they've had an incredible time together.

"The painting pottery was my favorite [memory together] because I got to paint something for Alex, and it was cool to do," Izzy shared. "It was a little plate with two hearts. I wrote Best Buddies on one side and Izzy and Alex on the other."

Alex treasures that memory, too, saying, "I could tell very early on how thoughtful you are, and it is really inspiring."

"Izzy has a smile that makes everyone else want to smile," Alex shared.

The two friends agree that having someone to hang out with is wonderful. "I enjoy just being able to chat," Izzy said.

"Alex is supportive, kind, and amazing," Izzy said. "She and her kids are fun to hang out [with]. I love little kids."

Their friendship has become a growing family bond as Izzy joins Alex and her children at the playground and for trips to their favorite local café. One time, Izzy noticed that Alex's four-year-old daughter was getting antsy at lunch, so Izzy surprised her with a fry. "My daughter's face lit up, and she was so happy about that kind gesture," Alex shared. "She still talks about it to this day."

> "Izzy has a smile that makes everyone else want to smile." **- Alex**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats VA & D.C.

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
19 Chapters	**438** Participants	**13** Chapters	**60** Participants	**57** Chapters	**2,094** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
13 Chapters	**647** Participants	**440** Participants	**257** Participants



Hannah, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Amazon-JLL, Arlington,VA

Hannah

Integrated Employment

Amazon-JLL, Arlington, VA

Hannah came to Best Buddies Jobs in 2020 to earn her own money and become more independent. Hannah worked with her employment consultant to find a job that would best fit her outgoing and fun personality. After a challenging and long job search, Hannah's perseverance paid off when she landed a full-time Facilities Coordinator position at Amazon.

Hannah found a home at Amazon. She ensures her 22-story office building runs smoothly and stays engaging by conducting site walkthroughs and updating the employee "Dog Wall" with pet photos. She and her coworkers dressed up as Winnie the Pooh characters for Halloween, and they show up to celebrate her successes at Best Buddies events.

"I love working alongside my team. They've helped me grow so much."

Her supervisor, Galy Torres, shares: "Hannah's willingness to always help and participate in teamwork with the best attitude is so nice to experience. We all enjoy having her as part of our team."

Hannah loves her independence. She takes the metro to work every day and treats herself to hard-earned manicures. Hannah's next goal is to pay her own rent at Best Buddies Living.

Her advice for others like her with intellectual and developmental disabilities seeking employment?

"Be patient, be kind, help your coworkers when they need it, and speak up for yourself."

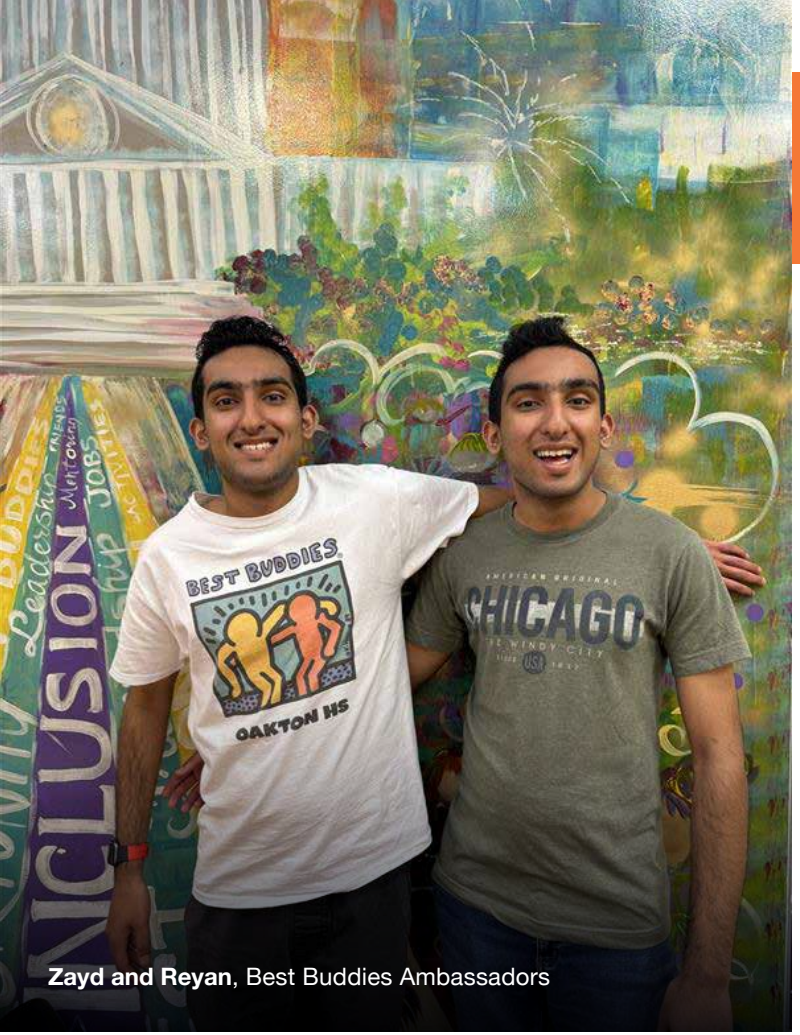
Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats VA & D.C.

Jobs

34
Participants Employed

41
Participants

> "I love working alongside my team. They've helped me grow so much." **- Hannah**



Zayd and Reyan, Best Buddies Ambassadors

Zayd & Reyan

Leadership Development

Transitions, Vienna, VA

Zayd and Reyan are 18-year-old twins who love to swim, play basketball, and learn new things. They joined Oakton High School's Best Buddies chapter in 2020 and attended their first Transitions Workshops in the summer of 2024.

Reyan and Zayd are both interested in computers and were impressed by an employer who discussed the relevance of IT in a retail setting. Reyan was excited to tailor his resume to that specific opportunity.

"I really enjoyed learning about what my options are after high school - I didn't know there were so many!" said Reyan.

Zayd is also preparing for life after high school. "I loved learning how to give an elevator pitch and having the opportunity to present my pitch to my peers," said Zayd.

Both Zayd and Reyan want to obtain their driver's licenses, and they're using the SMART goal method they learned from the Transitions workshop to break down their goal and make it achievable.

Ultimately, Zayd and Reyan aim to enter the professional world of IT. The Best Buddies Transitions Program has five main components: self-advocacy/mentoring, job exploration and counseling, a work readiness overview, work-based learning opportunities, and post-secondary counseling. For Zayd and Reyan, learning these skills at this critical transitional point in their life is key to understanding and preparing for the opportunities, like working in IT, that are available after graduation.

> "I really enjoyed learning about what my options are after high school - I didn't know there were so many! **- Reyan**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats VA & D.C.

Ambassadors

18
Ambassadors

Promoters

41
Chapters

744
Participants

Transitions

50
Participants



Andres, Best Buddies Living resident

Andres

Best Buddies Living Resident

Union Market, Washington, D.C.

Before joining Best Buddies, my life was already pretty good—I was active in Special Olympics and involved in the disability community. But I was ready for a new chapter and craving more independence. After spending about eight months on the waitlist, I moved into Best Buddies Living in August 2024.

What I love most about being a resident is the strong disability community. It's pushed me to grow and set new goals for myself. I've been working on improving my cooking skills and learning to be more patient.

Some of my favorite moments are just hanging out with my roommates—talking and watching TV together. I also work at the Warner Theater in Washington, DC, where I help guests by scanning tickets, resolving ticket issues, and guiding people to their seats. I really enjoy helping others and being part of the team.

Since moving in, I've become much more independent, and that's made a big difference in my life.

My message to others with IDD is simple: join Best Buddies. It's an amazing organization. Best Buddies Living is especially meaningful because it brings people with and without disabilities together. I'm proud to be part of this inclusive community.

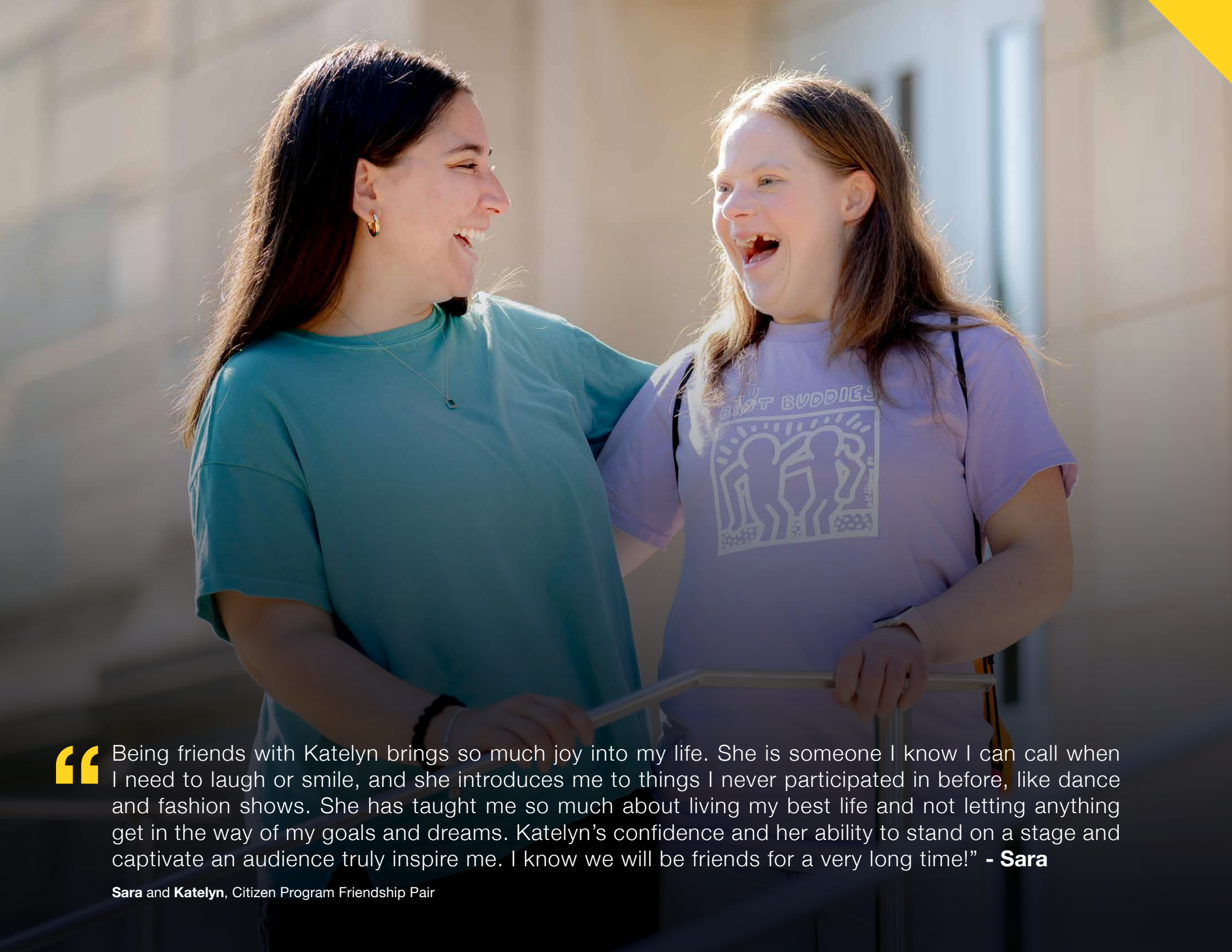
Inclusive Living
Key Program Stats VA & D.C.

Living

2
Residences

20
Participants

> "Since moving in, I've become much more independent, and that's made a big difference in my life." **- Andres**



“Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn’s confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!” **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Colorado







Colorado Year in Review

2024 has been a year of remarkable growth and impact for Best Buddies in Colorado. Our programs have expanded, creating more opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to build meaningful friendships, develop leadership skills, and gain employment. We now have 874 active members in our school programs, with 198 matches, fostering inclusion and support in communities across the state. Our Citizens adult friendship program continues to thrive, offering monthly events, both virtual and in person, to keep members engaged. We also launched two major new initiatives—Eunie's Buddies, a mentorship program supporting parents of children with IDD, and Integrated Employment, which is helping connect employers with talented employees in the IDD community. Additionally, our Advisory Board grew to 20 dedicated leaders, strengthening our statewide efforts.

Leadership development remained a key focus this year. Our Local Leadership Training Days brought together 40 student leaders, with one event hosted at Aspen High School, followed by a Dance Aspen workshop, and another at Broomfield High School. 19 delegates from Colorado attended the Best Buddies Leadership Conference, gaining valuable skills to bring back to their communities. We also hosted a successful National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) Ambassador Training, giving participants tools to explore their dream careers. Building on this, we are launching a three-part Ambassador Training Series in 2025, focusing on resume writing, interview skills, and securing meaningful employment.

The Best Buddies Friendship Walk (BBFW) was a powerful celebration of inclusion, bringing together nearly 800 attendees across two events. The Roaring Fork Valley and mountain communities gathered in Basalt, while the Denver metro area united in Washington Park for an incredible day of connection and support. These walks not only raised awareness for the Best Buddies mission but also strengthened our community, demonstrating the impact of friendship and inclusion.

Our Champion of the Year (COY) events were an incredible success, with 14 Champions rallying their networks to raise over $650,000 in support of Best Buddies programs. This annual event celebrates the dedication of local leaders who are committed to expanding opportunities for individuals with IDD. The funds raised will directly support school chapters, leadership training, employment programs, and community events, helping us continue our mission of inclusion across Colorado.

Looking Ahead As we move into 2025, our focus remains on expanding school programs, growing our Citizens adult friendship program, increasing employment opportunities, and continuing to strengthen leadership development. We are also excited to build upon our new initiatives, ensuring that more families, students, and employers are engaged in our mission. Thank you to everyone who has supported Best Buddies in Colorado—your dedication makes all of this possible. Here's to an even more impactful year ahead!

Rachael Fischer, State Director, Colorado

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Allie and **Taylor**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Allie & Taylor

One-To-One Friendships

Niwot High School, Niwot, Colorado

At Niwot High School, the Best Buddies program fosters meaningful friendships and promotes inclusion. Taylor, a sophomore, and Allie, a senior, have been paired for about a year, forming a strong bond beyond the classroom. From Starbucks runs to browsing LEGO sets at Target, their friendship is built on fun, support, and genuine companionship. Their story highlights how intentional matching in Best Buddies creates lasting connections that enrich students' lives.

For many high school students, loneliness can be overwhelming, especially for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), who often face barriers to social inclusion. Best Buddies bridges this gap by pairing students in one-to-one friendships, ensuring everyone has someone to share experiences with. In Colorado, the program has expanded significantly, with 13 active chapters and nearly 200 students participating in 1:1 friendships. This growth reflects a strong commitment to inclusion, creating communities where every student feels valued and connected.

One of Taylor's favorite memories was when Allie brought her service dog, Purdue, to a Best Buddies meeting, making it a special moment for everyone. Whether through small gestures or shared experiences, these friendships emphasize the importance of inclusion in high school and beyond. Programs like Best Buddies show that friendship isn't just about having fun—it's about being there for each other, embracing differences, and ensuring no one feels alone.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats CO

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**110** Participants	**11** Chapters	**88** Participants	**15** Chapters	**243** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
4 Chapters	**10** Participants	**220** Participants	**55** Participants



Alex and Paul have been buddies for three years and have enjoyed music festivals, museums, shopping, movies and even tea at the Boulder Dushanbe Teahouse.

Paul & Alexa
Friendship program Buddy Pair
Citizens, Denver, Colorado



Shivam, Best Buddies Ambassador

Shivam

Leadership Development

Castle Rock, Colorado

Before joining Best Buddies, Shivam often felt the weight of social isolation, longing for meaningful connections but unsure how to take that first step. That changed in 2021, when he became involved in the Best Buddies Friendship Program at Castle View High School. What started as a simple opportunity to make friends quickly turned into a life-changing experience. Today, Shivam has grown from being a buddy to a Champion, and now proudly serves as Colorado's first-ever State Ambassador for Best Buddies.

Shivam's journey into self-advocacy began when his Chapter Advisor, Erin Newton, introduced him to Best Buddies. Encouraged by the support of his peers and mentors, he realized he had a voice worth sharing. As an Ambassador, Shivam's goal is to advocate for inclusion and acceptance for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across Colorado. His role allows him to speak at events, inspire others, and promote opportunities for people with IDD to build friendships, find employment, and become active members of their communities.

Since joining Best Buddies, Shivam's confidence and outlook on life have transformed. Through his involvement, he has discovered his passion for music and languages, and now actively pursues opportunities that align with his interests. His experiences—such as speaking in front of large crowds and visiting CPR Classical Radio Studio—have fueled his belief that he, like anyone else, can achieve his dreams.

Shivam's message to others with IDD is simple: "Don't let others define your potential. You are capable, talented, and deserving of friendship and success." His journey is a testament to the power of inclusion, advocacy, and the lasting impact of Best Buddies.

> "Don't let others define your potential. You are capable, talented, and deserving of friendship and success."
> **- Shivam**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats CO

Ambassadors

3
Ambassadors

Promoters

11
Chapters

111
Participants

Transitions

3
Participants



Family Support

Launched in late 2024, Eunie's Buddies has already made a powerful impact across Colorado, generating excitement and filling a long-overdue gap in the community. Caregivers and mentors alike have shared how meaningful the program is—many expressing that they wish something like this had been available when their own journeys began. Across the board, participants have emphasized how essential this support system is for both caregivers and children. One mentor-mentee pair has already begun meeting in person, building the kind of connection they hoped for when they joined. These relationships are at the heart of Eunie's Buddies—offering encouragement, shared experience, and a sense of belonging. The program helps transform feelings of isolation into a network of genuine connections.

Since its launch, the program has enrolled 24 mentors and 22 mentees, built partnerships with 40 community organizations offering tailored services, and hosted eight community events that introduced over 1,000 people to the Best Buddies mission. Through social media, Eunie's Buddies has engaged more than 17,000 people, further amplifying awareness and connection.

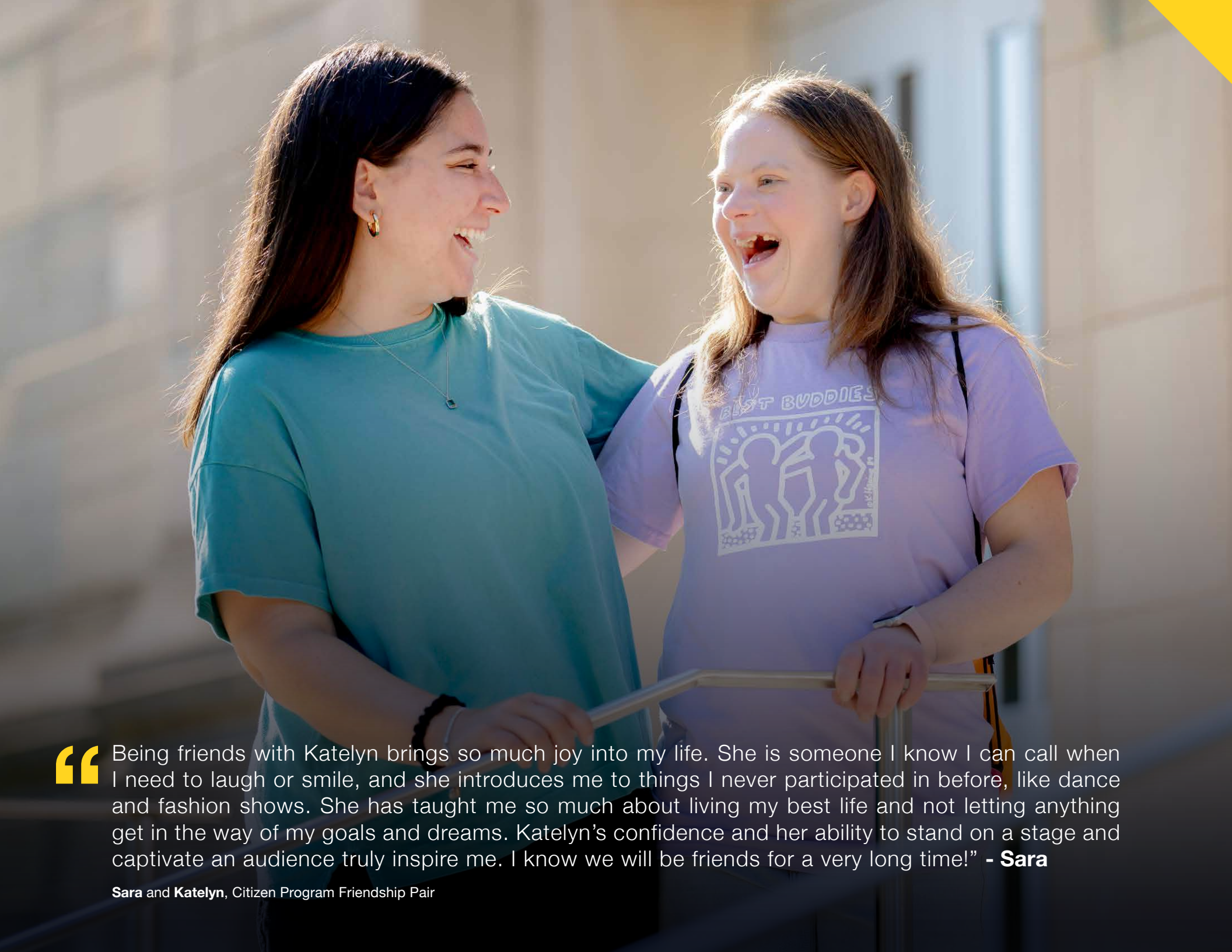
Looking ahead to 2025, the program aims to double mentor and mentee participation, create dozens of impactful caregiver-child matches, expand its presence at community events while hosting its own, and reach 100,000 people through digital outreach. Another priority will be growing the network of community partners to ensure families have access to comprehensive support. Eunie's Buddies is more than a program—it's a growing movement of care, connection, and hope for families navigating the IDD journey.

Family
Key Program Stats CO

Eunie's Buddies participants

4

Participaants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Connecticut







Connecticut Year in Review

2024 was an incredible year for Best Buddies in Connecticut (BBCT), marked by tremendous growth, meaningful connections, and mission-driven impact. From expanding school chapters and launching new initiatives like the Transitions program, to hosting unforgettable events like the Friendship Ball, Friendship Walks, and Champion of the Year, the BBCT community came together in powerful ways to support inclusion. We're also proud to share that our fundraising efforts were a resounding success, with every dollar going directly toward supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Our team worked tirelessly to strengthen and grow our foundation partnerships, expand our presence in schools, and create more leadership opportunities for our incredible volunteers. We launched the Transitions program to support job readiness, while also investing in the professional development of our staff to ensure sustainable leadership.

Through a strategic focus on school engagement, we opened seven new school chapters and reached nearly 3,000 individuals with and without IDD. We fostered growth in our Citizens program, established clear benchmarks for programmatic success, and continued to host both virtual and in-person events that bring our community together month after month.

The year started with our Friendship Ball, where close to 400 guests danced all afternoon in support of our mission. As one new parent shared, "My wife and I never thought we would be buying a prom dress for our daughter! This has been a truly amazing time, not only for our daughter but for us as a family." In the Spring, we added our first Best Buddies Friendship Walk in Fairfield County. With this new Friendship Walk, plus our Walk held at the Yard Goat stadium in Hartford, over 1,200 walkers registered and close to $120,000 was raised. It is a true testament to the volunteers that help move the mission forward. In October, people came out in their "Denim and Diamonds" to attend the Champion of the Year event. This year's Champions worked extremely hard to become the Champion of the Year. With the generous donors that contributed to the Champions, the silent and live auctions exceeded the fundraising goal. In total, 250 guests contributed to raise nearly $120,000.

Best Buddies in Connecticut ended 2024 on a high note and are anticipating an even stronger 2025 with plans to open more schools, advance the mission, offer more transition workshops, and achieve the program's highest financial goal to date. We extend heartfelt gratitude to all our friends, families, sponsors, volunteers, and participants for their invaluable support throughout the year. Thank you for making 2024 a truly memorable year for Best Buddies in Connecticut.

We're excited to see this momentum continue into 2025! The expansion of school friendship programs and anticipation of even larger events show that BBCT is laying a strong foundation for even greater impact. The dedication of our community—from volunteers to donors—has been essential to this success, and it's clear that everyone is deeply committed to advancing our mission of inclusion and connection.

Lezlye Zupkus, State Director, Connecticut
Connecticut Office
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Taylor and **Addy**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Taylor & Addy

One-To-One Friendships

Ellington High School, Ellington, CT

Before joining Best Buddies, life felt different for both Taylor and Addy. For Taylor, things were often "quiet," and she was deeply affected by how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)—like her sister—were sometimes treated. "It hurt to see people disrespect each other," she recalled. That changed when she joined Best Buddies. Being matched with Addy opened her heart even more. "I know she'll always be there for me," Taylor said. For Addy, who often felt overlooked by her peers, the program was a turning point. "Now I feel seen," she shared.

Since being matched a year ago, Taylor and Addy have become inseparable. They love going to basketball games together, with Taylor proudly cheering for Addy as she performs with the cheer squad. "I know we'll always cheer each other on," Taylor said. Whether they're crafting, listening to music, or just hanging out, their friendship is filled with joy and mutual support. "I always know I'll have a close friend," Taylor said, describing Addy as "sweet, caring, and always herself." Addy added, "She makes me feel special, and we always have fun."

Best Buddies has been transformative for both of them. For Taylor, it brought comfort and hope—knowing that people like her sister and Addy are valued and celebrated. "It's taught me how special everyone is," she said. For Addy, it created a sense of belonging. "Other people at school see and acknowledge me now," she said.

At Ellington High, Taylor and Addy's friendship has become an inspiring example of what true connection looks like. Their bond reminds everyone of the power of kindness, inclusion, and the importance of being seen and valued for exactly who you are.

> "She makes me feel special, and we always have fun." **- Addy**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats CT

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**395** Participants	**11** Chapters	**333** Participants	**33** Chapters	**1608** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
9 Chapters	**614** Participants	**126** Participants	**115** Participants



“Bobby and I have been matched for 4 years, and my college experience wouldn’t be the same without him. He is my best friend, and I am so glad I got to meet him through Best Buddies. I love to see him every week and we bond over bowling and pizza. Bobby is so positive and always sees the good in others, just being around him makes me feel better. Everyone should have a friend like Bobby!” **- Brooklyn**

Brooklyn & **Bobby**, Friendship Program Buddy Pair
Quinnipiac University, Hamden, CT



Jimmy, Best Buddies Ambassador

Jimmy

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Willimantic, CT

Before I joined Best Buddies, my life was good—I had a few friends and kept mostly to myself. But I was very shy and often unsure of myself. Best Buddies opened new doors for me, helping me build more meaningful connections and giving me the confidence to speak up and advocate for myself.

I've known Bill White, who works for Best Buddies, for several years, and we've become good friends. He encouraged me to join the Best Buddies Citizens program. At first, I was hesitant. But when Bill invited me to the Best Buddies Connecticut Friendship Ball in March 2024, everything changed. I fell in love with the program that night and joined right away.

Since then, I've become an active member of Best Buddies Citizens. I love attending the monthly in-person events and look forward to our virtual Game Nights on Zoom. In addition, I'm proud to serve as a Best Buddies Connecticut state ambassador. I participated in Ambassador Trainings in May and October 2024 and was part of the first group to attend the inaugural Best Buddies Transitions Trainings.

Best Buddies has had a huge impact on my life. As a Mission Partner alongside Desirae Lee, I helped raise over $5,000 for Best Buddies Connecticut during the Champion of the Year Gala in October 2024. I've also participated in several tabling events, promoting BBCT, recruiting volunteers, and spreading awareness about our friendship programs.

As an ambassador, my goal is to promote inclusion and help people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities become strong self-advocates. I'm passionate about supporting the Best Buddies mission and empowering others with IDD to thrive.

> "As a member of Best Buddies and an Ambassador, my goal is to promote inclusion and help people with and without IDD become great self-advocates." **- Jimmy**

Leadership Development Key Program Stats CT

Ambassadors	Promoters	
38	**10**	**450**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Delaware







Delaware Year in Review

Reflecting on 2024, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the incredible strides we've made together. This year brought growth, meaningful connections, and a strengthened commitment to inclusion. Thanks to the unwavering support of our volunteers, partners, and participants, we expanded programs, forged new partnerships, and deepened our impact for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across Delaware.

Our school and adult Citizens chapters flourished. We currently have 30 school chapters serving 970 student participants. We hosted two trainings where 35 student leaders and advisors were trained in advocacy and leadership. These school chapters hosted over 180 events combined in 2024! Our Adult program serves over 400 members and held monthly inclusive gatherings, bringing together over 70 people with and without IDD at each event.

A 2024 highlight was the Best Buddies Friendship Walk at Frawley Stadium, where 400+ attendees helped raise an incredible $46,000! It was a day of joy and celebration, recognizing our dedicated student leaders and volunteers. Another milestone was the Champion of the Year Gala, where we set a new fundraising record of over $56,000. With 120+ guests in attendance, we shared heartfelt stories, laughter, and a vision of inclusion that continues to drive our mission forward.

Looking ahead to 2025, we are excited to build on this momentum—expanding into new schools, particularly within the Brandywine School District, and strengthening our existing chapters to increase participation in our Friendship Walk and Gala.

None of this would be possible without our incredible Best Buddies Delaware community. As we embark on another year of growth, we remain committed to fostering a world where everyone is valued, included, and celebrated.

Ellie Townsend, Director of Programs, Delaware

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TJ and **Jesus**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Jesus & TJ

One-To-One Friendships

Thomas McKean High School, New Castle, DE

At Thomas McKean High School, Jesus and TJ's friendship is more than just a bond—it's a partnership that strengthens their Best Buddies chapter and uplifts those around them. From the moment they met at unified track practice, their connection grew into something special.

"My friendship with TJ has been incredibly exceptional, and I've grown as a person because of it," Jesus shares. "I chose him as Buddy Director because of his infectious joy and charisma. He's someone you can't help but want to talk to." Together, they work to help other students build friendships and communicate with their buddies.

"What I like about my friendship with Jesus is that we work great as a team helping other students learn how to communicate with their buddies," TJ adds. Their leadership has left a lasting impact, inspiring their peers to step outside their comfort zones.

Beyond their leadership, Jesus and TJ love spending time together. Whether it's participating in Bocce, running side by side in the Reindeer Run, or sharing laughs in Unified PE class, every moment strengthens their bond. "We always have fun, no matter what we're doing," Jesus says with a grin.

Their excitement is building for their upcoming field trip to Washington, D.C. "We can't wait to explore the city together," TJ says. "It'll be an adventure." But one of the most anticipated moments is the Buddy Ball. "We've got some big plans for that night," Jesus says.

One thing Jesus admires most about TJ is his passion. "His enthusiasm for My Little Pony is inspiring, and it brings me joy to see him so passionate about it," he says. As seniors, their time in high school is winding down, but their friendship remains strong. "I'm looking forward to graduating with him this June, alongside my Buddy Match, Irving Chavez," Jesus says. "And I think you'll really enjoy meeting TJ at the Friendship Dance—he's someone who can light up a room."

Through Best Buddies, Jesus and TJ have built a friendship rooted in teamwork, joy, and a shared commitment to inclusion—one that will last far beyond graduation.

> "I think you'll really enjoy meeting TJ at the Friendship Dance—he's someone who can light up a room." **- Jesus**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats DE

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
12 Chapters	**287** Participants	**7** Chapters	**206** Participants	**11** Chapters	**436** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
1 Chapters	**46** Participants	**433** Participants	**25** Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Bill and **Dave**

Bill

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Wilmington, DE

Hello, I'm Bill Ziegler, and I've had the honor of being part of the Best Buddies Bank of America Chapter in Delaware for the past 14 years. For all these years, I've been matched with my incredible buddy, Dave. From the very beginning, we hit it off and I've loved spending time with him ever since. Whether it's hanging out, having a laugh, or just catching up, I always look forward to the time we get to spend together.

Over the years, I've become close with Dave's wonderful wife, Marie, and their kids, Kelsey and Kyle. They've become like family to me, and I feel so lucky to be part of their lives. We've shared so many great memories, and I truly cherish our connection.

I also love the Best Buddies events, especially the monthly gatherings and the Friendship Walk. It's such a great way to meet new people and strengthen those bonds we've built. One of my proudest moments was running for Champion of the Year in 2013 for Best Buddies Delaware—and I actually won! That experience was life-changing and gave me even more confidence, both personally and in my connections with others.

Best Buddies has been such an important part of my life. It's not just about forming friendships, but also about growing as a person and learning how to be a better friend. It helped me make friends as an adult, and I'm forever grateful for that. If you're considering joining, I can't recommend it enough. It's been an incredible journey, and I'm excited for what's still to come.

> "One of my proudest moments was running for Champion of the Year in 2013 for Best Buddies Delaware—and I actually won! That experience was life-changing and gave me even more confidence, both personally and in my connections with others. " **- Bill**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats DE

Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**13**	**303**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Florida







Florida Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in Florida demonstrated the boundless power of connection, creating vibrant opportunities for individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Across 128 cities, our friendship programs brought together 8,824 participants in 265 schools and colleges, building a statewide movement of inclusion, empathy, and empowerment. At the core of everything we do are the friendships that break barriers and spark possibilities. These life changing relationships are the foundation of the Best Buddies experience—fostering belonging, building confidence, and transforming communities.

The Best Buddies Transition Program, designed to equip students aged 14–21 with IDD to transition seamlessly into life after graduation, entered its sixth year in 2024. Hosting 10 cohorts and 150 students statewide, we empowered students to forge paths tailored to their goals, from employment to further education, certification courses, or volunteerism. Thanks to the visionary support of our generous partners, the program expanded in 2024 to new regions across Florida, amplifying its reach and impact.

Our focus on employment continues to change lives through the Best Buddies Jobs program. Operating in six Florida markets, this initiative supported 232 individuals with IDD in securing or maintaining meaningful jobs. By partnering with companies like Canteen, Michaels, and VoLo Foundation, we are not only creating economic opportunities but also redefining workplace inclusion.

Best Buddies staff members representing our seven regional offices were busy hosting workshops, training sessions, and events that empowered participants and student leaders to thrive. A standout moment was the Best Buddies Leadership Conference in Bloomington, Indiana, where Florida's student delegation came together to exchange ideas, celebrate successes, and grow as leaders. Additionally, through the Best Buddies Ambassador program, more than 80 participants gained the skills to share their stories and advocate for inclusion in their communities.

As always, our two signature events: Friendship Walk and Champion of the Year Gala, raised awareness and funds (over $2 million dollars collectively) while bringing out thousands of community supporters all championing the Best Buddies mission of friendship and inclusion.

The Friendship Ball was a standout moment of the year—a night to remember where over 1,000 students from across the state came together to celebrate the friendships and connections that make Best Buddies so impactful. Joyful, inclusive, and inspiring, this annual event beautifully reflected the spirit of the year: friendships that change lives.

Finally, with the addition of a new organization wide pillar: Best Buddies Family Support, the Miami market was proud to launch Eunie's Buddies. This initiative connects experienced parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) with new parents—whether they are expecting, have recently welcomed a baby, or are navigating a new diagnosis for a child up to age eight. Eunie's Buddies provides a framework offering parents and caregivers encouragement, emotional support, and valuable resources.

As we close the chapter on 2024, we are energized by what lies ahead. Together with our volunteers, donors, corporate champions, and school partners, we are creating a future where every individual is seen, valued, and empowered to thrive.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we'll continue to rewrite what's possible for individuals with IDD—one friendship, one opportunity, and one milestone at a time.

Andi Allen, State Director, Florida
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Raffy and **Emma**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Raffy & Emma

One-To-One Friendships

Miami, FL

Before becoming involved with Best Buddies, Emma's life was already deeply connected to Raffy's. Born just months apart, they sometimes shared a crib, as their mothers were best friends. Emma says she, "never had to think about the word inclusion because it was only normal (as it should be) that Raffy was part of my life." As Emma grew, she began to understand what an (IDD) intellectual and developmental disability meant, but to her, it only made Raffy even more special. Emma's mom recalls how, as a child, Emma would help feed Raffy by holding her g-tube. Their friendship was organic and simply part of Emma's life. Even before officially joining Best Buddies, Emma was already learning how incredible it is to build meaningful connections with someone like Raffy.

Best Buddies has helped Emma better understand what an IDD is and its impacts on an individual's life and challenges. This has allowed her to be a better friend to Raffy. Emma and Raffy enjoy many activities together, such as going to the beach, dinners, arts and crafts, and spending holidays and family trips together. What Emma loves most about her friendship with Raffy is Raffy's ability to make everyone laugh. Raffy's positivity is contagious, and being around her reminds Emma to find happiness in the little things.

Raffy says, "Dear Best Buddies I hope your well. love to celebrate Valentine's Day with Emma. I love how we celebrate holidays like when Santa came to Emma's house and got Emma presents. My favorite part of friendship is having fun with my friend. She babysits me. I like to do activities with Emma. Have a great day Best Buddies we all love you, love Raffy."

As a proud participant in the Best Buddies Friendship program, Emma has had the opportunity to strengthen the bond she and Raffy already shared. Since officially joining Best Buddies, her life has changed in so many positive ways because she now has the opportunity to spend even more time with Raffy. Best Buddies has helped Emma become more aware of the impact she can have on creating an inclusive community for Raffy and others like her. Emma says, "Raffy inspires me every day with her joyful spirit and resilience, and even the moments I can see her struggling and powering through. Whether we're laughing over something silly, making crafts, or just spending time together, every moment is filled with love and appreciation. She truly cares for everyone. Over the years, Best Buddies has become more than just a program to me, it's a celebration of the unique bond Raffy and I share. This journey has reinforced my belief in the power of friendship to create a better, more inclusive world."

> "Raffy inspires me every day with her joyful spirit and resilience" **- Emma**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats FL

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
47 Chapters	**393** Participants	**87** Chapters	**834** Participants	**178** Chapters	**6,925** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
15 Chapters	**928** Participants	**1,313** Participants	**540** Participants



Johnathan, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Office Depot, Boyton Beach

Johnathan

Integrated Employment

Office Depot, Boynton Beach, FL

Jonathan's journey is a powerful reminder of how determination, when met with the right support, can lead to meaningful transformation. Motivated to find purposeful work and build lasting friendships, Jonathan leaned on his support system—and it was his sister who introduced him to Best Buddies. From that moment, everything started to change.

Through the Citizens program, Jonathan began forming new friendships, and with the help of the Jobs Program, he secured a part-time position at Office Depot. There, he's built strong connections with his coworkers, developed valuable job skills, and grown more confident in both communication and teamwork. Jonathan says the best part of his job is the people—mentors who are always kind, patient, and ready to teach him something new.

Jonathan credits much of his drive to his mother, who instilled in him the importance of setting goals and staying motivated. That foundation fuels his ambitions, including dreams of living independently and one day holding a full-time position.

Since joining Best Buddies, Jonathan has not only found meaningful work and lasting friendships, but also the confidence to express his needs and advocate for himself. His future is bright, and his story is just getting started.

> "My life with Best Buddies has been amazing. Without Best Buddies, I wouldn't have found a job I enjoy or the great friendships I now have." **- Johnathan**

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats FL

Jobs

201
Participants Employed

251
Participants



Joie, Best Buddies Ambassador

Joie

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Tampa, FL

Joie's journey with Best Buddies began in 2021 at the University of Central Florida, where she discovered a welcoming and supportive community that encouraged her to be her authentic self. Now a State Ambassador and active Citizen's participant, her story highlights the journey of finding her voice, gaining self-confidence, and learning to advocate for others.

Growing up with SMA and being neurodivergent, Joie faced many challenges, and sometimes those challenges made her feel as if she was all alone. Despite having people around that cared about her, Joie still felt a barrier that was hard to overcome. She dreamt of the day that she would find friends that would see past her wheelchair and disability and see the real Joie- someone full of passion, optimism, humor, and dreams.

From the first Best Buddies event she attended, Joie was welcomed with open arms and without question. In that moment, Joie realized that she no longer had to stand on the outside looking in—Best Buddies had become her community and her home.

This initial impact inspired Joie to continue participating in the program, eventually becoming involved with the Tampa Citizens chapter, and challenging herself to develop her leadership skills so that she could serve as an ambassador and advocate for others like herself. Through Best Buddies, Joie learned that the challenges she faces do not define her — they are just a part of her story.

> "Through Best Buddies, Joie learned that the challenges she faces do not define her — they are just a part of her story. " **- Joie**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats FL

Ambassadors

150
Ambassadors

Promoters

113
Chapters

1,101
Participants

Transitions

109
Participants



Michael, Best Buddies Living resident

Michael

Best Buddies Living Resident

Miami, FL

In 2024, Michael moved into Best Buddies Living, however this was far from his first Best Buddies experience. Michael first joined Best Buddies in 2016 where he participated in a college friendship chapter. Michael made genuine friendships with his peer buddies and later became the Buddy Director of his college chapter. Currently, Michael is still serving on his university's executive board.

"Before Best Buddies, I did not have many extracurricular things to do," said Michael. "Best Buddies has changed my life by providing me with leadership opportunities."

Before Best Buddies Living, Michael was living with his parents.

"I moved into Best Buddies Living to practice being independent," Michael shared. "Since moving in, I've learned so many new skills—from cleaning and cooking on my own to managing daily life independently." In addition to living at Best Buddies Living, Michael works full-time as an Athlete Director, a role he's held for over nine years, where he helps organize and lead fitness classes.

What truly sets Best Buddies Living apart is the sense of community it fosters. Residents come together each week for shared dinners and social events, like local fairs and sports competitions. "My favorite part of living here is building new friendships with the people around me," Michael said. "I love cooking with other residents and spending time together during our group dinners and events."

From meaningful friendships to fulfilling daily routines, Michael has found both independence and connection at Best Buddies Living. "If you're a person with a disability, I encourage you to consider Best Buddies Living," he said. "This program gives you the opportunity to live on your own and grow in ways you never imagined."

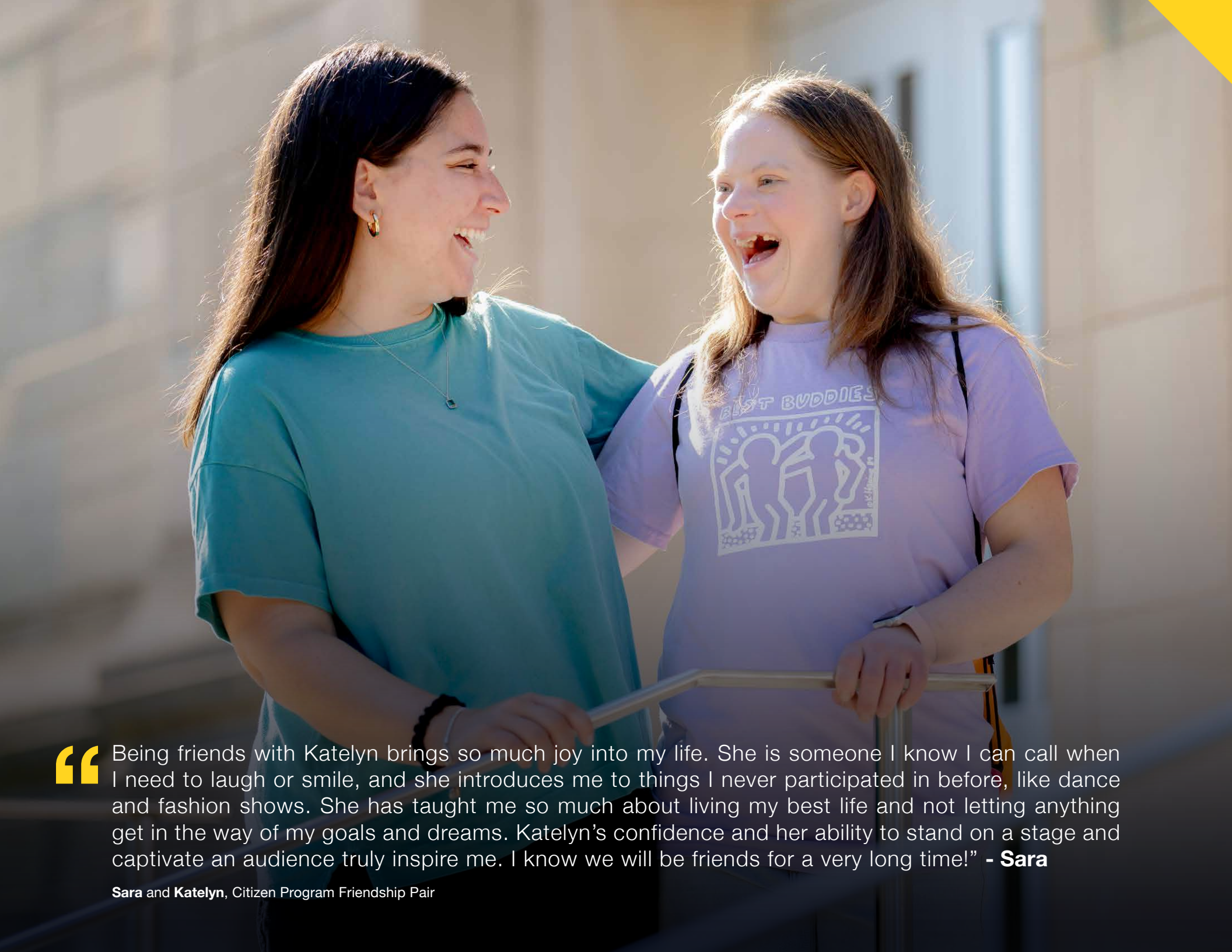
Inclusive Living
Key Program Stats FL

Living

1
Residences

5
Participants

> "Since moving in, I've learned so many new skills—from cleaning and cooking on my own to managing daily life independently." **- Michael**



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Georgia







Georgia Year in Review

At the start of 2024, Best Buddies in Georgia set ambitious goals to expand its programs and impact across the state. Under the leadership of State Director Katie Stanton and with guidance from the Best Buddies in Georgia Advisory Board, we laid a strong foundation for growth that carried throughout the year.

By year's end, our Friendship Schools program grew from 35 to 50 schools, fostering more inclusive communities. The Citizens program reached 111 people with 34 matches. Our Leadership Development efforts exceeded expectations in 2024, with five successful trainings that equipped 30 participants with essential leadership skills. The Jobs Program also surpassed its goals—enrolling 12 participants and securing seven job placements, particularly in the Sports & Entertainment and Arts & Culture sectors. Best Buddies Living continued to grow, now home to six residents, further advancing our mission to provide inclusive and meaningful independent living opportunities.

Across Georgia, Best Buddies Friendship Walks united communities in a powerful celebration of inclusion. On April 20, 548 walkers gathered at Blackburn Park for the Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Atlanta, raising $57,312. The excitement continued with our Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Coastal Georgia on April 21 in Guyton, where 260 participants walked at South Effingham High School, raising $10,340. The series wrapped up on April 28 with the Best Buddies Friendship Walk: Middle Georgia at Middle Georgia State University in Macon, with 51 walkers raising $3,021.

Our 2024 Champion of the Year event, held November 1 at the historic Biltmore, was an unforgettable Bridgerton-inspired evening. Guests enjoyed a Georgia-inspired dinner provided by our sponsor, Touchpoint, before dancing the night away. Thanks to our generous community, the event raised $139,551. Eleven champion pairs took the stage, showcasing the power of inclusion, with Martha Haythorn and Hannah Jenkins crowned Champions of the Year.

Looking ahead, 2025 will be even bigger. Best Buddies in Georgia will expand to reach 60 schools, place 12 additional job participants in meaningful employment, and bring our Best Buddies Living program residential program to full capacity with nine residents and five members in both male- and female-identifying living units. With fundraising goals of $85,000 from our Friendship Walks and over $200,000 from Champion of the Year, we're building the resources needed to sustain and grow our mission. With our dedicated team and incredible community, 2025 will be a year of unprecedented success!

Stephen Barwick, State Director, Georgia

Best Buddies in Georgia
3379 Peachtree Rd NE, Suite 700, Atlanta, GA 30326
P 312-203-9626



Eric and **Christ**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Christ & Eric

One-To-One Friendships

Johns Creek High School, Johns Creek, GA

Before joining Best Buddies, Eric had little experience with people with disabilities. "I'd never really had much contact with individuals with disabilities," he admitted. "I didn't fully understand their experiences, but that changed when he met Christ through Best Buddies in October 2024.

Now, their friendship is filled with laughter and connection. "Eric and I play games like Pop the Pig, and he eats lunch with me," Christ shared. "Eric is friendly and nice." For Eric, lunchtime with Christ is a highlight of his day. "I always try to meet up with him, stand in line together, and sit with him until he starts eating," he said. "The best part of our friendship is that Christ is always so happy—it's contagious. If I'm having a rough day, spending time with him turns it around. He's always smiling and laughing."

Since joining Best Buddies, Eric's perspective on inclusion and empathy has deepened. "I sympathize with people with disabilities so much more now," he shared. "I understand their experiences better, and it gives me something to look forward to every day."

Christ and Eric love attending Best Buddies events, from parties to field trips, but what matters most is simply being together. "I like the parties and trips with my buddy," Christ said. "I want to stay in Best Buddies with Eric."

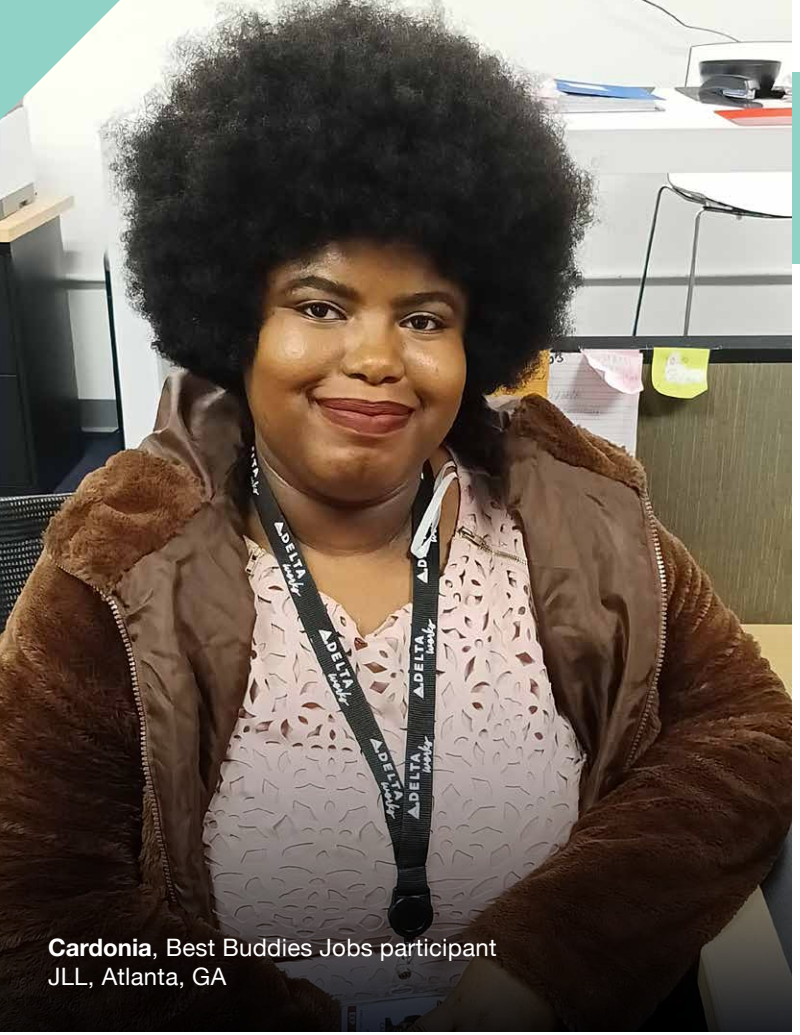
Though their bond is just months old, it has made a lasting impact. Whether playing games or catching up over lunch, their friendship embodies Best Buddies' mission. As Eric put it, "Christ is such a sweet kid—he always finds something to laugh about. I love that. I'm so glad I joined Best Buddies."

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats GA

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
14 Chapters	**556** Participants	**10** Chapters	**285** Participants	**21** Chapters	**1,084** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
6 Chapters	**190** Participants	**116** Participants	**90** Participants

> "The best part of our friendship is that Christ is always so happy—it's contagious. If I'm having a rough day, spending time with him turns it around. He's always smiling and laughing." **- Eric**



Cardonia, Best Buddies Jobs participant
JLL, Atlanta, GA

Cardonia

Integrated Employment

JLL, Atlanta, GA

Before joining Best Buddies, my life felt like a waiting game when it came to finding job opportunities. Everything changed when I got involved with Project SEARCH during an internship in Miami, Florida. That experience led me to meet my first jobs coach, Christopher Dourov, and eventually to my very first job—with Best Buddies in Miami. From there, a whole new chapter of growth and opportunity began.

Today, I work at JLL, and my mindset remains the same: grow, learn, and adapt. Having a job has helped me thrive and gain a true sense of independence. I really enjoy the variety and consistency in my daily tasks—from picking up packages and managing inventory to restocking documents and checking the gym area. Each responsibility has helped me sharpen my attention to detail and build valuable skills.

What I love most about my job is the environment—the diversity, the positive attitudes, and the shared desire for growth and improvement. It's a place where I feel supported and motivated.

Since starting this journey, I've stepped outside of my comfort zone and developed a drive to learn more and do more in my role. Looking ahead, my personal goals include continuing to improve my health and becoming even more independent.

Best Buddies has helped me unlock my potential and I'm just getting started.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats GA

Jobs

7
Participants Employed

14
Participants

> "What I love most about my job is the environment—the diversity, the positive attitudes, and the shared desire for growth and improvement. It's a place where I feel supported and motivated." **- Cardonia**



Adrew, Best Buddies Ambassador

Andrew

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Atlanta, GA

Before I joined Best Buddies, I did not have many friends. I often felt like I was on the outside looking in, wishing I had more people to connect with. That all changed in 2008 when I joined the Best Buddies chapter at Emory University. Since then, I've also become a part of Best Buddies Citizens, expanding my community even further.

In 2018, the Emory Best Buddies chapter saw something in me that I hadn't yet recognized in myself—they named me an ambassador. That moment changed everything. It was the first time I truly realized I wasn't just a participant; I had the potential to lead. I stepped into that role not as a follower, but as someone who could inspire and uplift others, both within my chapter and beyond. I'm committed to using my voice to raise awareness and help build a more inclusive community—one where true friendships can grow and everyone feels seen, valued, and connected.

Since officially joining Best Buddies, my life has changed for the better. I've made more friends, spent more time socializing, and felt a true sense of belonging. What started as a simple step toward meeting new people became a journey of personal growth, confidence, and leadership.

My message to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is to be seen and heard! You are capable of leading, not just within the disability community, but in every community. Step up, take charge, and show the world what you can do. Go Best Buddies!

> "I'm committed to using my voice to raise awareness and help build a more inclusive community—one where true friendships can grow and everyone feels seen, valued, and connected." **- Adrew**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats GA

Ambassadors

8
Ambassadors

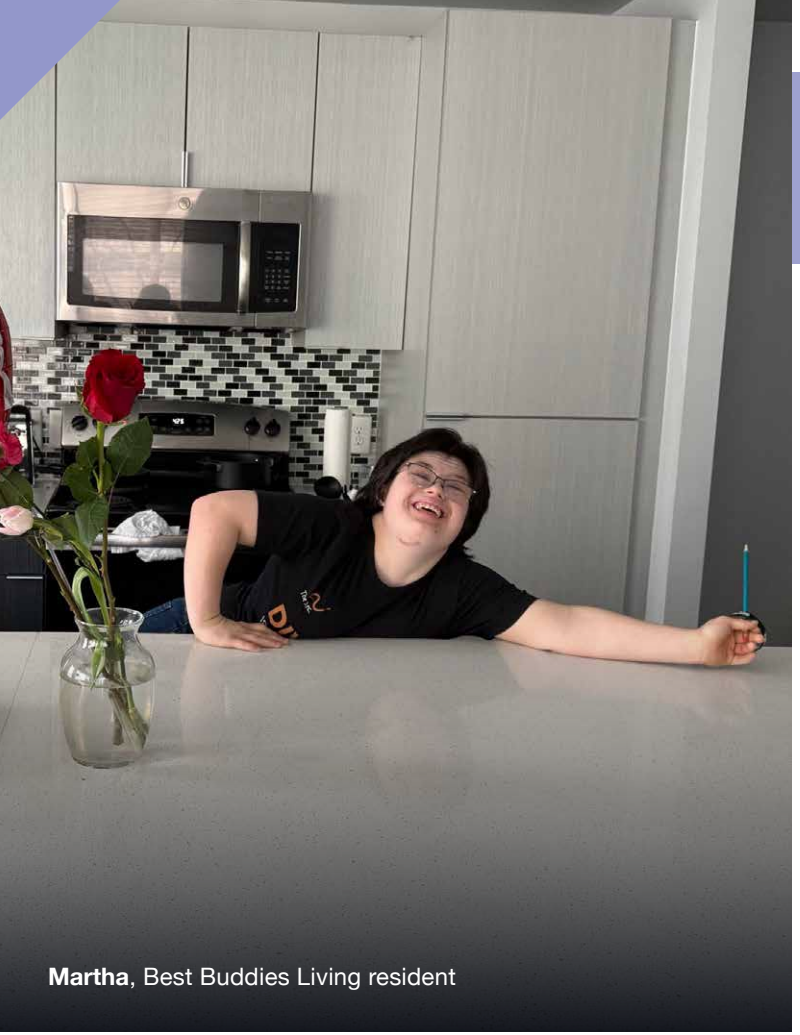
Promoters

18
Chapters

630
Participants

Transitions

105
Participants



Martha, Best Buddies Living resident

Martha

Best Buddies Living Resident

The Standard, Atlanta, GA

Before joining Best Buddies, I lived in an apartment behind my parents' house. I became part of the Best Buddies Living program to gain experience living in a larger apartment and taking on more personal responsibilities. Now, I'm ready to begin my journey toward independent living at the Standard!

My favorite part of the Best Buddies Living program is having access to fun social events and convenient transportation—without needing to use my debit card. I've improved at keeping both my kitchen and personal space clean. I'm also making more of an effort with my personal hygiene and putting together professional outfits for work. I love our group dinners, weekly public outings at Atlantic Station, and participating in Ambassador Trainings with my wonderful Best Buddy, Hannah.

Currently, I work at the Georgia State Capitol, assisting with hospitality and supporting the Lieutenant Governor's policy intern in tracking Senate bills and resolutions. Through Best Buddies, I continue to build friendships and connections.

The Best Buddies Living program helps you prove to yourself that you can be accountable, responsible, and self-motivated. But you're never alone—you still have a support system, including one-on-one meetings with the Best Buddies Living Program Manager. You also learn how to live with roommates and develop meaningful friendships. Since moving in, I feel more confident than ever, and I'm proud to continue growing in this journey!

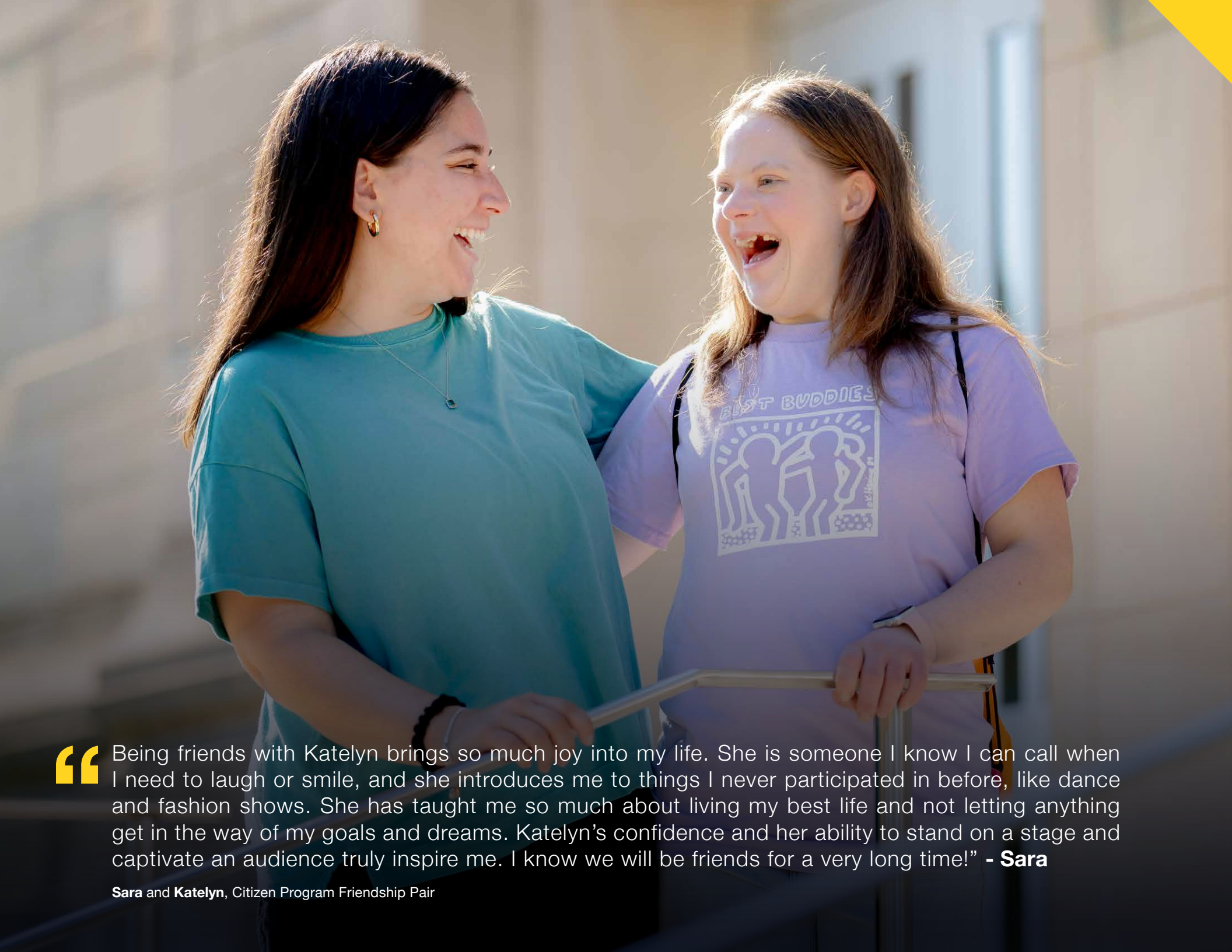
> "Since moving in, I feel more confident than ever, and I'm proud to continue growing in this journey!" **- Martha**

Inclusive Living
Key Program Stats GA

Living

1
Residences

9
Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Hawaii







Hawaii Year in Review

2024 has brought growth and learning opportunities for Best Buddies in Hawai'i. We are so grateful to have amazing volunteers and ambassadors who continue to spread the mission of inclusion. The staff at Best Buddies in Hawai'i (BBHI) have soared in expanding friendship programs with 2 new elementary schools, providing programmatic support for over 400 participants with and with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), and promoter chapters like Punahou School and University Laboratory School engaging in projects that support disability awareness.

BBHI traveled to Indiana University with 12 participants for the annual Best Buddies International Leadership Conference. It was amazing to see an increase in Ambassadors learning from their peers and developing their platforms. We also hosted our first Friendship Ball at the Blue Note Hawai'i in November. This spectacular evening provided 75 participants with the opportunity to dress in high fashion, celebrate over great food, meet and network with new and old friends while dancing the night away. Having this event struck opportunities for independence for our participants to make new friends and to be themselves.

The annual Best Buddies Friendship Walk on O'ahu, Maui and Hawai'i Island hosted over 500 Best Buddies participants and their families at local malls, parks and beaches this past year. This event brought the community together when it needed it most and we are thankful to our amazing volunteers, supporters, and generous donors and partners. The statewide event raised $39,000.00 to support the programs in Hawai'i. We look forward to raising more in 2025 and engaging our community to support opening more programs.

On behalf of all of us at Best Buddies in Hawai'i we are grateful for our advisory board, government funders, generous individual donors, and amazing businesses partners. We send thanks to all grantors who donate through the Hawai'i Community Foundation, Bank of Hawaii, and Aloha and Maui United Way organizations. The generosity of Kaiser Permanente Health Plan, Inc. allowed BBHI to open Best Buddies Transitions, an adapted workforce readiness program.

Moving into 2025, we intend to build on the momentum generated by these successes of our programs and events in Hawai'i. Thank you, we look forward to celebrating inclusion and friendship with you all. Join us for another year of mission-driven impact!

Elizabeth Mahoe, Director, Mission Advancement

Best Buddies Hawaii
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E hawaii@bestbuddies.org



Aya and **Melissa**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Aya & Melissa

One-To-One Friendships

O□ahu Citizens, Honolulu, HI

Aya and Melissa are a powerful example of the Best Buddies mission in action. Before joining Best Buddies, Melissa says, “I didn’t have much opportunity to meet new people who have common interests. I really enjoy interacting with people with diverse abilities and finding ways to be involved in my community. Best Buddies was the perfect fit!”

The two friends enjoy spending time together – most of all, sharing their love of movies and good food. Aya says, “My buddy, Melissa, is nice, friendly and kind. She shares her popcorn with me at the movies. I like to go out to movies and restaurants with her and talk with her.” Melissa adds, “I enjoy how much I learn from having Aya as a buddy. She has introduced me to so many things I hadn’t been exposed to before, such as J-pop and K-pop.”

Aya joined O‘ahu Citizens in 2022 and was matched the next year with Melissa, who has been a member since 2021. Both regularly participate in monthly Citizens group outings, and Melissa also serves as a Best Buddies Advisory Board member for Hawai□i. Melissa says, “I enjoy going to Citizens events with Aya and on group outings where we can all get to know one another better. It’s also great when we discover common interests with other buddy pairs and expand our friendship circle. Aya and I are looking forward to walking together at the upcoming Friendship Walk.”

The impact of Best Buddies for this pair of friends cannot be understated. Best Buddies not only facilitates enriching friendships like Melissa and Aya’s but can also be a crucial link to fostering a real sense of community and belonging. Indeed, Aya attests, “After joining Best Buddies, I have more friends, and I can make new friends.”

> “After joining Best Buddies, I have more friends, and I can make new friends” **- Aya**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats HI

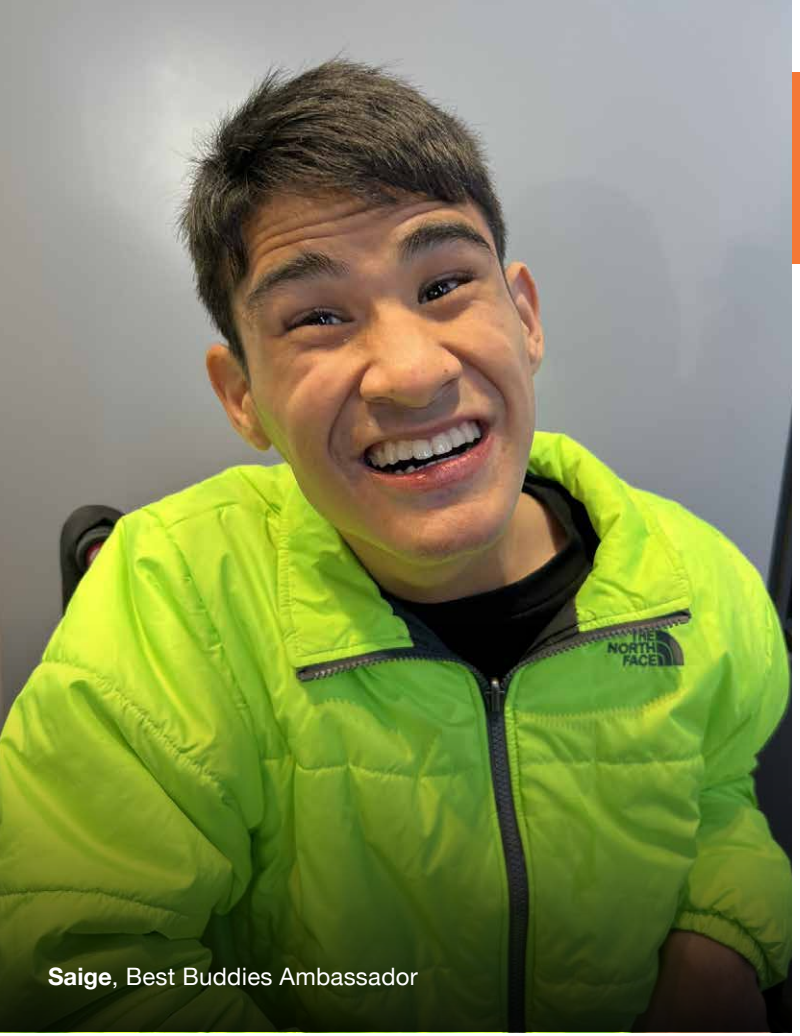
Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
4 Chapters	**54** Participants	**12** Chapters	**32** Participants	**19** Chapters	**221** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
5 Chapters	**93** Participants	**71** Participants	**26** Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Saige, Best Buddies Ambassador

Saige

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Honolulu, HI

My name is Saige, and I'm a proud Ambassador for Best Buddies in Hawai'i and a member of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College Friendship Chapter. I have Cerebral Palsy and use a communication device called an Accent, made by PRC. I'm 24 years old and have been involved with Best Buddies for over five years. I first joined at Mililani High School, where I was matched with my very first buddy, Diana, and began participating in activities that made me feel truly connected.

I joined Best Buddies because I wanted to be part of something meaningful—a place where I could grow, make new friends, and inspire others with disabilities. Being involved in monthly group activities and spending time with my college friends brings me real joy. Best Buddies has shown me how powerful it is when we come together, share our ideas, and create a community where everyone belongs.

The organization also offers virtual activities that help us stay connected across the state, while also giving us the chance to participate from home. We meet people from all walks of life and connect with community members who offer valuable resources and professional growth opportunities.

One of the most meaningful moments in my journey was speaking at the Best Buddies Friendship Walk. But my biggest dream came true in July 2024 when I traveled to Indiana with my friends from Hawai'i to attend the Best Buddies Leadership Conference as a State Ambassador. There, I met hundreds of people from around the world who share the same mission of inclusion.

Best Buddies gives me purpose. It's helped me become not only a friend to many, but also a mentor and a self-advocate. "Building others up and helping them get connected is one of my greatest accomplishments." My challenge to you is this: if you haven't joined Best Buddies yet, get involved and learn how you can make a difference through inclusion.

> "Best Buddies has shown me how powerful it is when we come together, share our ideas, and create a community where everyone belongs." **- Saige**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats HI

Ambassadors	Promoters	
20	**9**	**85**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Illinois







Illinois Year in Review

Best Buddies in Illinois continues to provide program participants with opportunities and resources to overcome the social and economic isolation that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) face every day. Our work in Illinois supports social engagement and mental well-being by facilitating friendships, fostering leadership development, and supporting inclusive employment throughout Illinois.

We closed out 2024 with 155 active school Friendship chapters across Illinois—a powerful milestone that reflects the strength and reach of our mission. The true impact of these chapters is seen in the meaningful friendships formed and the inclusive events hosted in schools across the state. One standout example is Andrew and Allison from Centennial High School in Champaign. Their connection embodies how friendship can transform school communities and drive a culture of inclusion throughout Illinois.

We also supported new Ambassador leaders through numerous training events and then as active voices in their communities. State Ambassador Zach Fintel proudly spoke at events in the Chicago area, and was one of the many participants again featured in the commercial featuring Best Buddies' national partnership with Jersey Mike's Subs.

Staff are leading supplemental hands-on training to 51 students in High School Transition programs who are now seeking more advanced workplace opportunities thanks to Best Buddies. The Best Buddies Jobs team placed 28 people into integrated employment in Illinois during 2024, including participants like Jeet Dave, who are improving their workplaces and are valuable members of their teams. These placements are also helping our participants achieve their personal and financial goals.

Our core mission pillars united communities at four Friendship Walks held in Chicago, Normal, Champaign, and Will County, where nearly 2,200 participants came together to celebrate inclusion and friendship. At the Chicago Marathon, 65 dedicated runners took to the course to champion our cause. We also raised nearly $500,000 through our Galas in Chicago and Peoria led by our twenty-one Champions including Grand Champions Nicole Marty and Joey O'Brien. This remarkable support fuels the continued growth of our programs. We're especially grateful to Aetna Better Health of Illinois, the DuPage Foundation, Walsh Construction, and The Yard for leading the way and helping us expand our impact in the year ahead.

We are deeply thankful for the incredible support of our Best Buddies participants, corporate partners, sponsors, foundations, and community advocates who help ensure individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are included in every part of our communities. With this strong foundation, Best Buddies in Illinois is excited to reach new heights and make an even greater impact in 2025.

Adam Wilt, State Director, Illinois

Illinois Office
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Allison and **Andrew**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Andrew & Allison

One-To-One Friendships

Centennial High School, Champaign, IL

Andrew joined Best Buddies during his sophomore year of high school in 2022–2023. "Before joining Best Buddies, I went to a private school and didn't realize someone like me could have such a strong connection with another person," he shared. "Best Buddies gave me a chance to shine." Since joining, Andrew has felt more connected to his community and has developed a meaningful friendship with Allison, who he calls his best friend.

Andrew and Allison were matched in early 2024 through the Best Buddies Friendship Chapter at Centennial High School, and their bond has only grown stronger since. Whether it's playing volleyball in the gym, grabbing food, bowling on the weekends, or just enjoying car rides, they love spending time together. More than anything, Andrew says, he values having someone he can trust and share meaningful conversations with.

Their friendship is mutual. "I love how energetic and fun Andrew is," said Allison. "He's so outgoing—I wish I could be more like him." Their connection is built on encouragement, laughter, and a shared commitment to showing up for each other.

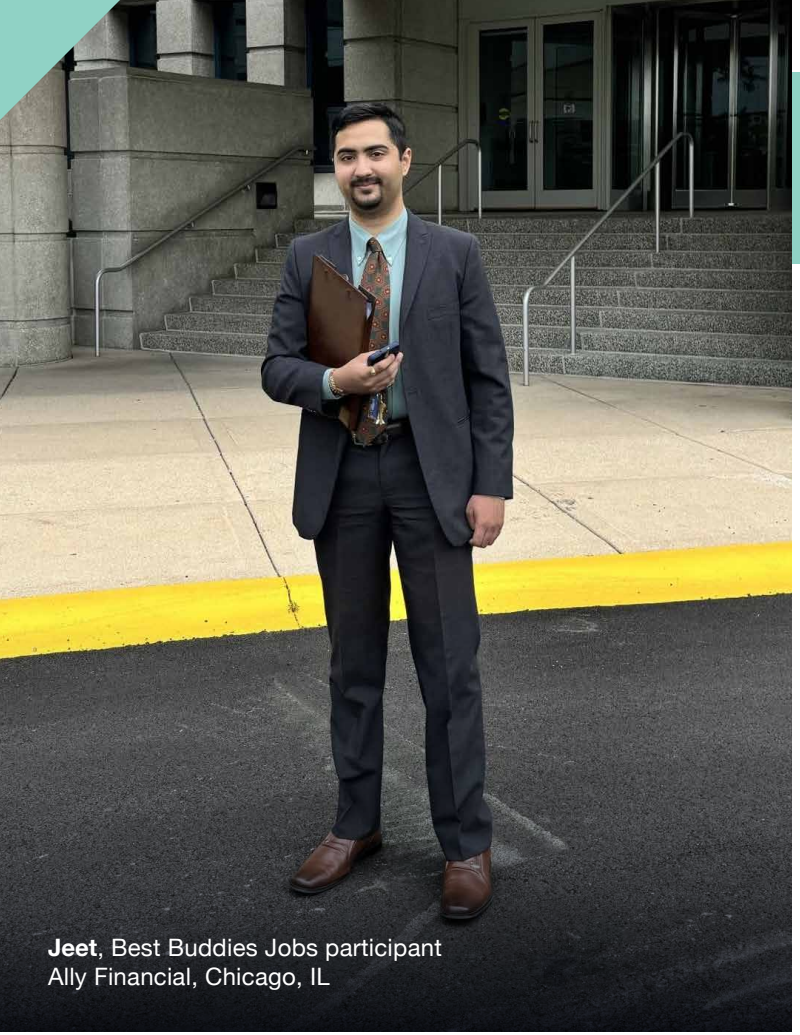
Andrew and Allison plan to attend the Best Buddies Leadership Conference together, excited to bring what they learn back to their school and community. Their friendship is a shining example of the Best Buddies mission in action—breaking down barriers, building confidence, and showing the power of inclusion.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats IL

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
30 Chapters	**410** Participants	**44** Chapters	**772** Participants	**94** Chapters	**3,414** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
16 Chapters	**460** Participants	**584** Participants	**301** Participants

> "We all come from different places, we are all different people with different abilities, but through Best Buddies, we all can be a part of the same community." **- Andrew**



Jeet, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Ally Financial, Chicago, IL

Jeet

Integrated Employment

Ally Financial, Chicago, IL

Jeet was diagnosed with Autism during his school years and was placed under a partial IEP program. Before becoming involved with Best Buddies, he began pursuing an associate degree in Accounting at Oakton Community College with support from the IEP program. During this time, he experienced feelings of insecurity and concern about securing a job in accounting. It was around this period that he was introduced to Best Buddies through Ms. Eileen Morrison.

In his final year of college, Jeet started working with Best Buddies to find a job in accounting. Initially, Best Buddies connected him with a position as a merchandise associate at a large retailer. He continued working with the organization to achieve his long-term goal of securing an accounting role. Simultaneously, he found an office assistant job at the office of a family friend. Recognizing the importance of stability, he decided to pursue a full-time office position that could support his disabilities and offer future career growth.

“Best Buddies worked hard to find me a job and provided accommodations throughout the hiring process in support of my disabilities,” said Jeet. “My life improved, not only economically but mentally and socially.”

Ultimately, Jeet was hired at Ally Financial with the assistance of Best Buddies and over two years of office work experience.

“The part I love most about my job is that my colleagues are very nice, friendly, and cooperative,” said Jeet. “I feel secure and safe in my work environment and, my job gives me opportunities to be social and continue advancing my professional skills.”

With a stable job and a steady income, Jeet has taken on personal financial responsibilities, including credit card payments and other necessary expenses. Looking ahead, he envisions getting married and starting a family.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats IL

Jobs

82
Participants Employed

138
Participants

> “I feel secure and safe in my work environment and, my job gives me opportunities to be social and continue advancing my professional skills.” **- Jeet**



Zachary, Best Buddies Ambassador

Zachary

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Chicago, IL

I began attending Hawthorne Scholastic Academy at age 7, shortly after being diagnosed with autism. It was there that I began to learn how to make friends and received the support I needed to grow both academically and socially. That foundation helped me earn a spot at Walter Payton College Prep High School, one of Chicago's selective enrollment schools. Walter Payton was a tough environment—especially for someone like me, whose brain works a little differently. I faced real challenges. But in 2008, something life-changing happened: I joined Best Buddies.

A teacher introduced me to Best Buddies while I was still at Walter Payton. At the time, I had no idea how much that introduction would shape my future. I went on to join the Best Buddies chapters at my schools, and later became involved in the Citizens, Jobs, and Ambassadors programs. I even competed in Champion of the Year. At DePaul University, I continued my involvement and was honored to give a speech on the Spread the Word: Inclusion campaign. That experience lit a spark in me—I began to realize my passion for advocacy.

Attending the Best Buddies Leadership Conference was a turning point. The speakers inspired me deeply, and I knew then that I wanted to become a public speaker—to share my story, motivate others, and make an impact just like those speakers made on me. Though I still face challenges every day, I meet them with determination and continue to succeed in my own unique ways.

Best Buddies has transformed my life. I've learned what true friendship feels like. I've found joy in social events, and I've gained confidence, employment opportunities, leadership skills, and a powerful sense of belonging. I'm incredibly grateful for the Best Buddies staff who have believed in me, supported me, and created an environment where I feel safe, seen, and included.

> "Best Buddies has transformed my life. I've learned what true friendship feels like. I've found joy in social events, and I've gained confidence, employment opportunities, leadership skills, and a powerful sense of belonging." **- Zachary**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats IL

Ambassadors

84
Ambassadors

Promoters

62
Chapters

871
Participants

Transitions

84
Participants

Indiana







Indiana Year in Review

Best Buddies in Indiana (BBIN) remains dedicated to fostering friendship, leadership development, and inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), creating a more inclusive Hoosier state.

In 2024, our impact grew, with more than 5,200 participants engaged in Best Buddies programs across Indiana. Our Friendship program expanded into seven new schools, bringing our total to 100 school chapters statewide. Additionally, we now have over 160 trained student leaders, and eight participants with IDD serving as Best Buddies Ambassadors—amplifying the voices of inclusion and advocacy.

Our Best Buddies Jobs program also saw continued growth and retention, helping four adult participants secure meaningful employment in the community. The program now serves 30 participants, with 22 currently employed, demonstrating the importance of workplace inclusion.

In the spring, we hosted the Best Buddies Friendship Walks in Indianapolis and Lake County, welcoming more than 2,000 walkers and raising an impressive $187,000 to support our statewide programs. These events brought together Best Buddies participants, families, volunteers, and community members, all walking in support of inclusion and friendship.

Our fall Champion of the Year campaign recruited incredible Champions who raised critical funds and awareness for our mission. At the Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala in November, we celebrated Donna Simerly, the 2024 Best Buddies Champion of the Year in Indiana, along with his Mission Partner, Michael Wheeler. The event welcomed over 215 guests and raised over $164,000 to support our programs.

As we look ahead to 2025, BBIN is committed to expanding our friendship, leadership development, and jobs programs, ensuring more youth and adults—both with and without IDD—experience the power of inclusion. With the support of our volunteers, participants, employers, donors, corporate partners, and advocates, we will continue to move our mission forward and make a lasting impact across Indiana.

Together, we are building a more inclusive future!

Natalie Seibert, State Director, Indiana

Indiana Office
8604 Allisonville Road #165, Indianapolis, IN 46250
P 317.436.8440



Erick and **John**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Erick & John

One-To-One Friendships

Lake Central High School, Crown Point, IN

Before joining Best Buddies, John felt a deep desire to give back to his community and make a real impact, but he wasn't sure how. That all changed the moment he walked into his first Best Buddies meeting at Lake Central. He had no idea that stepping into that room would lead him to friendships that would shape his life in ways he never expected.

That's where he met Erick. From the very beginning, their friendship was effortless. They'd hang out at bi-weekly events, go bowling, and even FaceTime just to play video games together. Over time, Erick became more than just John's buddy—he became part of his family. Seeing the joy and confidence their friendship gave Erick made John realize just how powerful a simple connection could be.

Before Erick graduated, they were a high school match at Lake Central in St. John, IN. But even as Erick moved on, the bond they built remained. And Erick wasn't the only one who changed John's life—his former Champion of the Year mission partner, Nick, did too. Both Erick and Nick showed him what it truly meant to be a friend. They taught him that kindness, laughter, and unwavering support are what make life meaningful.

Looking back, John realizes he had been searching for something like this his whole life—a passion that changes lives, including his own. Best Buddies didn't just give him a way to give back; it gave him friendships that he will carry with him forever.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats IN

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
23 Chapters	**708** Participants	**29** Chapters	**945** Participants	**46** Chapters	**2,678** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
9 Chapters	**729** Participants	**186** Participants	**152** Participants

"From the second I walked into my first Best Buddies meeting at Lake Central, I knew my life had changed forever." **- John**



Kelly, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Roselli's Pizza, Indianapolis, IN

Kelly

Integrated Employment

Roselli's Pizza, Indianapolis, IN

Kelly's journey with Roselli's is more than just a job; it is a testament to the power of community and inclusion. As she works behind the counter helping each customer and co-workers, her cheerful demeanor is infectious, drawing smiles from everyone alike. Each workday, Kelly steps into Roselli's, and enthusiastic greetings are like sunshine breaking through clouds, warming the hearts of those around her. With her coworkers Olivia and Alex, she shares more than just tasks; they share laughter, camaraderie, and hobbies—like music and dancing.

Kelly's journey to her new role with Roselli's was serendipitous. With the help of Best Buddies, this opportunity emerged that perfectly aligned with her skills and goals. Roselli's welcomed her with open arms, providing a supportive environment where she could thrive. Amid challenges like navigating a new workplace, Kelly persevered with determination. With guidance from her job coach and encouragement from her new team, she's honed her skills and embraced the responsibilities of her job.

In 2024, Kelly and her coworker Olivia took center stage at the Champion of the Year Gala, becoming champions of inclusion at the Best Buddies Gala. Their bond and mutual support shone brightly, embodying the spirit of partnership and inclusion.

Amid the celebrations and recognition, Kelly stays grounded in the genuine joy she finds in her work. Whether she's helping customers or keeping the buffet in order, she embodies the value of meaningful employment and the power of community. For Kelly, Roselli's is more than just a workplace—it's where she found connection, purpose, and a sense of belonging.

Kelly's dad shares, "I truly appreciate the care and time Best Buddies has taken to get to know Kelly, find the right job fit, and—most importantly—listen to her and what she wants in a job."

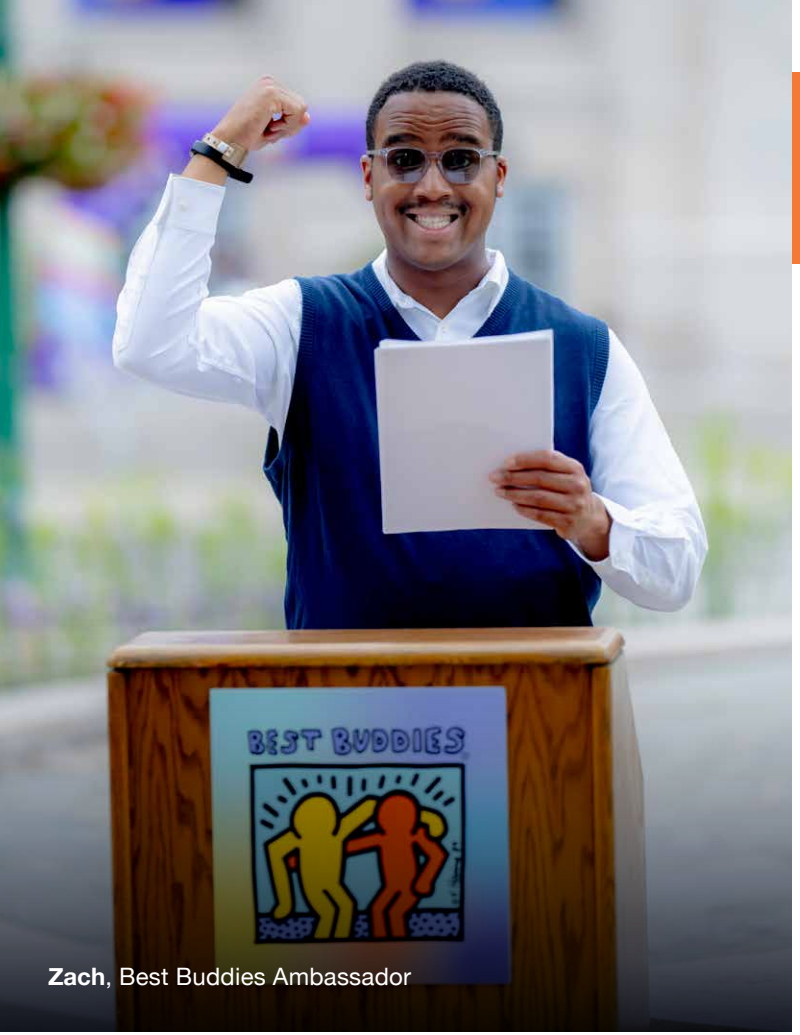
Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats IN

Jobs

25
Participants Employed

35
Participants

> "I truly appreciate the care and time Best Buddies has taken to get to know Kelly, find the right job fit, and—most importantly—listen to her and what she wants in a job."
> **- Kelly's Dad**



Zach, Best Buddies Ambassador

Zach

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Fishers, IN

My name is Zach, and I'm 29 years old. I have Autism, and I've been proud to call myself a part of the Best Buddies family for 15 years. My journey with this incredible organization began when I was a 14-year-old freshman at Fishers High School, and it continues today as a member of the Butler University chapter. Along the way, I've had the privilege of serving as a Best Buddies State and Global Ambassador, an Advisory Board Member, and a former Young Leaders Council member.

Before joining Best Buddies, I often wondered if I would ever find a true friend. I watched my brother spend time with his friends, going to parties and sleepovers, and I hoped that one day I'd have a friendship like that. But my freshman year of high school didn't start off well—I faced bullying from people who didn't understand me or my disability. I struggled to stand up for myself and to show others who I really was.

That all changed when my teacher told me about Best Buddies during an IEP meeting. Joining Best Buddies opened a whole new world of friendship for me. My first Buddy match, Madeline, became my closest friend. We spent all four years of high school paired together, and our friendship remains strong to this day. I've celebrated holidays with her family, and our families have grown close as well.

Best Buddies didn't just bring me friendship—it gave me confidence. Through the leadership opportunities I've had, I've learned to believe in myself and in others. I've discovered that I can achieve my dreams, find success, and live a fulfilling life. This organization helped me find my voice, and now I use it to educate others about inclusion, sharing the mission of Best Buddies with parents, students, teachers, businesses, and anyone willing to listen.

One of my favorite experiences is attending the Best Buddies Leadership Conference. I love the energy of the opening and closing ceremonies, the leadership opportunities, and meeting others who are just as passionate about inclusion as I am. Each year, my involvement in Best Buddies grows, and I continue to find new ways to make a difference.

To anyone reading this, I want to say thank you. Thank you for supporting Best Buddies and its mission to create a more inclusive world for people like me. Because of people like you, there's no limit to what we can achieve together. Best Buddies has made a lasting impact on my life, and I know it can do the same for so many others.

> "Through the leadership opportunities I've had, I've learned to believe in myself and in others. I've discovered that I can achieve my dreams, find success, and live a fulfilling life." **- Zach**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats IN

Ambassadors	Promoters	
19	**30**	**829**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Iowa







Iowa Year in Review

Best Buddies Iowa experienced amazing change and growth in 2024. Our one-to-one friendship and leadership development programs served over 2,500 people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across many rural and metro communities. We opened 12 new school chapters, partnering with 51 schools in total, from elementary to college, to promote inclusion and belonging for all students. Our jobs program has added eight new participants, all while maintaining a 100% job retention rate. We've been able to accomplish all of this in a year where we have promoted a new state director as well as hired a new program manager.

In line with our mission to spread awareness about the importance of inclusion, our staff team trained 54 Ambassadors and student leaders to be inclusion advocates, hosted disabilities awareness trainings with several companies, and brought 32 student leaders, chapter advisors and Ambassadors to the acclaimed Best Buddies International Leadership Conference in Bloomington, Indiana. We've also been fortunate enough to partner with several local sports teams, hosting Best Buddies days with the Iowa Wolves, Iowa Cubs, and the Iowa Wild.

Our Friendship Walk this past year was the biggest that Iowa has ever had. Hosted at the Iowa State Fairgrounds, we were able to provide an amazing party for over 500 participants, their friends and families. We raised nearly $100,000 through our various sponsors and community fundraisers.

Best Buddies in Iowa went back to the drawing board for its Gala event this fall, the Chef and Champion Challenge. Twelve local chefs served up dishes to treat all our guests, as we celebrated six Champion candidates vying for the title of Champion of the Year. Having a fresh program provided the spark that raised close to $200,000.

On behalf of our Advisory Board and the staff at Best Buddies in Iowa, I would

like to thank our generous sponsors, dedicated volunteers, and selfless donors for your support. Moving into 2025, we intend to build on this momentum to partner with more schools, empower our volunteers, grow our community-based programs, and engage more companies to spread awareness about the importance of inclusion. Thank you for being part of our success!

Ted Rives, State Director, Indiana

Indiana Office
7518 Hickman Road, Des Moines, IA 50324
P 515-423-0522



Suzanne and **Mason**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Mason & Suzanne

One-To-One Friendships

Des Moines, IA

Before joining Best Buddies, Suzanne felt disconnected from her school community. That began to change during her sophomore year when she made the decision to get more involved—and she hasn't looked back since. Now, she encourages others to find their own way to make an impact.

Suzanne and her buddy Mason have built a fun and meaningful friendship. They enjoy playing board games, doing crafts, and, most of all, laughing together. "His laugh is contagious," Suzanne says with a smile.

Being part of Best Buddies has transformed Suzanne's high school experience. It's helped her form lasting friendships, feel more connected to her school, and live out her commitment to promoting inclusion—something that means a lot to her personally, as her brother has an intellectual disability.

Mason, her buddy since the beginning of the year, is a kind and thoughtful person who lights up every room with his smile. A passionate gamer, he always has something new to share about the latest game he's played. Suzanne joined Best Buddies her freshman year, and Mason is new to the program this year—but their bond is already strong.

> "Getting involved and attending games and events is one of the best ways to start getting involved in your school. Feeling the school pride can help you discover how to make a difference and use your voice effectively." **- Suzanne**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats IA

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**84** Participants	**10** Chapters	**194** Participants	**26** Chapters	**813** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
11 Chapters	**337** Participants	**80** Participants	**51** Participants



Zach, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Jordan Creek Elementary School, Indianapolis, IN

Zach

Integrated Employment

Jordan Creek Elementary School, IN

Zach joined the Best Buddies Iowa Jobs program at the beginning of 2024. A highly independent and capable individual, Zach had long aspired to find meaningful employment. However, at 35 years old, he had never held a job due to persistent barriers that stood in his way for years.

Upon joining the program, Zach and the Jobs team had several thoughtful conversations about his interests and employment goals. Initially, he expressed a strong interest in working in security, and together, they pursued several opportunities in that field. Despite participating in a few interviews, Zach faced challenges securing a role, largely due to his lack of prior work experience.

Recognizing the need to pivot, Zach broadened his job search and mentioned a desire to work in a school setting. Soon after, the team identified an opening for a noon supervisor at Jordan Creek Elementary School. Following his interview, Zach was offered the position on the spot.

In his role, Zach supports students during lunch and recess by assisting with their needs, maintaining order and schedules, and ensuring safety on the playground. He ends each shift by helping clean the lunchroom. Zach thrives in this environment and enjoys the camaraderie with his coworkers. The presence of supportive teachers offers a strong natural support system for him throughout the day.

Now with valuable job experience on his résumé, Zach is optimistic about the future and looks forward to continuing his journey with Best Buddies Iowa Jobs—with the ultimate goal of securing a full-time position in the security field.

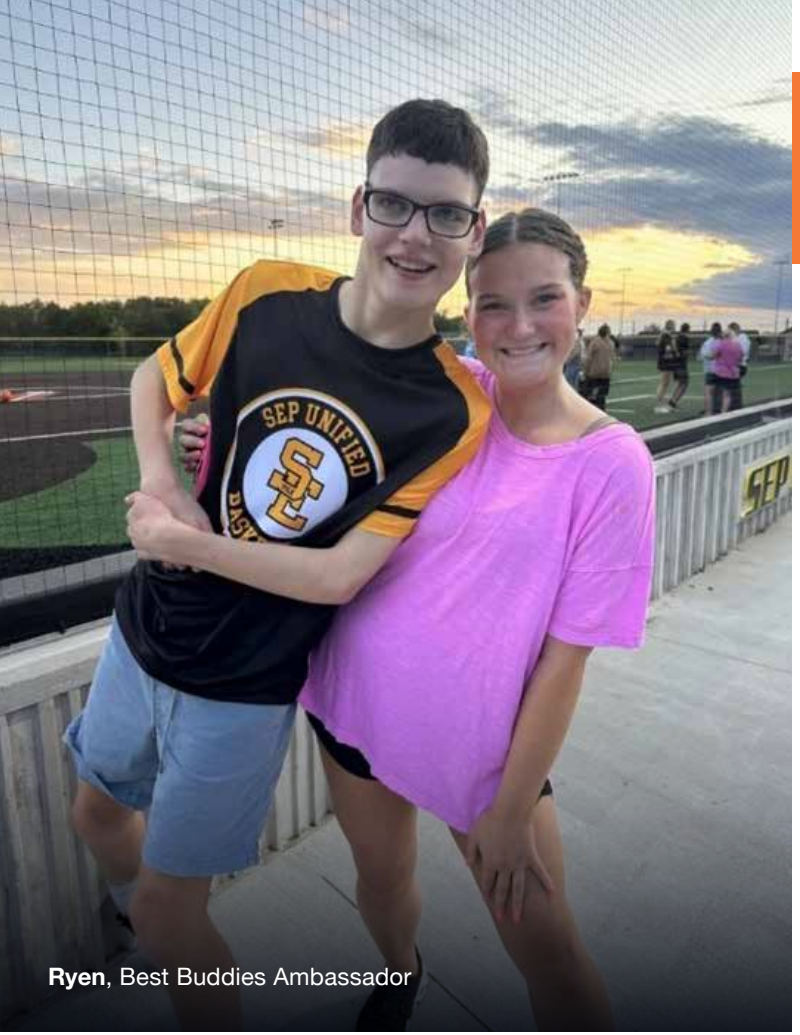
> “When I interviewed Zach, what stood out to me was his enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment.”**- Dr. Jenette Barnes**, Vice Principal, Jordan Creek Elementary School

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats IA

Jobs

8
Participants Employed

13
Participants



Ryen, Best Buddies Ambassador

Ryen

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Des Moines, IA

Before getting involved with Best Buddies, Ryen's world revolved around sports—especially swimming, which she competed in for five years. While she was a dedicated athlete, Ryen wasn't involved in any school clubs. None of them felt like the right fit or offered a deeper purpose that resonated with her. Between practice and meets, nothing outside of sports really caught her attention—until Best Buddies.

Ryen joined the program at the start of her freshman year on August 23, 2023. During her sophomore year, she was matched with her "best buddy ever," Daniel, and the two have now been friends for two years. Through this experience, Ryen has built connections that she says will last a lifetime. Best Buddies helped her find her purpose and completely changed her perspective on what it means to be part of a community.

Ryen has built meaningful relationships with each of the 105 members in her chapter. She says the club has taught her that inclusion isn't just a word—it's the everyday actions and choices of those involved. Best Buddies has helped her grow personally, reflect on the value of life, and discover just how powerful belonging can be. The organization has become a defining part of her journey, and she can't imagine life without it.

> "A message I hope everyone remembers is in a world where you can be anything, be kind. It's such a simple phrase, yet people often forget it. In Best Buddies, it's hard not to remember. So keep going, keep reaching new levels, and continue being the reason someone feels like they belong." **- Ryen**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats IA

Ambassadors	Promoters	
54	**15**	**245**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Kentucky







Kentucky Year in Review

Best Buddies in Kentucky could not be prouder and more grateful for our achievements in 2024! Headed into 2024, we set an ambitious goal to create more inclusive communities, grow our ambassador programs and open more school chapters. We are proud to report that by year's end, we did just that. We opened new school chapters totaling 37 chapters in 2024 and we finished the year impacting over 9,800 families. Great things are happening in Kentucky, a state that spans two time zones and has 120 counties – the fourth most counties in the country!

Our success was only made possible by the hard work and dedication of our Kentucky team. This includes former Director, Mission Advancement, Emily Brunderman, who in 2024 took her many talents to the grant writing team at Best Buddies. We also could not have succeeded without Savannah Von Dylen, who joined the Kentucky team in 2024 as lead program manager.

Kentucky hosted its annual Friendship Walk in the spring and we saw terrific turnout on a beautiful spring Saturday at Louisville's EP Tom Sawyer Park. Over 600 participants enjoyed live music and snacks as we raised $64,000.00, exceeding our goal. It truly was a day full of inclusion, community and happiness.

In October, Best Buddies Kentucky put on the Champions of the Year Gala. We welcomed 275 attendees at the historic grounds at Farmington, a colonial-era farm where Abraham Lincoln visited as a young man! Our Champions raised a grand total of over $175,000, exceeding our goal of $155,000. From the live DJ music to locally sourced food to perfect fall weather, it was a night to remember.

We finished 2024 with a confident look ahead to 2025. Best Buddies Kentucky is gearing up for big things to happen and can't wait to continue supporting the mission of Best Buddies in our local Kentucky communities. With our dedicated team, chapters, donors, and Buddies, we have already hit the ground running in 2025!

Joan Pannuti, State Director, Kentucky

Kentucky Office
3044 Bardstown Road #1274, Louisville, KY 40205
P 502.333.2679



Emelia and **Taylor**, Friendship program participants

Emelia & Taylor

One-To-One Friendships

Somerset, KY

I enjoy being part of Best Buddies because it gives me the chance to meet new people and make meaningful friendships. One of the best parts of the program is being in a buddy match—it's comforting to know you always have someone by your side to share fun moments with. My buddy, Emelia, and I have created so many special memories together. One of our favorite traditions is building gingerbread houses during the holidays, and it's just one of the many ways our friendship has brought joy into my life.

Spending time with Emelia—whether we're playing games, going for walks, or just hanging out—has been one of the most meaningful and inspiring parts of my journey. Even seeing her for a few minutes during the school day, whether it's in the library or between classes, instantly makes my day better. I wouldn't trade those moments for anything.

Everyone deserves the chance to be part of something as special as Best Buddies. I hope that by sharing my story, others will feel inspired to seek out the kind of friendship I've found with Emelia. Best Buddies has truly changed my life, and I believe it can change others' too.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats KY

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**100** Participants	**3** Chapters	**29** Participants	**20** Chapters	**475** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
6 Chapters	**449** Participants	**74** Participants	**43** Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Sydney and Mario, Friendship program participants

Sydney & Mario

Leadership Development

My name is Sydney, and I've been a part of Best Buddies since last year. And I'm Mario—I've been involved with Best Buddies for two years now. Together… we are buddies!

What an incredible few weeks it has been, celebrating the power and purpose of Best Buddies! Mario and I want to thank every single person who helped make this celebration possible—and for supporting our Champions as they raised funds for this amazing organization. You all are truly incredible. Thank you, Champions, for raising money and showing your love and support for Best Buddies. We love you!

Today, Mario and I want to share our journey as buddies and how our lives have been transformed by being part of this community. We first met at the UofL Best Buddies match party. We danced, ate pizza, and waited excitedly to find out who our match would be. I never could've guessed I'd be paired with someone as amazing as Mario. From that day forward, we started spending time together, and it became clear just how perfect our match was. We both love superheroes, Funko Pops, singing, dancing—the list goes on.

When I asked Mario what his favorite memory with me has been, he said he loved going to PopCon together and seeing fun characters like Deadpool. He also loved the time we went swimming at his house this summer. And honestly, those were amazing experiences! For me, one of the most memorable moments was watching Mario run the mini-marathon. I got to cheer him on with our friends and family and witness him embody everything Best Buddies stands for—friendship, inclusion, and pure joy. Mario high-fived every person he passed and made new friends along the way. No one is a stranger around Mario. I've also loved being in class with him and my sister Samantha, who's also in Best Buddies. Walking to class together as our little Best Buddies crew always puts a smile on my face.

When I asked Mario why he loves Best Buddies, he said, "I love getting to be a friend. I love getting to hang out with my best buddy Sydney and all my friends. Best Buddies makes me so happy!" And when I asked how Best Buddies has helped him grow, Mario shared that the program helped him get a job at Wigglewow, where many of his Best Buddies friends also work. He loves it and is so thankful for the opportunity.

As a peer buddy, I can honestly say that Best Buddies has changed my life just as much as it has Mario's. I transferred to UofL my sophomore year after going through one of the hardest mental health years of my life. Without Best Buddies, I'm not sure I would've bounced back the way I did. Being Mario's buddy has brought joy, purpose, and healing into my life. Friendship helps pull us out of dark places—and that's exactly what Mario is to me: a light in this world.

Thanks to the generosity of our donors and the dedication of our Champions, Best Buddies can continue building a more inclusive and welcoming world. Thank you for supporting Best Buddies, and thank you for being our friends.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats KY

Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**11**	**145**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Maine







Maine Year in Review

Best Buddies in Maine (BBME) set bold goals in all areas for 2024 and proudly surpassed them all. Our Friendship chapters continued to expand statewide, and we finished the year with 52 total chapters, 1237 participants and over 5000 Mainers impacted by our programs. In July, Maine sent 39 student leaders and chapter advisors to the Best Buddies Leadership Conference in Indiana, more than doubling our size from 2023. The hands-on training these leaders receive directly impacts their local chapters, creating a foundation for success in the '24-25 school year. Lastly, we officially launched our Transitions Program in the Fall of 2024, which is a leadership program designed to empower students ages 14-22 years old by equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to take ownership of their futures after high school. This program perfectly complements our Friendship Chapters, and we can't wait to see its impact.

BBME again hosted two successful Friendship Walks in 2024, experiencing remarkable growth, with attendance and funds raised both surpassing previous years. This increase underscores the strength and impact of our programs, highlighting the deepening connections and friendships formed within our community. Our Promoter Chapter Cheverus High School again hosted our Portland Walk, raising nearly $80,000 with over 600 in attendance. We returned to Bass Park for our Bangor Walk which doubled in size from 2023, with 150 walkers and $15,000 raised. These substantial increases reflect the growing commitment and generosity of our supporters, enabling us to continue fostering inclusive communities and empowering individuals with IDD.

Our annual Champion Gala was a beautiful, mission-focused evening that celebrated the 10-week campaign of 12 motivated, inspiring champions. We highlighted a high school buddy pair whose genuine friendship is emblematic of the power of our programs. Their message of the importance of an inclusive school community inspired a room of 650 guests, raising $300,000. We continue to grow our Circle of Champions and every year they raise the bar on what the collectively can accomplish all in the name of inclusion.

As we look to 2025, BBME intends to continue our tradition of shattering every goal we set. This means more schools, more matches and bigger events. We hope to expand our Transitions Program to empower more Maine students to prepare them for their life beyond High School, helping us take one more step in creating an inclusive Maine.

Rebecca Williams, State Director, Maine

Maine Office
1 Farwell Ave, PO Box 573, Cumberland, Maine 04021
P 207.347.1298



Sami and **Brooke**, Friendship program participants

Sami & Brooke

One-To-One Friendships

Thornton Academy, Saco, ME

Best Buddies fosters life-changing friendships, and Sami and Brooke's bond is a perfect example.

Before joining Best Buddies, Sami often felt lonely. While she had friends to talk to, she longed for deeper connections—friends to make memories with. That changed when she met Brooke. Now, the two share adventures like traveling to different states, shopping, spa nights, and baking together. Sami loves that she can always count on Brooke. "She answers my calls, laughs at my jokes, and always wants to hang out. I don't want her to go to college until I go," she says.

For Brooke, joining Best Buddies gave her purpose. "I always thought I made an impact, but I realized I could do so much more," she shares. Seeing the challenges students with disabilities face daily inspired her to advocate for inclusion. She is Chapter President at Thornton Academy, she takes Unified classes and plays Unified sports and ensures no one is left out—whether at lunch, school dances, or community events.

Her bond with Sami is at the heart of this mission. "We do everything best friends do. We shop, we watch movies, we have spa days, and sometimes we're just happy being together doing nothing at all. Our time together is priceless," she says. Their friendship has shaped her future—she plans to start a Best Buddies chapter in college and continue advocating for inclusion. "Best Buddies will always be a part of my life. I will be their biggest fan and advocate until they no longer need me."

Sami and Brooke's friendship is a testament to the power of belonging. Through Best Buddies, they found more than a program—they found a lifelong connection that proves everyone deserves a friend, a seat at the table, and the chance to shine.

> "Best Buddies will always be a part of my life"
> **- Brooke**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats ME

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
12 Chapters	**196** Participants	**12** Chapters	**224** Participants	**18** Chapters	**461** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
7 Chapters	**256** Participants	**168** Participants	**23** Participants



“The collaboration between the Best Buddies Transition Program and Deering High School highlights the profound impact of inclusive targeted support for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Using a hands-on approach that included activities, role-playing, and mentorship, the program effectively equipped students not only with skills but also with the ability to apply their unique strengths in practical settings. The Best Buddies program stands as a compelling example of how tailored support can prepare individuals for meaningful employment and foster a supportive community environment. Such initiatives are crucial in ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed and contribute positively to society. We are so grateful for having the support from the Best Buddies Transition Program as we help our students best prepare for life after high school.”
-Margaret Hoyt Special Education Teacher

Transitions Program Spotlight – Deering High School



Tucker Conley, Best Buddies Ambassador

Katherine W.

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Portland, ME

Before joining Best Buddies, I wasn't very involved with a community of people like me. My peers didn't understand that I may need extra time to think about their questions before I responded, and I often felt like I didn't belong.

I was introduced to Best Buddies through my family before we even had a chapter in Maine. I knew Best Buddies was a program I wanted to become involved in to help promote inclusion. Now, I am the Vice President of my high school chapter, involved in the Transitions program, and I'm training to become a Best Buddies global ambassador and once I graduate high school. I'm also looking forward to advocating at the State level for opportunities for young adults like me to attend inclusive post-secondary programs at higher education institutions just like our typically developing peers.

I've made so many new friendships since joining Best Buddies! My buddy Ally is very kind, and we like to do many of the same activities together. She is very supportive of me and wants the best for me and others in the program. I've also had great opportunities to attend state Ambassador trainings, participate in the Champion of the Year Gala as a Mission Partner, fundraise for the Friendship Walk, ride 20 miles on a tandem bike in the Hyannis Port Challenge, and model for a collaboration campaign between Best Buddies and a local clothing brand that employs people with disabilities.

My message for other people with IDD is this: Don't ever let your challenges stop you from achieving your goals. Find others who are willing to help you accomplish what is important to you. Treat everyone with kindness. Promote inclusion, always.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats ME

Ambassadors	Promoters	
11	**11**	**230**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> “Don't ever let your challenges stop you from achieving your goals.” **- Kate**

Maryland







Maryland Year in Review

2024 was a year of continued growth and expansion, marked by strong friendships, meaningful employment opportunities, and inspiring leadership for Best Buddies in Maryland. It was a year that truly showcased the power of inclusion and belonging.

Through our school Friendship Program, served 3,427 of students and successfully matched 459 in one-to-one friendships. Additionally, we were thrilled to add a new focus on transitions to help students prepare for life beyond high school. We welcomed 47 students from Walt Whitman and Bowie High Schools, who participated in 10 workshops covering essential skills, such as self-advocacy, self-determination, resume building, and interview preparation. This is a program we are excited to expand further in 2025.

The Best Buddies Leadership Conference (BBLC) made its triumphant return to Indiana University. It was a weekend full of new friendships, enhanced leadership skills, and countless memories. Over 1,500 participants from around the world attended, including 59 students, job participants, and ambassadors from Maryland. These participants returned to their schools, workplaces, and communities with new skills to further advance our mission of inclusion.

Among our chapter highlights this year were the annual Best Buddies Buddy Ball, Citizens Summer Fest, two Ambassador Summits, and several Ambassador Hangouts. These events continue to be central to our efforts to create a more inclusive and connected community.

The Best Buddies Friendship Walk, held at the University of Maryland on Saturday, May 4, 2024, was another major milestone. With almost 90 teams and over 735 participants, we raised more than $314,000. We were honored to have University of Maryland Head Football Coach, Mike Locksley, and many players from the football team join us in supporting our mission of inclusion. This year, we saw record-breaking corporate sponsorship, and we are deeply grateful to our founding sponsor, Shulman Rogers, as well as our legacy sponsors and the many other corporate partners and teams that made this success possible.

A truly special event in 2024 was the Champion of the Year Gala at Live Casino and Hotel on October 21, 2024. The evening was a tremendous success, with over 200 guests and more than $118,000 raised. Our Grand Champion, Mary Snowdon, raised an impressive $23,687 dollars for Best Buddies in Maryland. The event also featured six local restaurants offering tasting portions of their favorite cuisines, making it a memorable night for all.

As I reflect on the incredible work we accomplished in 2024, I am reminded that none of it would have been possible without the dedication and commitment of so many individuals. Our team members, Advisory Board, school partners, participants, employer partners, community organizations, donors, and our passionate community members played an integral role in creating a more inclusive Maryland. We are forever grateful for your unwavering support, determination, and passion.

As we look to 2025, we're energized by the opportunities ahead. Together, we will build on our momentum and create an even greater impact.

Laura Nicolini, State Director, Maryland

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Aidan and **Christine**, Friendship program participants

Aidan & Christine

One-To-One Friendships

Howard High School, Ellicott City, MD

Before joining Best Buddies, Christine wasn't very involved in school activities and considered herself a little shy. That changed in 2022, when she became a part of Best Buddies. "It really helped me grow out of my shell and make friendships with people I did not know before," Christine added.

Aidan, who has Down syndrome, joined Best Buddies in 2020, during the pandemic. While the program offered virtual meetings at the time, Aidan's outgoing personality shined, and he was thrilled to be a part of a community of peers. Since then, Best Buddies has brought him joy and lasting friendships, some of which he keeps up with even after they've graduated.

Christine and Aidan were officially matched this year, and their friendship has been filled with fun, creativity, and laughter. One of their favorite activities is the annual Thanksgiving turkey build, where they use recycled materials to create a unique masterpiece. They also enjoy playing games at monthly events, having lunch together, and spending time in the media center. No matter what they're doing, Aidan's energy and enthusiasm make every moment exciting.

Since joining Best Buddies, Christine has met new people, gain confidence, and formed a meaningful friendship with Aidan. Likewise, Aidan has found a friend who shares his excitement for fun activities and quality time. Their bond continues to grow, making every event, lunch, and creative project even more special.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats MD

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
15 Chapters	**158** Participants	**36** Chapters	**251** Participants	**90** Chapters	**2,257** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
15 Chapters	**430** Participants	**246** Participants	**201** Participants

> "There is never a dull moment with Aidan, and he always puts a smile on everyone's faces."
> **- Christine**



Layla, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Gundalow Gourmet, Baltimore MD

Layla

Integrated Employment

Gundalow Gourmet, Baltimore, MD

When Layla first entered the Best Buddies Jobs program, her professionalism and drive immediately stood out. She was a perfect addition to the program and was soon matched with Gundalow Gourmet, where her impact was felt right away. Gundalow Gourmet quickly became an incredible employer partner, supporting Best Buddies at major events by making speeches, raising funds, and donating food. Layla's hard work and enthusiasm fit seamlessly with the team, and together they've created a lasting partnership.

Over the past two years at Gundalow Gourmet, Layla has learned a great deal and has enjoyed making new dishes. "I love being in the kitchen and learning new things," Layla shared. Recently, she mastered making pasta salad with roasted squash and enjoys preparing chicken enchiladas and salads. Her growth in the kitchen is a testament to her dedication, and she continues to build on her skills every day.

Layla's supervisor, Patty DeSa, couldn't be more proud of her. "Layla is organized, talented, smart, funny, kind, and very independent," Patty said. "She's the queen of lasagnas, chicken enchiladas, and salads in our kitchen. Layla is always up for any last-minute task and does it with efficiency and a positive attitude. She's one of the hardest-working people I know, and it's a privilege to work with her."

Looking ahead, Layla is excited to continue learning and growing at Gunadlow Gourmet. "I can't wait to see what I get to learn next," she said. With the support of her incredible employer and her own drive, Layla is sure to continue thriving.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats MD

Jobs

42
Participants Employed

63
Participants

> "Layla is one of the hardest-working people I know, and it's a privilege to work with her." **- Patty DeSa**, Kitchen Supervisor



Anderson, Best Buddies Ambassador

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats MD

Ambassadors

70
Ambassadors

Promoters

24
Chapters

347
Participants

Transitions

49
Participants

Anderson
Leadership Development
Ambassador, Bethesda, MD

Anderson joined Best Buddies during a time of isolation—his high school experience began during the pandemic, making it difficult to form lasting connections. “I felt pretty lonely at times,” he remembers. Before joining Best Buddies, Anderson’s routine was repetitive, with few opportunities to meet new friends. That all changed when he found his place in Best Buddies. Through virtual meetings, he was introduced to his buddy family and developed a close bond with his buddy, Katie. When school returned in person, Best Buddies supported him in making meaningful connections, and Anderson quickly became an active and engaged member of his chapter.

As Anderson’s passion for inclusion grew, he decided to take on a leadership role. In his sophomore year, he became Buddy Director on the Executive Board, his first leadership position. “Best Buddies showed me a path to unlocking my potential,” he shares. Embracing the chance to be a self-advocate, Anderson worked to bring guest speakers to chapter meetings and organized dance parties that inspired his peers. It was through this leadership that Anderson discovered his passion for motivating others. His newfound confidence led to the launch of his own DJ business, where he’s now completed over 50 paid jobs and numerous pro-bono gigs for nonprofits.

Anderson’s leadership skills didn’t stop there. He expanded his involvement by joining student government, becoming a teacher’s assistant, and managing the JV basketball team. As the first special needs assistant coach at Open Door Sports, Anderson has become a key advocate for inclusion and self-empowerment. “Best Buddies gave me the chance to take on roles that allowed me to grow as a leader and advocate,” he says.

In addition to his leadership journey, Anderson’s role as an Ambassador through the Transition Program at Walt Whitman High School has been life changing. Through this program, he and his peers develop essential skills like resume building and interview preparation, paving the way for a brighter future. “Best Buddies has the power to help people with disabilities make meaningful friendships and be included,” Anderson says. As an Ambassador, Anderson continues to advocate for the inclusion and potential of individuals with IDD.

> “The world may not have seen my potential, but Best Buddies did, and that means everything to me.” - **Anderson**

Massachusetts & Rhode Island







Massachusetts & Rhode Island Year in Review

Best Buddies in Massachusetts (MA) and Rhode Island (RI) continued to grow and thrive in 2024.

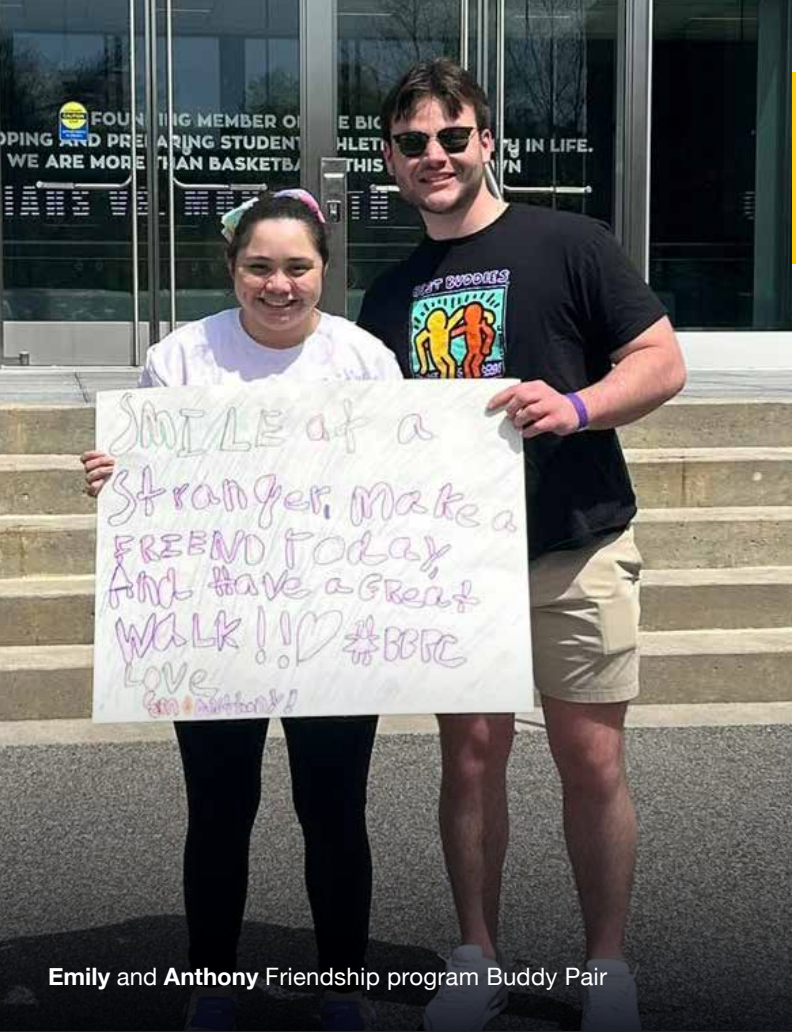
Our Friendship programs served 238 chapters, impacting over 55,000 individuals from early childhood through adulthood and helping to build friendships and social inclusion for people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). For individuals ages 14-22, our Transitions program worked in 20 schools with 134 students with IDD on career exploration, self-advocacy, and workplace readiness. Best Buddies Jobs continues to facilitate a more inclusive workforce in Massachusetts, now serving over 206 adults with IDD with 86 employer partners. Best Buddies Jobs staff work with participants on job development and ongoing support and work with our employer partners to provide diversity, equity, and inclusion training and best practices for inclusion in the workplace. Our Leadership pillar continued to thrive, with 27 active trained leaders and 87 training events. Notably, two of our ambassadors spoke at the Best Buddies Leadership Conference at University of Indiana in July 2024. We had over 80 chapter leaders, job participants, ambassadors, and transition students attend in order to gain skills to take back home with them. Our Family Support program, Eunie's buddies launched in 2024 with the goal of providing support and resources needed to navigate the journey of raising a child with IDD.

In 2024, we proudly hosted three Friendship Walks—held in Boston, Worcester, and Providence. These walks collectively raised over $215,000 and involved over 1,800 people. Other events, such as our Evening of Opportunity and Hyannis Port Golf Tournament, alongside our teams at the Boston Marathon and Falmouth Road Race, helped raise funds to support our programs. The money raised from the Friendship Walks and other local events directly supports and expands our programs in MA and RI.

We fostered programmatic growth and served more people than ever across both states with 2024 being one of our strongest years. I sincerely thank all our supporters for helping us foster inclusion in our communities for people with and without IDD to make MA and RI more welcoming for all.

Kara Falcone, State Director, Massachusetts & Rhode Island

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Emily and **Anthony** Friendship program Buddy Pair

Emily & Anthony

One-To-One Friendships

Providence College, Providence, RI

Before Emily joined Best Buddies, she often felt misunderstood by her classmates and teachers. It was hard for her to feel comfortable or included. But everything changed when she joined her high school's Best Buddies chapter.

Right away, Emily felt a sense of belonging and had a lot of fun. She quickly became an active member and was even elected Buddy Director. Unfortunately, the pandemic hit soon after, limiting her ability to participate. But her Best Buddies journey didn't end there—after high school, she joined the chapter at Providence College. That's where she met Anthony.

Anthony was a freshman when he joined the Best Buddies chapter at Providence, not knowing he was about to meet one of his best friends. He and Emily have been matched for four years now. Over that time, their friendship has helped Emily come out of her shell and embrace who she is. With Anthony's support, she became a Best Buddies Ambassador, growing more independent and confident. At the same time, Anthony says Emily has shown him what true friendship really means.

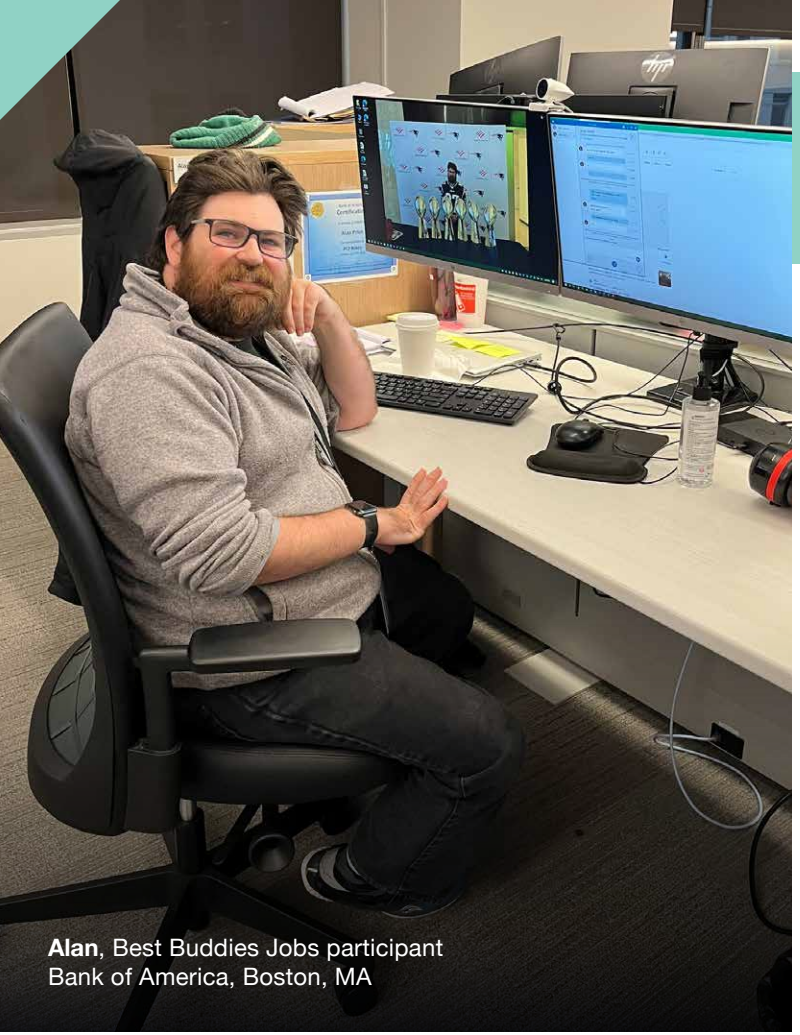
Emily and Anthony simply love spending time together. Whether they're teasing each other, making silly jokes, coloring, doing word searches, or attending Friendship Walks, they just get each other.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats MA & RI

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
25 Chapters	**352** Participants	**41** Chapters	**845** Participants	**148** Chapters	**4,535** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
27 Chapters	**1,086** Participants	**173** Participants	**334** Participants

"I was so quiet before and then Anthony really broke me out of my shell." **- Emily**



Alan, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Bank of America, Boston, MA

Alan

Integrated Employment

Bank of America, Boston, MA

Before joining Best Buddies, Alan struggled to find steady employment. While he held a few temporary jobs, none offered the stability or sense of belonging he was searching for. Determined to find meaningful work, Alan got involved with Best Buddies through the Friendship program in high school. Once he was eligible, he joined the Best Buddies Jobs program—and that's when everything changed.

Alan found a fulfilling career at Bank of America, where he's been able to grow both personally and professionally. His role has helped him build confidence, independence, and financial stability. Every day, he shows up to work proud and motivated to keep learning.

Looking ahead, Alan is focused on personal growth and developing skills that support both his career and daily life. He hopes to earn promotions and continue being recognized for his contributions.

Over the years, Alan has learned valuable skills such as attention to detail, flexibility, and time management—skills he now uses in all areas of his life. He's proud of his accomplishments and excited to continue thriving at Bank of America with the support of his coworkers and Best Buddies.

> "I am proud to come to work every day and continue to learn something new." **- Alan**

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats MA

Jobs

174
Participants Employed

223
Participants



Alexander, Best Buddies Ambassador

Alexander

Leadership Development

Sandwich, MA

Before I joined Best Buddies, school was a difficult place for me. Most people didn't understand my autism—aside from a few friends—and things got especially tough when some staff members treated me and my classmates with IDD unfairly. That was my breaking point. I decided I'd had enough of the mistreatment, and joining Best Buddies turned out to be the best decision I ever made. It completely changed my life. I began setting goals for myself and got involved in e-Buddies, the Ambassadors program, and the Jobs program.

I became an Ambassador over a year ago, and since then, I've grown tremendously as a public speaker, a leader, and an advocate—not just for myself, but for the entire Best Buddies mission and for people with disabilities. One of the highlights of my Ambassador experience was the opportunity to speak in front of 400 people at Bournedale Elementary School last spring. I shared my story and helped teach the audience about disability etiquette.

This past summer, I attended the Best Buddies Leadership Conference, which was truly the experience of a lifetime. I stepped far outside my comfort zone—it was my first time attending such a large event and being away from home on my own for so long. While it was overwhelming at times, I gained so much from the experience, and I'm incredibly grateful I went.

Through all these opportunities that Best Buddies has given me, I've made amazing friends, built my confidence, and become a stronger advocate. I hope everyone finds the courage to include others—whether it's during a game, at work, at lunch, or at an event. Inclusion matters, and together, we can make a difference.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats MA & RI

Ambassadors

25
Ambassadors

Promoters

83
Chapters

1,206
Participants

Transitions

172
Participants

> "I hope everyone finds the courage to include others—whether it's during a game, at work, at lunch, or at an event. Inclusion matters, and together, we can make a difference." **- Alexander**



Shanda, Eunie's Buddies Mentor
Boston, MA

Shanda

Family Support

Eunie’s Buddies, Mentor, Boston, MA

Before becoming involved with Best Buddies, Shanda’s life revolved around advocating for and supporting her two incredible children, both of whom live with global developmental delays. They use wheelchairs, and one of her daughters is non-verbal. While their days were filled with love and resilience, there were moments that felt overwhelming and isolating. Shanda and her daughters joined Eunie’s Buddies in 2024, and it has been a deeply emotional and humbling experience for them. Being invited to serve as a mentor was truly an honor for her and a reminder that their journey could help inspire and support others.

Shanda has not been paired with a mentee yet but is excited for that day. When connecting with a mentee, she hopes to offer encouragement and guidance from her own experiences while also building a relationship that’s mutually supportive. Shanda’s goal is to help another parents or caregivers feel seen and understood, just as she would have benefited from others walking alongside her in this journey.

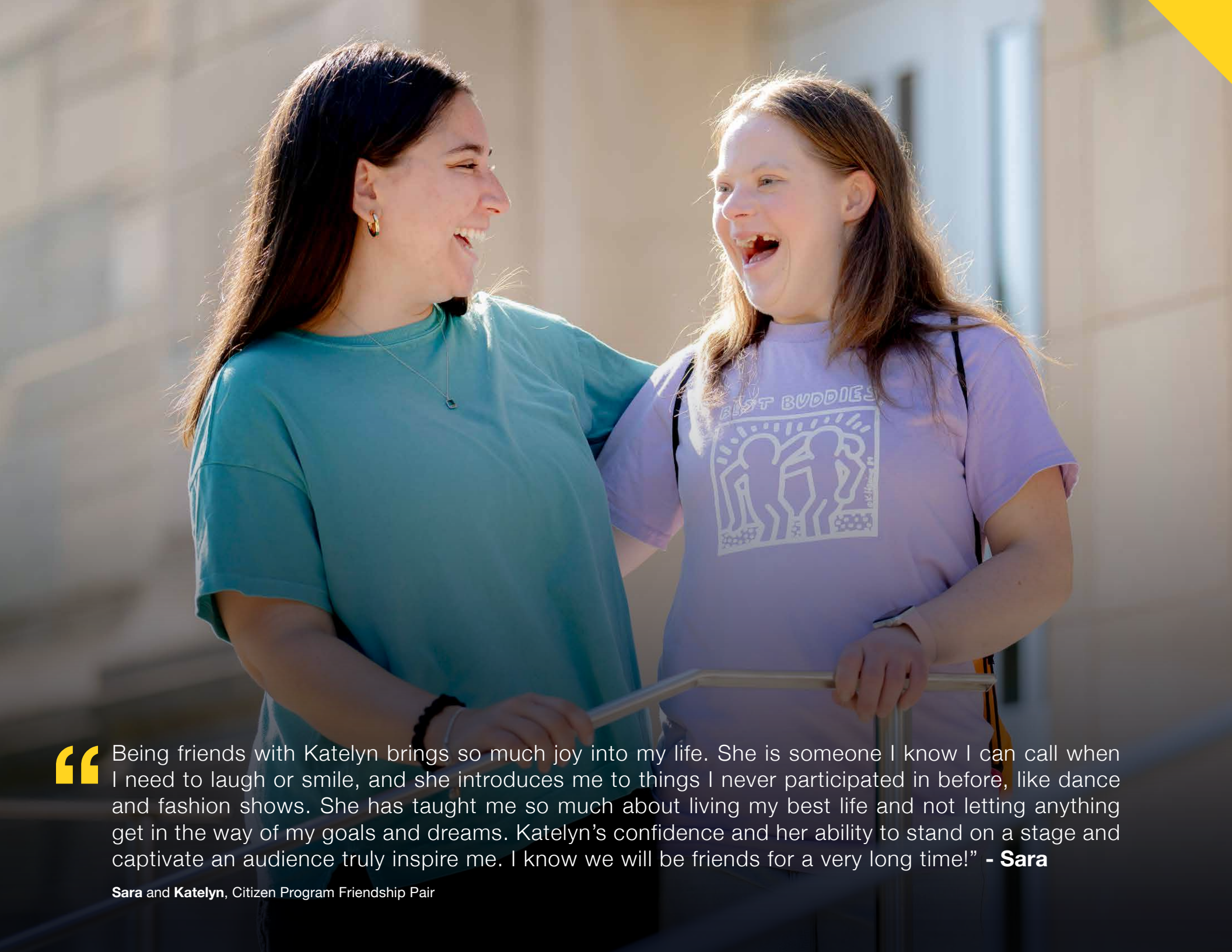
“To any family considering joining Eunie’s Buddies, I would wholeheartedly encourage you to take the leap. This program is a lifeline of connection and community, filled with people who truly “get it.” You’ll find support, friendship, and the kind of shared understanding that makes all the difference. You are not alone,” says Shanda.

Family
Key Program Stats MA & RI

Eunie's Buddies participants

10
Participaants

> “You’ll find support, friendship, and the kind of shared understanding that makes all the difference. You are not alone.” **- Shanda**



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair

Michigan







Michigan Year in Review

This past year has been full of incredible memories, community building and program growth for Best Buddies in Michigan. We are proud of the progress we've made in our state and can't wait for what 2025 will bring.

Our Friendship program has grown to 17 chapters, with three new additions in the high school space. We also added a new Citizens program chapter in Washtenaw County to complement our already existing chapter in Oakland county, and hope to bring more of these throughout Michigan. Andrews University is our latest addition to our college ranks, making nine schools pairing college students with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In 2025, we hope to surpass 25 chapters and reach areas of our state that we are not currently serving. In total, we are serving nearly 1,000 individuals through our Friendship program and have seen a 25 percent increase in total participants since the end of 2023. Additionally, we are proud of the work our Best Buddies Jobs program has done in the past year by making seven placements and currently serving 20 individuals with IDD. With recent approval to work with more counties in Michigan, we plan to make at least seven new placements in 2025 while expanding our employer partner base.

All of this is made possible by the generous support of our community. Participants, families, supporters and sponsors collectively have helped us grow our programming and impact more individuals this year than ever before. Our Best Buddies Friendship Walk at the Detroit Zoo saw more than 1000 registrants, a new Michigan record, and raised $70,000 to support our mission in Michigan. We also had an amazing night at another Detroit landmark, the Henry Ford Museum, for our 2024 Champion of the Year Gala. More than 200 guests gathered for a memorable night celebrating our participants and raised more than $152,000. Top Champion Alexis Fisher raised $26,000 and took home the title of Champion of the Year!

We're deeply grateful for the incredible support we've received across our state and are excited to continue making an even greater impact. Thank you to our community, sponsors, volunteers, and donors—your dedication has truly changed lives.

Jonathan Ganci, Director Mission Advancement, Michigan

Best Buddies in Michigan
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Spencer and **Addison**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Spencer & Addison

One-To-One Friendships

South Lyon High School, MI

Hi everyone! I'm Addison, the president of the Best Buddies chapter at South Lyon High School. I've been involved with Best Buddies for two years, and this year I had the amazing opportunity to be paired with Spencer. We love listening to music, cracking silly jokes, and doing fun activities together. I'm so grateful to be part of something that helps make our school a more inclusive and welcoming place.

Every time I'm with Spencer, I know we're going to have a great time. We connected instantly when we met, and I'm incredibly thankful to be his buddy. We've gone bowling, visited the cider mill, and our favorite memory so far is going Christmas shopping at the mall. Being part of Best Buddies has truly changed my life. I plan to stay involved for years to come and will always treasure the memories and joy this experience has given me.

> "Best Buddies has helped me get through my freshman year. I've met so many new people and got to hang out with my friends during the activities!" **- Spencer**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats MI

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
27 Chapters	**402** Participants	**38** Chapters	**889** Participants	**141** Chapters	**4,513** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
28 Chapters	**1,086** Participants	**273** Participants	**290** Participants



Alexis, Best Buddies Jobs participant
T.J. Maxx, Troy, MI

Alexis

Integrated Employment

T.J. Maxx, Troy, MI

Before becoming involved with Best Buddies, life wasn't always easy for Alexis. School had always been a challenge, and she often found herself without many friends. But that all started to change when she joined the Best Buddies Jobs program. It was there that she began to see a different side of life—one filled with opportunities and new experiences. The social connections she has made through Best Buddies created a sense of inclusion and belonging. It wasn't long before Alexis began participating in more events, including the Best Buddies Leadership Conference (BBLC), and Champion of the Year.

Alexis is thrilled with how much her life has transformed and the positive impact her job has had on her. "I have been more productive since getting a job and I enjoy having a place to go each day and being part of a team.

"At my job I have to stay focused and use customer service skills, organizational skills and time management. I have learned customer service skills and self-advocacy skills. I like staying busy at work and enjoy having my own money to spend," Alexis said.

Alexis looks forward to contributing to her team and having a sense of purpose.

As she looks ahead, Alexis has big plans for the future. "I would love to save enough money to get my own car one day."

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats MI

Jobs

177
Participants Employed

207
Participants

> "I have learned customer service skills and self-advocacy skills. I like staying busy at work and enjoy having my own money to spend" **- Alexis**



Madison, Best Buddies Ambassador

Madison

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Rochester, MI

Hi, my name is Madison, and I'd love to share how Best Buddies has positively impacted my life—and why I believe it's so important to get involved.

I'm matched in a one-to-one friendship with my buddy Sarah! We love getting our nails done, going out to dinner each month, seeing movies, and attending concerts together. Our friendship has brought so much joy to my life.

Best Buddies has truly helped my social life blossom. I love being part of this organization because it offers so many opportunities to connect and grow. Each month, we do fun group activities like visiting the cider mill or having gatherings at MOD Pizza. One of my favorite memories was walking onto the court for the Detroit Pistons high-five tunnel—it was so exciting to meet the players and be part of the action!

We also participate in larger events like the Friendship Walk and this incredible gala. And recently, I attended an Ambassadors training at Ally, where I worked with a speech coach to strengthen my public speaking and advocacy skills. That experience inspired me to attend the Best Buddies Leadership Conference next year. I'm passionate about the mission of Best Buddies and want to use what I've learned to bring even more people into the community.

Best Buddies fills me with happiness, excitement, and a deep sense of belonging. It's an amazing organization that has given me friendships, confidence, and countless opportunities—and I'm so grateful to be part of it.

> "Best Buddies fills me with happiness, excitement, and a deep sense of belonging." **- Madison**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats MI

Ambassadors

7
Ambassadors

Promoters

48
Chapters

691
Participants

Transitions

91
Participants

Minnesota







Minnesota Year in Review

2024 was a year of impactful growth and program expansion for Best Buddies in Minnesota. Our one-to-one friendship and leadership development programs served over 2,200 people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across 116 cities and 24 counties in Minnesota. We opened 13 new school chapters, partnering with 40 schools in total, from elementary to college, to promote inclusion and belonging for all students. Additionally, our adult friendship program, called Best Buddies Citizens, grew to six different chapters across the state from Owatonna to the Twin Cities to Sherburne County. In total, 44 adults were matched in one-to-one friendships providing a lifeline of connection for those often left out.

In line with our mission to spread awareness about the importance of inclusion, our staff team trained 76 Ambassadors and student leaders to advocate for inclusion, hosted disabilities awareness trainings with several companies, and brought 20 student leaders, chapter advisors and Ambassadors to the annual Best Buddies Leadership Conference in Bloomington, Indiana.

The incredible support from our two signature events—the Best Buddies Friendship Walk and the Champion of the Year Gala—has been vital in helping Best Buddies Minnesota create opportunities for inclusion and leadership for individuals with and without IDD.

This spring, our Friendship Walk raised over $110,000, bringing together nearly 800 walkers, 70 volunteers, and 16 generous sponsors. It was an inspiring day that proved: inclusion truly lives here in Minnesota.

In the fall, we hosted our 7th annual Champion of the Year Gala at Quincy Hall, which turned out to be our biggest event yet in both attendance and funds raised. Thanks to the generosity of 450 guests and the incredible efforts of nine Champion Candidates, we raised over $360,000—making it the 6th highest-grossing Best Buddies gala in the nation!

On behalf of our Advisory Board and the staff at Best Buddies in Minnesota, I would like to thank our generous sponsors, dedicated volunteers, and selfless donors for your support.

Moving into 2025, we intend to build on this momentum to partner with more schools, empower our volunteers, grow our community-based programs, and engage more companies to spread awareness about the importance of inclusion. Thank you for being part of our success!

Katey DeMarais, State Director, Minnesota

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P 612.460.7440



Will and **Milan**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Will & Milan

One-to-One Friendships

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities, Minneapolis, MN

Will first joined Best Buddies as a 9th grader at Mounds View High School. Through the chapter, he made meaningful friendships and felt a stronger sense of inclusion within his school community. His connection with his high school buddy remains strong to this day. That positive experience left a lasting impact, and when he started at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities in fall 2023, Will knew he wanted to stay involved. That's where he met his current buddy, Milan.

Will and Milan share a passion for running—they race together several times a year and enjoy participating in other chapter events like bowling, sporting games, and dances. For Milan, Best Buddies has been a much-needed break from the demands of college life. Between coursework and internships, his time with Will offers a chance to unwind, have fun, and recharge.

"Since joining Best Buddies and meeting Will, I've been having more fun and feeling more motivated than ever before," Milan shared.

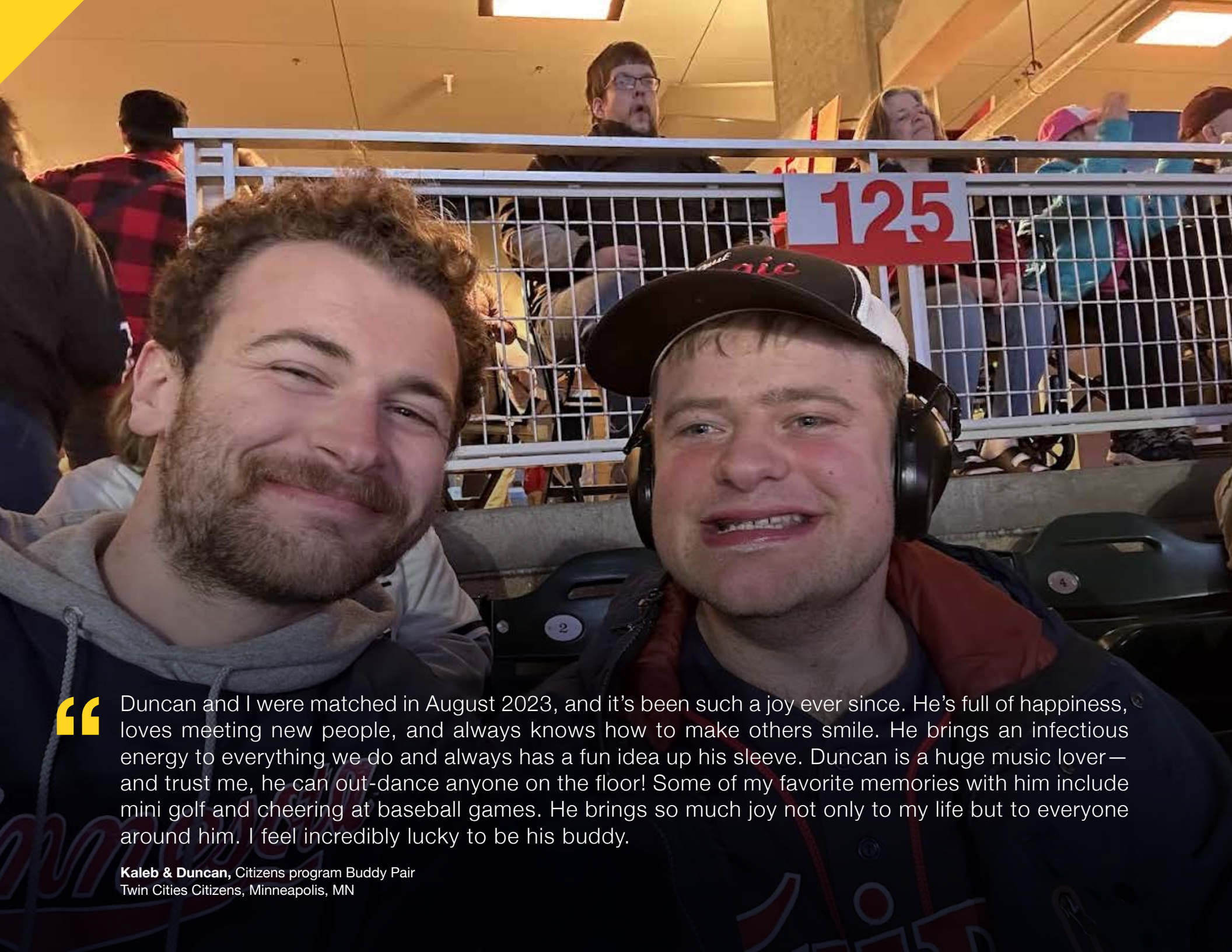
Together, Will and Milan motivate each other—on the race course and in life. With Will's upbeat spirit and Milan's drive, there's no finish line they can't cross side by side.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats MN

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
14 Chapters	**149** Participants	**9** Chapters	**358** Participants	**19** Chapters	**476** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
3 Chapters	**88** Participants	**301** Participants	**74** Participants

> "Milan always looks out for me, helps me, includes me, and we have so much fun. I feel so lucky to have Milan as my Best Buddy!" **- Will**



“Duncan and I were matched in August 2023, and it’s been such a joy ever since. He’s full of happiness, loves meeting new people, and always knows how to make others smile. He brings an infectious energy to everything we do and always has a fun idea up his sleeve. Duncan is a huge music lover—and trust me, he can out-dance anyone on the floor! Some of my favorite memories with him include mini golf and cheering at baseball games. He brings so much joy not only to my life but to everyone around him. I feel incredibly lucky to be his buddy.

Kaleb & Duncan, Citizens program Buddy Pair
Twin Cities Citizens, Minneapolis, MN



Lucy, Best Buddies Ambassador

Lucy

Leadership Development

State Ambassador, Golden Valley, MN

Lucy was first introduced to Best Buddies in 2020 through her friend and Best Buddies Global Ambassador, Mikayla Holmgren. Since then, she's become a passionate advocate and leader within the organization. Lucy has completed numerous Ambassador trainings, earned the role of State Ambassador, is matched in the Citizens program, and most recently attended the 2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference.

To Lucy, being an Ambassador means focusing on her strengths rather than her disability. "I'm very independent—I live on my own in an apartment. I have strong communication skills and a real motivation to give back to my community. I work and volunteer to support myself," she says. Her journey as a State Ambassador has been especially meaningful because "it's important to promote inclusion and acceptance."

Lucy is also a strong advocate for the Citizens program, which has played a key role in her life. "Best Buddies has given me meaningful friendships," she shares, "and I want others to have that same opportunity."

After graduating from the Bethel BUILD program, Lucy found herself missing the everyday connections she once had. "I always had great friendships in high school and college with so many people, but afterward, I started to feel isolated," Lucy says. That changed when she joined the Citizens program. "The most awesome thing about the Citizens program is my buddy, Maddie. I love spending time with her, and she supports me at my Special Olympics events."

From the Friendship Walk and Champion of the Year Gala to the Dreaming Big Without Limits Fashion Show and countless Citizens events throughout the year, Lucy is a familiar and enthusiastic presence at nearly every Best Buddies gathering.

> "I really enjoy when all the buddies come together for events in the community. It's truly inclusive. Everyone should have a friend and feel special." **- Lucy**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats MN

Ambassadors	Promoters	
9	**15**	**160**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Missouri







Missouri Year in Review

What a year it has been! Thanks to our extraordinary supporters, volunteers, and community partners, Best Buddies in Missouri impacted more lives than ever through innovative programs that foster friendships, develop leaders, and promote inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Best Buddies in Missouri had a landmark year, launching 18 new Friendship chapters and engaging a record-breaking 2,500+ student participants! A major driver of this growth has been our expansion in elementary schools, where young student leaders are introduced early to the values of inclusion—lessons they will carry with them throughout their academic journey and beyond.

Another milestone in 2024 was the launch of our Integrated Employment program in St. Louis, marking a powerful step forward in creating meaningful, competitive job opportunities for individuals with IDD. We're incredibly grateful to Blues for Kids for their vital support in helping bring this program to life.

On Saturday, May 4, nearly 900 supporters gathered at Kirkwood Park to celebrate inclusion at our 2024 Friendship Walk. Their incredible energy helped raise awareness for Best Buddies and generated more than $76,000 to support our programs!

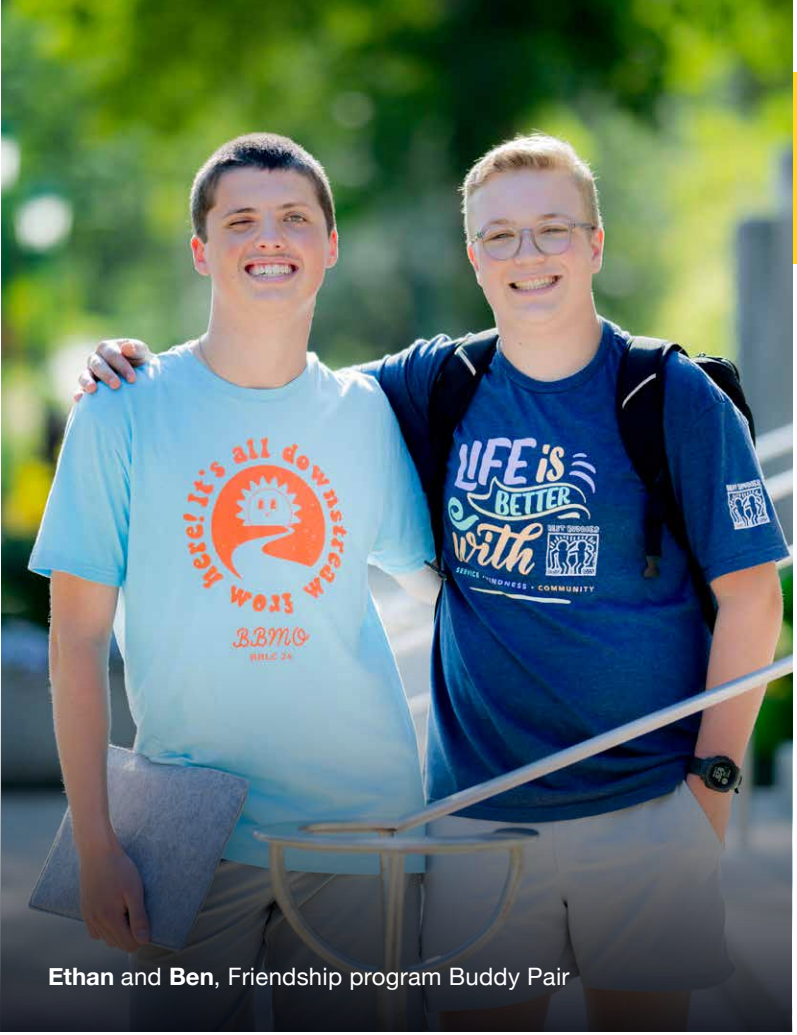
Later in the year, the 2024 Champion of the Year Gala showcased an extraordinary group of Champion Candidates whose dedication broke all previous fundraising records—bringing in over $150,000 for Best Buddies in Missouri. Congratulations to our Grand Champions, Bennett and Neddie, for leading the charge!

Thanks to the collective efforts of our community, Missouri is becoming a more inclusive, connected, and welcoming place for people of all abilities. While we're proud of the progress made in 2024, we know the journey is far from over—and we're more inspired than ever to build on this momentum in the years ahead.

We invite you to join us in providing these life-changing programs by identifying schools, businesses, funders, and community leaders throughout Missouri whose partnership can advance the Best Buddies mission. Thank you for all you do in support of building a more inclusive Missouri.

Tim Bommarito, State Director, Missouri

Best Buddies in Missouri
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Ethan and **Ben**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Ethan & Ben

One-To-One Friendships

Eureka High School, Eureka, MO

Ethan and Ben have known each other since first grade, but joining Best Buddies in high school has propelled their friendship and empowered each of them to become champions for inclusion.

Before Best Buddies, Ethan had few meaningful friendships and found it difficult to focus, leaving him with little to look forward to. Ben, on the other hand, felt he wasn't doing much for his community and wanted to make a real difference. Best Buddies has been a game-changer, giving Ethan and Ben opportunities to develop leadership skills, connect with their local community, and form an even stronger bond with each other.

Since becoming an official buddy pair, Ethan and Ben have shared countless experiences, from fishing and sledding to bowling and enjoying pizza at their favorite spot. They appreciate each other's easygoing nature—Ethan admires Ben's positivity and flexibility, while Ben loves Ethan's infectious energy and kindhearted personality. Their friendship extends beyond just the two of them, as they spend time with other friends, further fostering inclusion and connection.

Through Best Buddies, both friends have grown as individuals and leaders in their school community. Ethan has become more focused, observant, and social, participating in various events and even performing in their Winter Performance. Ben has taken on leadership roles, including establishing his school's Special Olympics planning committee. Their friendship has been strengthened through their shared experiences, making them not just buddies, but lifelong friends. Best Buddies has empowered them to create a more inclusive environment while positively impacting each other's liv

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats MO

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
22 Chapters	**892** Participants	**15** Chapters	**254** Participants	**23** Chapters	**925** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
7 Chapters	**278** Participants	**33** Participants	**56** Participants

> "Best Buddies gives me a sense of pride because I know I'm making a difference." **- Ben**



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Ethan, Best Buddies Ambassador

Ethan

Leadership Development

Ambassador, St. Louis, MO

"I first got involved with Best Buddies through the Maryville University chapter, where I served on the Advisory Board. Today, I'm proud to serve as the State Ambassador for Best Buddies in Missouri, participate in the St. Louis Citizens chapter, and recently received the incredible honor of being named a Global Ambassador for Best Buddies International.

My mom has always been a role model for me. Watching her lead and make a difference inspired me to step into leadership myself. At Maryville, I embraced that opportunity by serving as Buddy Director and joining the executive committee. Those roles helped me realize the impact I could make—and I've been seeking out leadership opportunities in Best Buddies ever since. I love speaking to others about the power of inclusion and friendship, and I'm passionate about using social media to advocate for myself and others.

Best Buddies has truly changed my life. Since joining in 2016, my confidence has grown tremendously. I've learned to embrace who I am and to use my voice to lead and lift others. Along the way, I've met so many amazing people who've supported me—and Best Buddies has become like family.

Everyone has dreams and goals, and while we may face challenges, those challenges should never stop us. There is always a way forward.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats MO

Ambassadors	Promoters	
11	**42**	**1,257**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "Best Buddies focuses on what we can do—helping us build meaningful friendships, find fulfilling jobs, and reach for our dreams. **- Ethan**

Nevada







Nevada Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in Nevada set ambitious goals to further our mission of creating opportunities for one-to-one friendships and leadership development for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). After retiring from my corporate job, I joined Best Buddies in Nevada with a renewed passion for making a difference. By expanding our programs and fostering new partnerships, we aimed to reach more individuals than ever before.

The dedication of our team, volunteers, and supporters have brought our vision of inclusion to life in communities across Nevada.

Our progress this year has been fueled by strong collaboration. In 2024, we launched six new school chapters, welcoming back UNLV (University of Las Vegas) and UNR (University of Las Vegas-Reno) along with 81 Friendship matches, with an impressive 967 members. Through our leadership development programs, we empowered participants to take on meaningful roles in their schools and communities. None of this would have been possible without the steadfast support of our donors, volunteers, and community partners, who believe in our mission and continue to push it forward.

One of the most exciting milestones of the year was our Best Buddies Friendship Walk, which raised an incredible $58,000 thanks to the support of more than 700 walkers, including participants, families, and sponsors. More than just a walk, this event is a celebration of inclusion—a day where new friendships are formed and our community rallies around a shared goal of creating a more inclusive world for people with IDD. The funds raised go directly toward strengthening our programs and reaching more individuals across the state.

Another standout highlight was the 2024 Champion of the Year Gala, held at the Las Vegas World Market Center in their stunning Worldview banquet room. With 130 guests in attendance, the event raised more than $150,000—a truly transformative milestone. This success ensures the sustainability of our work and expands our ability to provide life-changing opportunities for individuals with IDD. The Champion of the Year campaign not only raises critical funds but also amplifies awareness, engaging more people in our mission and inspiring them to be part of the change.

As we look ahead to the future, Best Buddies in Nevada remains committed to expanding our reach and deepening our impact. With the continued support of our community, we will create more opportunities for inclusion, grow our programs, and build a world where everyone can thrive.

Together, we are building a brighter future for individuals with IDD, and we are excited for all that 2025 will bring.

Celeste Brooks, Director, Mission Advancement

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Courtney and **Jody**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Jody & Courtney

One-To-One Friendships

Las Vegas, NV

When Best Buddies in Nevada first heard about Courtney and Jody, they immediately thought about their contrasting personalities—Courtney, one of the most outgoing people she had met, and Jody, quiet and reserved. They thought; “This would be a wonderful recipe for a one-to-one friendship.”

Courtney and Jody have been matched in a one-to-one friendship since October 18, 2018, and since then, they have been an unstoppable pair. Together, they attended Best Buddies Friendship Walks and Galas, strengthening their bond and supporting the mission. Courtney has proudly served as the MC for the Friendship Walk for the past two years, as well as The Party for a Purpose and last year’s Champion of the Year Gala. Jody made a lasting impact as the 2024 mission speaker at the gala—and she hit it out of the park!

As members of the Best Buddies Citizens program and Nevada State Ambassadors, Courtney and Jody not only celebrate their friendship but also inspire others to build meaningful connections.

Before joining Best Buddies, Courtney was looking for a way to get involved in her community and give back. Meanwhile, Jody described her life as boring because she didn’t have any friends to spend time with. That all changed when they found each other through Best Buddies. Now, they enjoy shopping together, dining at Italian restaurants, watching movies, and cheering loudly at sporting events—GO KNIGHTS GO!

For Courtney, Best Buddies is a reminder that there is so much good, love, and happiness in the world—and when we bring those things to others, they come back to us tenfold. Jody shared that she has learned to speak up and stand up for herself. She’s no longer shy and has come to understand how important it is to socialize and build connections.

Above all, the most beautiful part of their friendship is simple: they are always there for each other, they trust each other, and they know they have each other’s back.

Their story is a testament to the power of friendship, proving that one connection can truly change a life. back to us tenfold. Jody shared that she has learned to speak up and stand up for herself. She’s no longer shy and has come to understand how important it is to socialize and build connections.

Above all, the most beautiful part of their friendship is simple: they are always there for each other, they trust each other, and they know they have each other’s back.

Their story is a testament to the power of friendship, proving that one connection can truly change a life.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats NV

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
19 Chapters	**377** Participants	**7** Chapters	**95** Participants	**19** Chapters	**432** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
1 Chapters	**13** Participants	**100** Participants	**62** Participants



“Our friendship makes me smile when I am with Abby. I feel included and never judged, which means so much. I enjoy spending time with Gabi; when we hang out, it’s always so much fun. I wouldn’t miss those moments for the world—they make me feel valued and happy.” **- Gabi**

Gabi and **Abby**, Friendship Program Buddy Pair - Citizens Program, Las Vegas, NV



Nicholas, Best Buddies Ambassador

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats NV

Ambassadors	Promoters	
31	**19**	**377**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Nicholas
Leadership Development
Ambassador, Las Vegas, NV

Before becoming involved with Best Buddies in Nevada, I grew up in New Jersey, where I experienced both bullying and friendships during my elementary and middle school years. At the time, I didn't question it—I just rolled along, often acting like the class clown to get by. But in high school, things began to shift. I started to gain confidence and understand the value of real friendships and meaningful bonds. I was actively engaged with several recreational centers, and I have been involved with the special needs community since my sophomore year of high school. This work has shaped who I am today.

I've always wanted to be a guide, a light, and a brother figure to those in the special needs community. My journey with Best Buddies Nevada began when my buddy match, Kellie Connolly, invited me to a Best Buddies Nevada event.

Best Buddies in Nevada taught me to use my voice, connect with others, and build bonds through leadership skills and one-to-one friendships. This organization shows love and care to every single one of its members. They believed in me before I believed in myself, and that's something I will forever cherish. Learning about the Ambassador Program and its mission deeply inspired me. It gave me the courage to pursue self-advocacy with determination and to help others recognize their strength and potential.

I attended my first Best Buddies event in December 2016, and by 2022, I became a full member. Throughout this time, I participated in Ambassador classes that helped me grow as a leader. Since officially joining, my life has transformed. I've developed into a strong advocate and a source of inspiration for others.

Best Buddies has given me the tools and confidence to step into leadership roles, and I'm committed to continuing to inspire and uplift those around me. I also work for Raising Cane's, further contributing to my journey of leadership and growth.

When you think you've reached your limit, I promise you haven't. The only limits are the ones you place on yourself. With determination and belief in your abilities, you can achieve more than you ever imagined. Remember, your disability does not define you—it's your strength and resilience that truly shine.

> "Leadership is not about titles or recognition. It's about the lives you impact and the positive change you inspire." **- Robin S. Sharma**

New Hampshire







New Hampshire Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in New Hampshire was excited to build on the momentum of 2023, focusing on expanding our programs, increasing one-to-one matches in the Citizens program, enhancing our Ambassador curriculum, and laying the groundwork for Pre-Employment Transition Services. I am happy to share that we successfully achieved these goals. We added new School Friendship programs, increasing our one-to-one friendship matches to 124 and bringing the total number of students in our programs to 1,040. In the Citizens program, we matched 16 participants (137 members in total), and we trained 15 Ambassadors who played a key role in multiple events throughout the year. One of our State Ambassadors, Katelyn McKivergan, made history as the first Ambassador from New Hampshire to deliver a speech at the closing ceremonies of the 2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference—a moment of immense pride for all of us. Additionally, we collaborated to develop new Ambassador training sessions, which were well attended and well received. For example, one of our local business partners hosted an Ambassador training on social media, dedicating a full day to teaching best practices. We also took significant steps toward introducing Pre-Employment Transition Services in our state.

Our two annual Friendship Walks were a tremendous success! Together, they raised an impressive $189,000 and welcomed over 1,000 attendees. This year marked the eleventh year of our Friendship Walk in Concord and the second year of our Walk in Exeter, both of which continue to grow each year. Seeing this incredible growth and community support is truly inspiring!

Our two Champion of the Year events were as magnificent as ever, creating lasting memories for all who attended. The Nashua Champion event featured 11 incredible Champions from across New Hampshire and raised over $215,000. Meanwhile, our inaugural Party with a Purpose at the beautiful Wentworth by the Sea Country Club welcomed four Champions and raised $40,000. Each night was filled with unforgettable moments and powerful showcases of our mission of inclusion.

As we step into 2025, we are filled with excitement for the future. We plan to build on the incredible momentum created by our dedicated volunteers, supporters, and donors. Our goals include expanding Friendship chapters across the state, increasing participant matches in the Citizens program, creating new growth opportunities for our Ambassadors, and continuing our efforts to bring Pre-Employment Transition Services—and ultimately, the Jobs program—to New Hampshire.

We strive to make a meaningful difference in our community and look forward to another year of growth and success in New Hampshire.

Sarra Dennehy Lynch, State Director, New Hampshire

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Emma and **Harrell**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Emma & Harrell

One-To-One Friendships

Souhegan High School, Amherst, NH

For the past three years, the halls of Souhegan High School have been brightened by the presence of one extraordinary friendship. Emma and Harrell, now seniors, met when they were first-year Sabres at the school in Amherst and were matched in the Best Buddies program. Being matched in a one-to-one friendship has enhanced the high school experience for both Emma and Harrell. Emma explains that while many high schoolers worry about the opinions of their peers and whether they are “popular,” she feels that the bond she has with Harrell is more than enough to make her feel like she belongs.

Harrell lists off some fun things he and Emma have done together, including foosball, Candyland, popcorn with movies, petting horses, and bracelet making. His learning specialist, Katie, describes that Harrell’s communication skills and confidence have both blossomed as a result of being part of Best Buddies and having a friend like Emma to bond with. He is more apt to seek out close friendships now that he has experienced such a meaningful one with Emma for the past three years.

Emma and Harrell have had a lasting impact on their school’s chapter, constantly bringing their energy and positivity to meetings, from dance parties to unified basketball games. Emma tells Harrell, “You’re the reason I’m sad to leave high school!” Harrell reinforces those feelings calling Emma his best friend and encouraging individuals in New Hampshire and beyond to “join Best Buddies!”

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats NH

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
3 Chapters	**99** Participants	**5** Chapters	**15** Participants	**31** Chapters	**686** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
3 Chapters	**185** Participants	**162** Participants	**50** Participants

> I love our friendship because I know Harrell will always be there" **- Emma**



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Izabel, Best Buddies Ambassador

Izabel

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Manchester, NH

Izabel's journey with Best Buddies began because of her close relationship with her cousin, Joe, who has Down syndrome, igniting a passion for inclusion that would continue to grow throughout her life. Izabel served as the chapter president at John Stark Regional High School for two years and was selected for the Best Buddies International Young Leaders Council, a group of 30+ individuals who help bridge the gap between the participant and staff experience. Izabel was the first person ever selected for the YLC from New Hampshire. She has competed as a candidate in the Champion of the Year campaign, got involved with the Best Buddies chapter at her college, and joined the Best Buddies in New Hampshire Advisory Board.

"I have been so lucky to get to lead a group of people dedicated to making the lives of others better," Izabel said. "Best Buddies has connected me with my best friends and a community that truly feels like a family. As the Chapter President I was able to pursue my passion for inclusion and as a result, watch inclusion bloom within my school. Overall, my role within Best Buddies has given me friendships that go far beyond the walls of the school and memories that I will cherish forever. As I move forward with my life, I can confidently say that Best Buddies will forever remain a part of it."

As a lifelong advocate, Izabel also notes, "I hope to give everyone the opportunity to feel the friendship, connection, acceptance, and love that radiates from this organization. I owe so much of who I am today to Best Buddies. Best Buddies helps everyone to feel seen, valued, accepted, and included in our community, and I am beyond grateful for that."

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats NH

Ambassadors	Promoters	
9	**9**	**155**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

"Best Buddies helps everyone to feel seen, valued, accepted, and included in our community" **- Izabel**

New Mexico







New Mexico Year in Review

As we reflect on 2024, we are incredibly proud of all that we've accomplished in New Mexico with Best Buddies. From expanding our programs to connecting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to new friendships, jobs, and opportunities, this year has been a testament to the power of inclusion and community. We witnessed many inspiring moments of growth and support across our chapters, as well as increased awareness of the mission.

In 2024, Best Buddies in New Mexico supported 54 school-based chapters, which included six new chapters, and three Citizens chapters. The Jobs program worked with 66 participants, with 42 actively employed in integrated and competitive employment. In the Transitions program, Best Buddies in New Mexico served 142 Albuquerque Public Schools students across eight cohorts and delivered over 100 comprehensive Pre-Employment Transition Services workshops.

To support the continued growth of programs in New Mexico, we hosted two Friendship Walks—one in Albuquerque and a new site in Las Cruces. In Las Cruces, more than 200 supporters joined us for our inaugural Friendship Walk in the southern part of the state, where we raised close to $10,000 to support our programs. Two weeks later in Albuquerque, we hosted the Friendship Walk, welcoming over 300 attendees and raising over $45,000.

The New Mexico Champion of the Year Gala was an incredible event. We welcomed over 120 guests, cheered on six Champion of the Year candidates and their mission partners, and named Michelle Roybal as our 2024 Grand Champion. We are excited to continue the momentum of 2024 events as we enter 2025!

These incredible achievements highlight the dedication of our volunteers and supporters, but they also remind us of the ongoing need that still exists. As we continue our work across New Mexico, it's important to remember that fostering connection, a sense of belonging, and social inclusion are essential for building vibrant, healthy communities.

On behalf of our Advisory Board and the entire team in New Mexico, I want to express my deepest gratitude for your unwavering support of our mission to make friendship and inclusion a reality for all. Thanks to you, we reached remarkable milestones in 2024 that have paved the way for continued growth and success. We're excited for what 2025 holds and are grateful for your belief in the transformative power of inclusion!

Mia Pruzin, Senior Director, State Operations (Interim State Director)

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Maddie and **Kate**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Kate & Maddie

One-To-One Friendships

V. Sue Cleveland High School, Rio Rancho, NM

When I first became aware of how many people in our community live with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) it was eye-opening. I realized that I could make a difference by being part of an organization like Best Buddies, which celebrates the unique qualities of every person. When I joined Best Buddies on my own, I never expected it to have such a ripple effect. Since then, close to 30 of my friends and teammates have joined the mission, and it's amazing to see how our collective efforts continue to grow.

My Best Buddy is Kate. I love the way that Kate makes me feel. She makes me feel loved and trusted, and she makes me feel like my presence at school every day is important to somebody. She is so funny, and she's always laughing. My friendship with Kate thrives because of the person she is and has nothing to do with her disability. My favorite way to connect with Kate is by eating lunch together!

Through Best Buddies, I've made so many new friends. It's been an incredible journey, and I've seen the impact it has had not just on me, but on others too.

I truly believe we all have a role to play in creating a more inclusive society—one where every person is valued and celebrated for who they are. I'm proud to be part of Best Buddies, and I hope others will continue to join us in making the world a more connected and accepting place.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats NM

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
9 Chapters	**86** Participants	**11** Chapters	**136** Participants	**32** Chapters	**387** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
2 Chapters	**18** Participants	**50** Participants	**26** Participants

> "I truly believe we all have a role to play in creating a more inclusive society—one where every person is valued and celebrated for who they are. **- Maddie**



Devine, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Office Depot, Albuquerque, NM

Devine

Integrated Employment

Office Depot, Albuquerque, NM

Before joining Best Buddies, Devine describes his life as great and has always enjoyed building models. Now, as he embarks on his career journey, his goal is to continue reading, learning, and growing—both professionally and personally. He aspires to gain more knowledge and become a better person through his experiences.

At Office Depot, Devine thrives in his role, especially when it comes to helping customers. Whether assisting them in loading new desks and chairs into their cars or ensuring smooth store operations by unloading trucks, he finds fulfillment in making customers' experiences easier. One of the valuable skills he has learned on the job is how to use the box baler—carefully distinguishing between cardboard, which goes in the baler, and plastic, which belongs in the trash.

Now that he earns a paycheck, Devine looks forward to becoming more independent. He hopes to save up to purchase things he may need around the house while also striving to be more respectful and considerate of others. Looking ahead, his ultimate goal is to continue learning, growing, and making a positive impact in both his workplace and community.

> "What I like best about working is helping customers."**- Devine**

Integrated Employment
Office Depot, Albuquerque, NM

Jobs

40
Participants Employed

57
Participants



Michelle, Best Buddies Ambassador

Michelle

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Las Cruces, NM

I'm part of the Best Buddies chapter at New Mexico State University and Ambassador Program. As an Ambassador, I use my voice to share my story and advocate for inclusion. In 2024, I had the honor of giving a speech at the first-ever Best Buddies Friendship Walk in Las Cruces, which was an unforgettable experience. That same year, I became the first Champion of the Year from Las Cruces, which was an incredible accomplishment.

I was inspired to become a self-advocate because I want to show the world that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have value, talent, and a voice that deserves to be heard. My goal is to continue raising awareness, helping others feel included, and proving that we all deserve opportunities to succeed.

Since joining Best Buddies in 2023, my life has completely changed. I have made so many wonderful friends, gained confidence, and realized the power of my voice. I no longer feel like I'm standing on the outside looking in—I feel like I am part of something meaningful.

To anyone with IDD, I want you to know that you are important, you are capable, and you deserve friendship and opportunities just like everyone else. Don't be afraid to share your story, because your voice matters!

> "Don't be afraid to share your story, because your voice matters!" **- Michelle**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats NM

Ambassadors

4
Ambassadors

Promoters

13
Chapters

68
Participants

Transitions

72
Participants

New York







New York Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in New York focused on one key mission: expansion. From growing our programs to reaching new communities, we set out to make inclusion more accessible across the state, and we delivered. This year, we opened 29 new School Friendship chapters, strengthening connections and fostering meaningful relationships among students with and without IDD. Our Citizens program also saw tremendous growth, matching an additional 100 adults in one-to-one friendships, providing essential opportunities for socialization and inclusion. In response to the growing demand for skill-based programs, we continued expanding the Pre-Employment Transitions program, ensuring that more students with IDD received the career-readiness support they need to prepare for life after high school.

Our Best Buddies Jobs program also continued to secure integrated, competitive employment for adults with IDD, helping them achieve independence and financial stability. This year, we were proud to partner with new employers, including Citi Field and Manhattan Psychiatric Center, further expanding opportunities for inclusive hiring. The pipeline from Transitions to Jobs remains a critical pathway, ensuring that individuals with IDD have the resources and opportunities to build fulfilling careers.

Signature events once again proved to be powerful drivers of awareness and support. In 2024, our five Friendship Walks, including a brand-new Walk in Buffalo, welcomed more than 2,500 registrants statewide and raised an incredible $378,792. The Champion of the Year galas in Albany and Rochester brought together 350 guests and raised $140,000, with winners collectively raising more than $20,000. Meanwhile, NYC's Party for a Purpose at Hearst Tower welcomed 250 guests and raised an impressive $400,000. Lastly, the TCS NYC Marathon team grew to 17 runners, collectively raising $97,857 to fund our mission.

Looking ahead, Best Buddies New York is eager to build on this momentum. In 2025, we hope to expand programming to include Best Buddies' newest pillar: Family Support. With the unwavering support of our community, we are confident in our ability to create even greater opportunities for inclusion. Together, we will continue to foster a world where everyone, regardless of ability, is valued, celebrated, and given the opportunities they deserve.

Sophie Dubuisson Shah, State Director, New York

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Katie and **Bella**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Bella & Katie

One-To-One Friendships

Nazareth University, Rochester, NY

Katie and Bella's friendship and bond started with Best Buddies but extends far beyond the program. Bella says, "Before Best Buddies, I felt very lonely and like I was missing something in my life. I have always loved the idea of inclusion and making sure everyone feels seen, but I never knew how to show that until now."

The pair spends much of their time together, doing activities on campus or getting food. Katie said, "I love the inclusive activities we do together in collaboration with other clubs on campus. It spreads our mission to the sports teams, which I love because I play hockey! We always sit together at meetings and do activities together while catching up."

Bella and Katie say that finding a group they feel comfortable with and a place where they can share their compassion for inclusion and friendship was just what they needed. "Since joining Best Buddies, I have found a piece of me that was missing before. I have made so many friendships and so many memories," Bella says.

Bella attended the Best Buddies Leadership Conference in 2024 where she was trained in leadership skills to bring back to her chapter. "Best Buddies is so inspiring, empowering and inclusive which I saw firsthand throughout the conference. I had the ability to not only meet more people from my area, but from all around the world, who share the same love and passion I have for Best Buddies."

Bella and Katie are excited to continue their friendship this year and beyond. "I love that my buddy and I can have a good time wherever we go and whatever we do - that is what friendship is all about. We are never bored when we are together and always have so much fun!" says Bella.

> "Best Buddies is so inspiring, empowering and inclusive." **- Bella**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats NY

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
40 Chapters	**987** Participants	**33** Chapters	**670** Participants	**89** Chapters	**3,472** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
28 Chapters	**804** Participants	**506** Participants	**416** Participants



John, Best Buddies Jobs participant
The National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New York, NY

John

Integrated Employment

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New York, NY

I've been involved with Best Buddies since graduating from St. John's University in 2022, where I majored in Anthropology and minored in Economics. I first heard about Best Buddies through my career advisor, and since I have ADHD and Asperger's, I qualified for the program. They really helped me figure out where to look for jobs and gave me great resources during my search.

I work part-time as a Visitor Services Associate at the 9/11 Memorial Museum, a job I started in February 2023. At first, I was helping enforce museum policies, scanning tickets, and giving directions. After a year, I advocated for myself and started working in the box office during busy seasons, which has been a great experience. I love meeting people from all over the world, and my job has taught me discipline, teamwork, and how to handle tough customer situations. I've even picked up some Spanish to help Sanish-speaking visitors!

I've learned a lot on the job, from cash handling and operating projectors to managing ticket systems. My love for history, strong memory for facts, and communication skills really help me in this role.

Having a job has definitely made my life better—I can pay for things I enjoy, like The New York Times and Peacock TV, and I can buy gifts for my friends and family. In the next five years, I hope to go full-time, grow in the museum field, and eventually have my own place.

For anyone considering Best Buddies, my advice is to stay patient and persistent. It took me a year to find the right job, but it was 100% worth it—I'm now doing something I truly enjoy!

> "Having a job has definitely made my life better!"
> **- John**

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats NY

Jobs

55
Participants Employed

63
Participants



Oscar, Best Buddies Ambassador

Oscar

Leadership Development

Ambassador, New York, NY

Oscar was introduced to Best Buddies at 18 while figuring out his next steps after high school. “I applied to a few other programs and was not accepted, but Best Buddies accepted me,” he shared. Oscar first joined Best Buddies through the adult-based one-to-one Citizens Friendship program. “My current buddy’s name is Gregg, and we have done a lot of fun activities together. He’s very warm with his smile, reliable, and always on time. He checks in on me almost every day because he cares about me.”

Soon after joining, Oscar became involved in the Ambassadors program, embracing his role as a self-advocate. He even attended the 2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference in Indiana as an Ambassador. Oscar’s passion for self-advocacy extends beyond Best Buddies. As a filmmaker, he creates content focused on gaining independence as someone with a disability. “I am a huge self-advocate in many different ways, seeking opportunities to travel around the state and country to share the Oscar Show, My Independent Life, and the Best Buddies mission.”

Through his advocacy, Oscar hopes to achieve even greater independence. “I want to live and work on my own, get more involved in all pillars of Best Buddies, and share my story – it is important to share because I want other people to believe they can live more independently too.”

Since joining Best Buddies, Oscar’s life has changed in many ways – he’s made more friends, joined new programs, and continues to expand his network. “I bring my business cards to every event to make more connections. I’m like the mayor!”

When asked what message he has for others with IDD, Oscar says: “It is very important to take small steps toward independence so it’s not overwhelming. Start early and work up to full independence. You can do it!”

> “I want other people to believe they can live more independently too." **- Oscar**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats NY

Ambassadors

24
Ambassadors

Promoters

52
Chapters

1,347
Participants

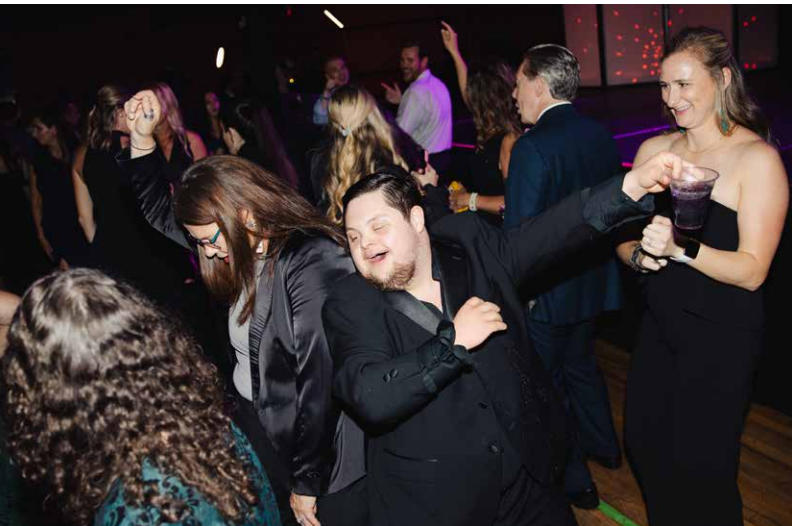
Transitions

117
Participants

North Carolina







North Carolina Year in Review

As Best Buddies in North Carolina reflects on our accomplishments in 2024, we are deeply grateful for the generous support of our donors, sponsors, volunteers, and advocates. Your contributions have been vital to our growth and success throughout the state.

This year, we celebrated significant growth within our team, which opened the door to new and enhanced programs. I stepped into the role of State Director, joined by two new Employment Consultants, Marisa Bowles and Spencer Setcavage, along with Transitions Manager Louise Kelley. We also welcomed Ally Adams as our new Development Coordinator and proudly promoted Erin Vermillion to Lead Program Manager and Kelsey Warlick to Director of Jobs and Transitions.

A highlight of our year was launching the Transition Program, which has allowed our community and employer partners to invest in our students more meaningfully, broadening our overall impact. This fall, we partnered with three schools, launched six cohorts, and successfully engaged 48 students in a comprehensive 10-week program. Participants benefited from two tailored tracks—self-advocacy mentoring and job exploration/workplace readiness—integrating hands-on activities that emphasized community engagement. We are incredibly excited to see how this program will grow in 2025 with the support of our community, sponsors, and state partners.

Our two key signature events, which greatly impacted our efforts in North Carolina, were the Best Buddies Friendship Walks in Charlotte and Raleigh and the Champion of the Year Gala. This year's Friendship Walks were a tremendous success, with over 1,000 participants joining us to promote inclusive friendships and raise awareness. Together, we raised nearly $90,000, attracting numerous new school and community teams eager to support our cause. Additionally, our Champion of the Year Gala celebrated its 9th year! Thanks to the dedication of our amazing Champions, Mission Partners, sponsors, and guests, we raised over $220,000 to support our North Carolina programs. This achievement not only highlights the power of community but also inspires us to continue our work with renewed energy.

On behalf of our organization, I would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all our donors, supporters, and volunteers for their unwavering support and commitment to our mission. We are optimistic about the year ahead and look forward to achieving even greater milestones with your continued partnership.

Meg Graybill, State Director, North Carolina

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Meg and **Katie**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Meg & Katie

One-To-One Friendships

Citizens Pair, Charlotte, NC

Meg and Katie joined Best Buddies in 2023 and were immediately paired in the Friendship program after having become acquainted through a previous job. Katie shared, “Meg’s dad asked me about our Citizens program. I said if Meg joined, I would LOVE to be her buddy—and here we are!” While Meg already had friendships through work, church, and college, her friendship with Katie has had a unique impact on her independence as an adult.

“Ever since joining Best Buddies in 2023, I can spend time with a friend without needing a parent nearby,” said Meg. “I have work, church, and college friends, but because of my epilepsy, hanging out with anyone usually meant having my parents or another responsible adult around. With Katie, I can hang out without needing my mom or dad.”

The two share many interests and can often be found grabbing coffee, heading to the movies or a musical, taking long walks, or attending Best Buddies events. Meg loves that they have so much in common—including being born in the same month—but says, “What I enjoy most about my friendship with Katie is that she understands me.” Katie echoes the sentiment, saying, “Meg’s perspective on life is a breath of fresh air. I enjoy hearing about her opinions and how her life experiences have shaped them. I’m always learning and growing through our conversations and often being reminded of the positives we can find in everything around us.”

Together, Meg and Katie help each other see the world through a more positive lens and always know they have a friend to count on. The consistency of their friendship is incredibly meaningful and refreshing for both. Their story illustrates the beautiful connections that Best Buddies can create. Thank you for your continued support in helping foster friendships like theirs.

> “Katie embraces my “differences” (my word for disability), and we share many things in common.” **- Meg**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats NC

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
10 Chapters	**349** Participants	**8** Chapters	**163** Participants	**29** Chapters	**732** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
11 Chapters	**678** Participants	**137** Participants	**143** Participants



Chloe, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Childtime of Huntersville, NC

Chloe

Integrated Employment

Childtime of Huntersville, NC

Best Buddies in North Carolina is excited to share the inspiring story of Chloe, a remarkable participant in our Integrated Employment program. Before joining Best Buddies, Chloe was pursuing her goals at Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) where she made wonderful friends, learned about her personal passions, and gained great confidence. With this newfound confidence and support of her parents and vocational rehabilitation services, she learned of the opportunity to work with Best Buddies to take her next steps in finding employment opportunities.

Chloe secured her first job in retail with Best Buddies' national partner TJX Companies at her local HomeGoods store. She thoroughly enjoyed her time there, but her true aspiration was to work with kids. With the encouragement of Best Buddies, she returned to CPCC to earn her certificate in Early Childhood Education.

"Best Buddies always supported me and helped me look for a new job working with children. They helped me prepare for interviews and were always by my side. With Best Buddies' support, I found an awesome job working at a childcare learning center. I am so happy and love working with the children."

Thanks to encouraging parents, Best Buddies employment consultants and employer partners, Chloe is thriving at Childtime, finding joy in educating and nurturing children every day.

"My future goals are to save money and take on more responsibilities in the classroom. Patience and kindness are skills I use at work and have also learned new communication skills that help when caring for children," said Chloe.

Thank you for your continued support of Best Buddies, which empowers individuals like Chloe to achieve their dreams.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats NC

Jobs

17
Participants Employed

24
Participants

> "Best Buddies always supported me and helped me look for a new job working with children. They helped me prepare for interviews and were always by my side."
> **- Chloe**



Jacob, Best Buddies Ambassador

Jacob

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Charlotte, NC

We are delighted to introduce you to Jacob who became our first State Ambassador in 2024. Jacob has always been enthusiastic about his role within Best Buddies and has shown incredible commitment to fulfilling his duties as State Ambassador, sharing his experiences participating in our friendship programs and speaking at numerous events to include our Champion of the Year Gala.

Introduced to Best Buddies by a former employee, Jacob attended his first speech writing workshop in 2021, marking the beginning of his journey with Best Buddies. Since joining Best Buddies, Jacob feels his life has changed significantly, especially through his involvement in the Friendship program and as an Ambassador. Jacob shared that, “Life before Best Buddies was pretty normal. Joining Best Buddies proved to be very special for me.”

Jacob often emphasizes the importance of the one-to-one friendships formed through Best Buddies, sharing, “...I love the one-to-one friendship with my buddy too. I enjoy it because having that special buddy feels like a safe place.” One of his favorite memories from the program was spending the holidays with his buddy, making gingerbread houses together.

Best Buddies North Carolina is honored to have Jacob as our State Ambassador and more importantly, our friend. We hope you will take this sage advice Jacob offered and join us as an ambassador or buddy in 2025 – “Take your chances and get involved in a program like Best Buddies!”

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats NC

Ambassadors	Promoters	
6	**22**	**526**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> “Through self-advocacy, I hope to continue talking about my experiences with Best Buddies and I hope to continue to get people involved with the program!” **- Jacob**

Ohio







Ohio Year in Review

2024 was another year of tremendous growth and increased engagement for Best Buddies in Ohio. We opened Best Buddies Friendship chapters in 20 schools across the state and now have 55 Best Buddies Citizens matches statewide. We also launched a school-based program featuring 20 hours of curriculum focused on leadership development and job readiness. More than 100 students from our Best Buddies Friendship chapters participated in these sessions. Across all programs, we served more than 2,000 individuals in 36 cities and 21 counties throughout Ohio. We also hired two new team members, bringing our total to seven full-time staff and expanding our presence with offices in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati.

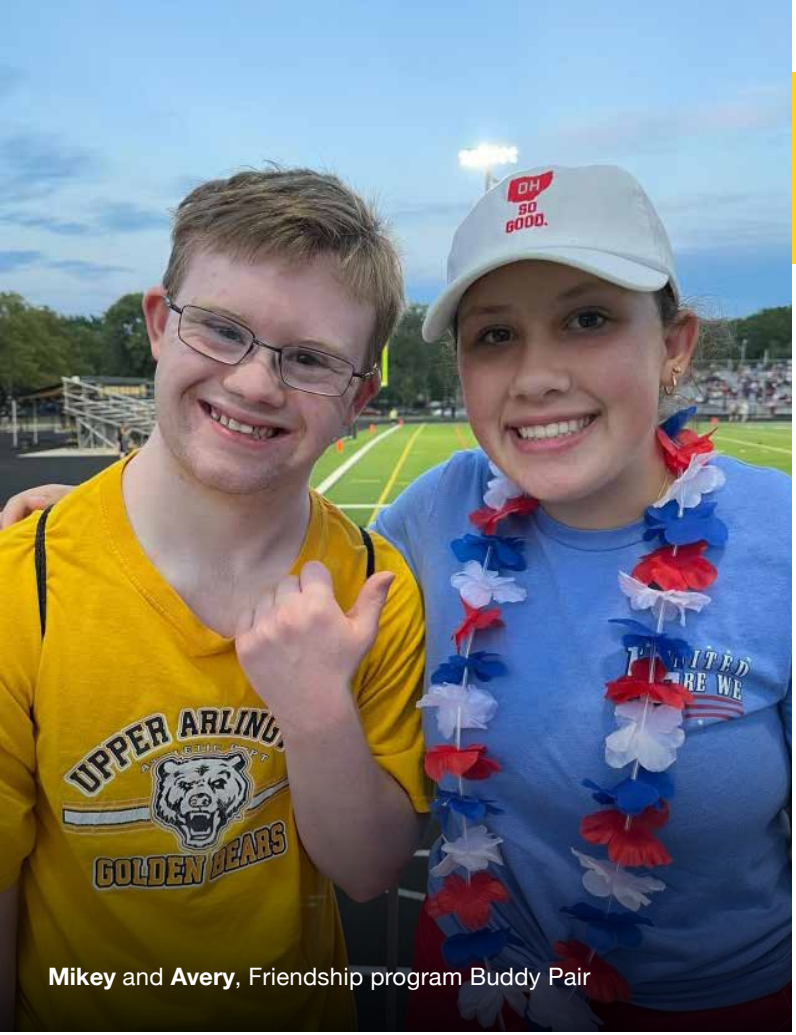
The Best Buddies Friendship Walk was, once again, our most well-attended event since launching programs in Ohio! Attendance grew from 800 participants in 2023 to more than 1,300 in 2024, as people came together in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati to walk for inclusion. Participants, families, and businesses united to raise $140,000 across all three events. We extend a special thank you to our event chairs: Jenna Chilinski and Eric Simon (Cleveland), Renee Stein (Columbus), and Kate Malo and Connie Mehlman (Cincinnati).

Community leaders also championed inclusion through our Champion of the Year Galas in Cleveland and Columbus. Fifteen community leaders competed for the title of Grand Champion of the Year, raising an impressive $289,000. The generosity of our donors laid a strong foundation for the continued success of our friendship and leadership programs, propelling us toward our expanding goals. Congratulations to our Grand Champions: Sue LeDonne Girardi and Julie Panzera in Columbus, and Jackie Wise in Cleveland.

All of us at Best Buddies in Ohio extend our deepest appreciation to our incredible participants, families, volunteers, donors, and corporate sponsors for a successful 2024. Your support and commitment to our mission continue to drive the growth of our programs and create more inclusive communities throughout the state. We are excited to build on this momentum in 2025!

Catlin Skufca, State Director, Ohio

Ohio Office
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Mikey and **Avery**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Avery & Mikey

One-To-One Friendships

Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

Arriving at Upper Arlington High School, Avery felt like something was missing. She missed spending time with the friends she made at Hastings Middle School, where she helped start a Best Buddies Friendship chapter. Determined to bring that same sense of community to her new school, she successfully helped launch a Best Buddies Friendship chapter there as well.

Mikey, who had known Avery since middle school, was excited to join an inclusive community when he started high school the following year. Avery and Mikey were matched in a one-to-one friendship. They loved Best Buddies so much that they continued their friendship by joining Best Buddies at Ohio State University four years later!

Avery has enjoyed building a long-lasting friendship with Mikey through their shared interests. She says, “Mikey and I both enjoy being active and love music. We attend various Best Buddies events at Ohio State University, and we also especially love getting ice cream and playing sports together.”

Mikey shares Avery’s appreciation for their friendship, saying, “Avery is such a great buddy. She talks with me, is very accepting, kind, dependable, and laughs with me! She treats me with respect! I love her so much!”

Avery feels lucky to be friends with Mikey. She says, “Mikey is one of the kindest, most caring people I know. He is always a smiling face to have around and truly cares about me and how I’m doing! Mikey makes sure to attend events that are important to me—especially my musicals, which I believe he has been to nearly ten of!”

True friendship isn’t the only thing they found in Best Buddies—both Mikey and Avery gained many additional benefits from their participation. Mikey shares, “Being a part of Best Buddies has taught me how to be more independent and confident. Through my trusting relationship with Avery, I have learned how to be a good friend by following her genuine example. I am grateful for this program and look forward to continuing the OSU Best Buddies program with Avery!”

Best Buddies has enriched Avery’s life in other meaningful ways as well. She says, “Through various leadership roles I’ve held, I’ve learned how to stay organized, communicate well with others, coordinate events, fundraise large amounts of money, and—most importantly—how to make sure everyone feels included. Through my friendship with Mikey, I’ve learned what attributes I should look for in a friend and how to be there for a friend no matter what.”

Long-lasting friendships can be rare. Through Best Buddies, Avery and Mikey formed a special bond that has supported their social and educational growth from middle school all the way to college.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats OH

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
8 Chapters	**102** Participants	**8** Chapters	**199** Participants	**32** Chapters	**933** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
13 Chapters	**843** Participants	**165** Participants	**147** Participants



“I’ve quickly come to learn that these kinds of activities are so essential in so many ways. The Best Buddies leaders, activities, and trainings they lead are a huge part of why this program truly deserves all possible support. When I first signed up, I had initially thought of this as a “volunteer opportunity.” But after that first meetup with Ryan, I no longer saw it that way. Thanks to Best Buddies, I have a new best friend and a new outlook on life.”**- Jordan**

Jordan and **Ryan** at the Champion of the Year event in Columbus, OH
Citizens program Buddy PaiColumbus, OH



Niles, Best Buddies Ambassador

Niles

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Columbus, OH

Niles first discovered Best Buddies in 2014 when he joined the Ohio State University Chapter. Before that, he shared that it was difficult for him to step out into the community and connect with others. He struggled to find friends who shared his interests and often felt isolated.

Everything began to change when he became part of Best Buddies. In 2018, Niles completed his first self-advocacy training and soon began sharing his story publicly. He spoke at the Best Buddies Friendship Walk, inspiring others with how the program had transformed his life. His leadership journey continued as he served as a State Ambassador and, most recently, attended the 2024 Best Buddies Leadership Conference, where he connected with fellow leaders from across the country.

Since 2014, Niles has been actively involved in three Best Buddies programs: Colleges, Citizens, and Ambassadors. He reflects, “Without Best Buddies, I wouldn’t be able to go out in the community and make new friends. It would be hard for me to find friends with similar interests. Best Buddies gives me the opportunity to meet new people and get to know them.”

Niles encourages others to get involved, saying, “I want everyone to join Best Buddies because it’s a great way to find a sense of community and make new friends.”

His story is a powerful reminder of the impact of inclusion and the strength that comes from friendship and belonging.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats OH

Ambassadors	Promoters	
11	**20**	**168**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> “I want everyone to join Best Buddies because it’s a great way to find a sense of community and make new friends."**- Niles**

Oklahoma







Oklahoma Year in Review

As we look back on 2024, we are filled with pride and gratitude for everything we've achieved together. This year was all about growth, expanding our reach, and deepening our impact in the communities we serve. Thanks to the incredible support from our volunteers, partners, and participants, we were able to achieve goals that once felt far off. We grew our chapters, forged new partnerships, and saw an even greater commitment to inclusion for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across Oklahoma.

One of the most exciting moments of the year was the Best Buddies Friendship Walk, held at the University of Tulsa. Over 250 walkers came together, and we raised $40,000—far surpassing our goals. But beyond the fundraising, we built a meaningful relationship with the University of Tulsa that we're excited to nurture for years to come. It was a wonderful reminder that when we unite around a cause, we can accomplish so much.

Another memorable highlight was the Champion of the Year Gala. It was an incredible evening, and we set a record for Oklahoma, raising over $170,000! More than 230 guests joined us to celebrate the impact of our programs and to hear the inspiring stories of students, parents, and citizens who are living proof of the difference Best Buddies makes. It was a night filled with laughter, tears, and a sense of shared purpose.

As we look ahead to 2025, we're excited to keep that momentum going, especially as we expand into Oklahoma City. With new chapters in the Union School District approved, we're bringing Best Buddies to all 17 schools in the district. It's a huge step forward, and we can't wait to see how this new chapter unfolds. We're also focused on growing our current chapters at OU and OSU, and we are committed to seeing the ripple effect of inclusion spread even farther across the state.

Thank you for everything you've done to make all this possible. As we move forward, we're more determined than ever to create a more inclusive Oklahoma. Together, we're building a future where everyone belongs.

Grant McCarty, Director of Mission Advancement,
Best Buddies Oklahoma

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Alex and **Kai**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Alex & Kai

One-To-One Friendships

Union High School, OK

Meet Alex and Kai. Alex is a student at Union High School, and Kai is a student at the University of Tulsa. From the moment they met through Best Buddies, their connection was instant. What started out as a few casual hangouts turned into a deep, meaningful friendship.

For Alex, his friendship with Kai has made a world of difference. “Kai is one of my best friends,” Alex says, his face lighting up. “We hang out a lot—we play video games, go to campus, or just make up raps together, it’s always a good time.”

Kai feels just as strongly. “Alex brings so much positivity into my life. He’s always smiling, and it’s hard not to get caught up in his good energy. I love bringing him to campus, hanging out with him, and introducing him to my friends. He makes everything more fun.”

Whether they’re watching sports together, studying, or just grabbing lunch, Alex and Kai are inseparable. One of Kai’s favorite things to do is visit Alex at his school and bring him to the University of Tulsa to hang out. “It’s awesome to see Alex on campus. He loves being around new people, and everyone enjoys meeting him. He fits right in,” Kai explains.

Their friendship became so impactful that Alex and Kai were invited to share their story at the Champion of the Year Gala. “It was amazing to be able to talk about our friendship and the impact Best Buddies has had on our lives,” Alex says. “We even got to share a rap we wrote.”

For Kai, being part of Alex’s life has been a rewarding experience. “It’s incredible how much Alex has taught me. He’s taught me how to be a better friend, to appreciate the small moments, and to always be inclusive,” Kai says.

Together, Alex and Kai are a shining example of what Best Buddies is all about—building real, lasting friendships that go beyond differences. They remind us that inclusion isn’t just a buzzword; it’s a powerful way to bring joy, understanding, and respect into our lives.back to us tenfold. Jody shared that she has learned to speak up and stand up for herself. She’s no longer shy and has come to understand how important it is to socialize and build connections.

Above all, the most beautiful part of their friendship is simple: they are always there for each other, they trust each other, and they know they have each other’s back.

Their story is a testament to the power of friendship, proving that one connection can truly change a life.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats OK

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
6 Chapters	**10** Participants	**2** Chapters	**32** Participants	**3** Chapters	**51** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
4 Chapters	**114** Participants	**26** Participants	**19** Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Kelsey, Best Buddies Ambassador

Kelsey

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Tulsa, OK

Hello everyone, my name is Kelsey, and I'm so happy to share what Best Buddies means to me.

I have Williams syndrome, and sometimes things can be harder for me. But through Best Buddies, I've found a place where I truly belong. I've met so many great people, but most of all, I've met my buddy, Michelle. Michelle is my best friend. We hang out all the time. I love family dinners and going to her daughter McKenzie's soccer games. She's always there for me, and she makes me feel special and loved.

What I love about Best Buddies is that it's not just about one friendship—it's about the whole community. It's a place where I feel accepted and never judged. Best Buddies has given me so many wonderful friends, and I always feel supported.

Thank you to everyone who makes Best Buddies so amazing. You make a real difference in people's lives. Because of you, I have friends like Michelle, and I'm proud to be part of this family.

Thank you for supporting Best Buddies and for making sure all of us—no matter our abilities—feel included.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats OK

Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**7**	**10**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "What I love about Best Buddies is that it's not just about one friendship—it's about the whole community. It's a place where I feel accepted and never judged."
> **- Kelsey**

Oregon







Oregon Year in Review

Every day, hundreds of individuals with disabilities spend hours alone, wishing they had a friend or someone to talk to. Others have friends but don't have a job or steady income. Best Buddies in Oregon is on a mission to change that. With a growing community of supporters across the state, we believe we can end the isolation experienced by individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Thanks to the generous support of the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust and the JTMF Foundation, Best Buddies Oregon hired two full-time staff members in 2024. With the addition of an Area Director and a Lead Program Manager, we significantly expanded our statewide outreach and friendship programming. Throughout the year, our school friendship program operated in 13 schools, including 1 elementary school, 2 middle schools, 7 high schools, and 3 colleges—serving a combined 250 members. Our adult friendship program, Citizens, established two community chapters and served 38 members.

Leadership development trainings educated and empowered people from Oregon—with and without IDD—to become leaders, public speakers, and advocates. Our program participants led efforts within our communities and across the country to build a more inclusive world for people with IDD.

Our community of passionate supporters, fundraisers, influencers, and partners continues to inspire us with their commitment to our mission. In May 2024, more than 250 people gathered at the Friendship Walk, promoting inclusion and raising over $13,000 for Best Buddies Oregon.

In the fall of 2024, supporters and participants from across the state came together for Oregon's 4th annual Best Buddies Champion of the Year Gala. We celebrated the night with 200 attendees as community sponsors, volunteers, and advocates raised over $107,000.

The year 2025 promises to be one of growth and excitement for Best Buddies Oregon. We will continue to expand our school and community-based friendship programs, provide leadership training, and work toward ending the social, physical, and economic isolation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Leanne Goolsby Thompson, Area Director, Oregon
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Chris and **Addilyn**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Chris & Addilyn

One-To-One Friendships

Orenco Elementary School, Hillsboro, OR

It all started when Addilyn met Chris. Chris is a student in the Life Skills classroom, and they became friends during adaptive PE and class time. When Addilyn saw Chris's big smile, she knew right away they would become good friends.

As Addilyn spent more time with Chris, she learned about the Best Buddies program in Orenco Elementary's Life Skills classroom. She was thrilled to discover there was a way to spend even more time with Chris—and to meet other amazing kids, too!

From the moment she joined Best Buddies, Addilyn knew she had found something special. She feels happy every time she visits the Life Skills classroom. They read books, play music, sing songs, and even go on adventures together. It's like being in a room full of friends who are always excited to see her.

What Addilyn loves most about Best Buddies is how they make everyone feel important. When she's there, she's not just a student helping—she's a friend. And her buddies aren't just kids with disabilities—they're her friends, each with their own unique personalities and talents.

Being part of Best Buddies has taught Addilyn so much. She's learned that everyone has something special to offer, no matter how they look or learn. She's discovered that small acts of kindness can make a big difference in someone's day. And she's realized that true friendship doesn't care about differences—it celebrates them!

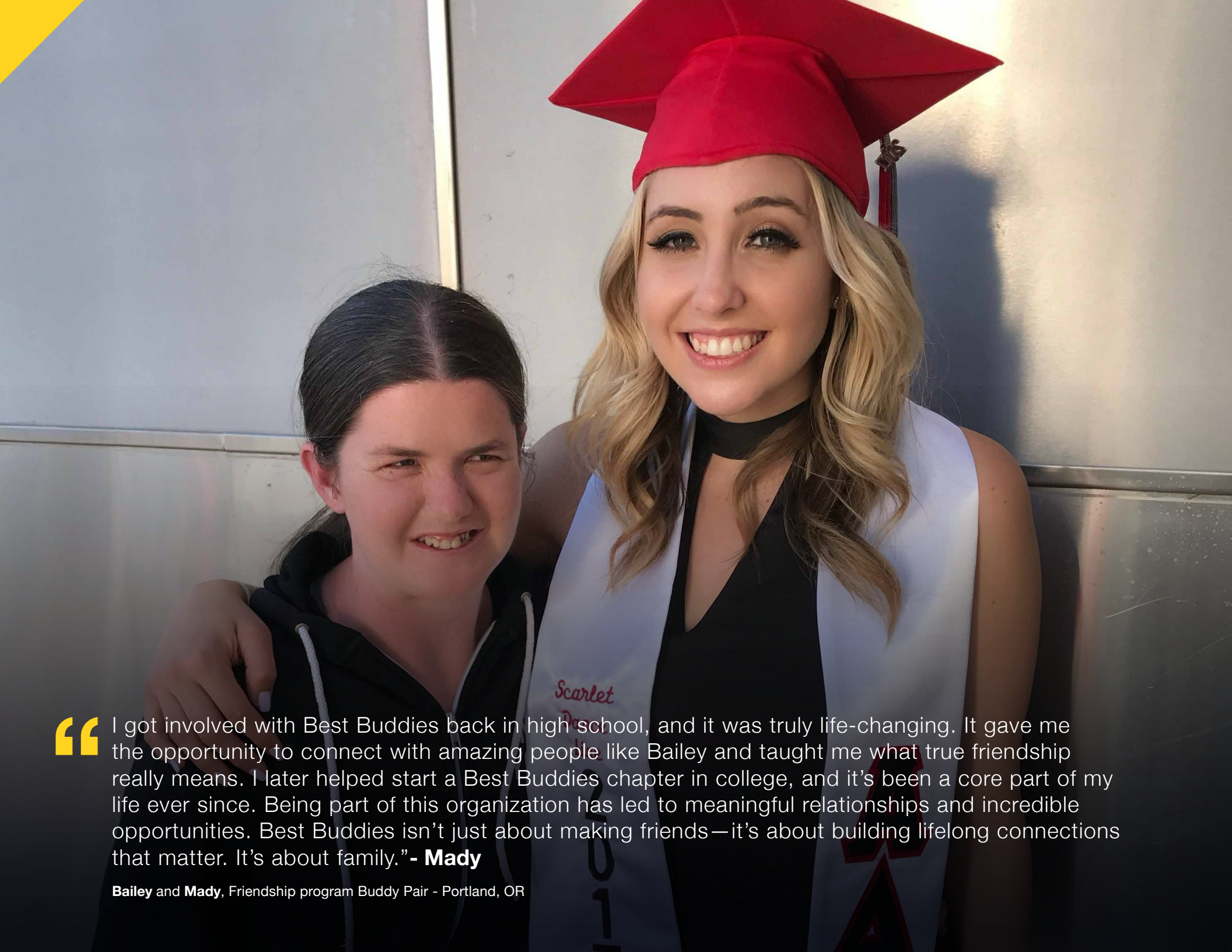
When she grows up, Addilyn wants to work with children with disabilities and help create a world where everyone feels included and valued—just like in the Life Skills classroom.

> "Every friendship we make is like adding a new star to the sky—it makes the world brighter and more beautiful." **- Addilyn**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats OR

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
3 Chapters	**32** Participants	**3** Chapters	**55** Participants	**9** Chapters	**72** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
3 Chapters	**69** Participants	**33** Participants	**33** Participants



“I got involved with Best Buddies back in high school, and it was truly life-changing. It gave me the opportunity to connect with amazing people like Bailey and taught me what true friendship really means. I later helped start a Best Buddies chapter in college, and it’s been a core part of my life ever since. Being part of this organization has led to meaningful relationships and incredible opportunities. Best Buddies isn’t just about making friends—it’s about building lifelong connections that matter. It’s about family.”**- Mady**

Bailey and **Mady**, Friendship program Buddy Pair - Portland, OR



Logan, Best Buddies Ambassador

Logan S.

Leadership Development

Global Ambassador, Portland, OR

Growing up, I had trouble making and keeping good friends. Since joining Best Buddies, I've made a lot of great friends. I know I can trust the people I meet through Best Buddies to help me when I need them. I will always have these friends. I've learned a lot about them, and they've learned a lot about me.

When I was younger, I was picked on a lot. If I'd had Best Buddies back then, I would have had people I trusted to talk to and get advice from on how to deal with bullies. I know for sure that no one in this organization would ever treat anyone with disrespect. I believe everyone involved in Best Buddies genuinely wants to be friends with one another. Everyone in Best Buddies is caring and thoughtful toward others.

I didn't believe I was normal. But Best Buddies taught me that there's no such thing as a "normal" person—or "normal" at all. I used to think that there was such a thing as normal, but now I understand that everyone has their own problems to deal with. "Normal" is just a word we use, but it doesn't really mean anything.

I believe that everyone's life could be different in a positive way with Best Buddies. It can help people who are going through tough times and those who feel different—because I felt different too. If we all come together and see the bigger picture, then together we can make the world a better, more inclusive place.

Leadership Development Key Program Stats OR

Ambassadors	Promoters	
2	**3**	**32**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "Everyone in Best Buddies is caring and thoughtful toward other people." **-Logan**

Pennsylvania







Pennsylvania Year in Review

The year 2024 was truly a milestone year for Best Buddies in Pennsylvania as we celebrated the 30th anniversary of our mission to foster inclusion, friendship, and opportunity across the Commonwealth. With our commitment to growth, we expanded to 158 school friendship chapters, including 29 elementary schools, 42 middle schools, 60 high schools, and 28 colleges. This growth added 1,750 new members this year alone, allowing us to connect even more individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). One of our proudest achievements was launching the Best Buddies Living Program at State College. This new initiative fosters an inclusive, integrated environment where individuals with and without IDD live, learn, and thrive together, and it has already become a cornerstone of our efforts.

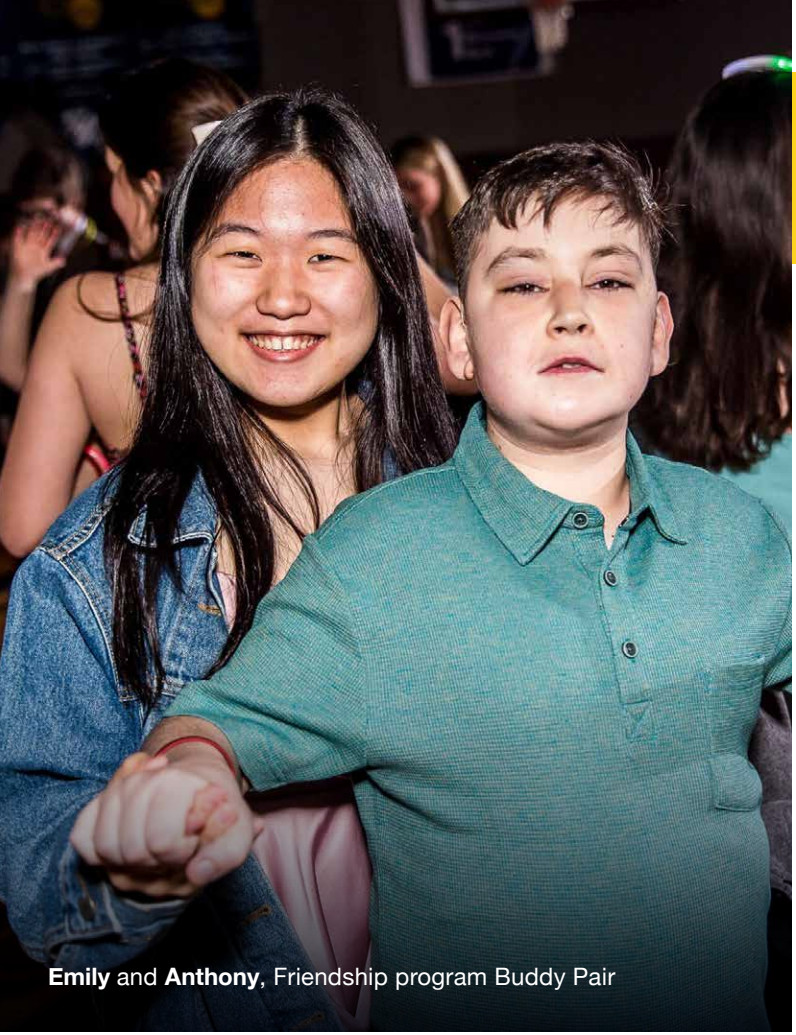
This year, our signature events broke records and brought communities together like never before. The Best Buddies Friendship Walks (BBFW) in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia welcomed more than 2,500 walkers, uniting supporters and raising an impressive $250,000 for our programs. The Philadelphia Walk returned to the crowd-favorite, King of Prussia Mall, drawing record attendance and showcasing the region's enthusiasm for inclusion.

Pittsburgh's annual TasteBuds event, which has been a beloved tradition for almost a decade, celebrated its continued success with a sold-out crowd of 1,000 guests and featured 35 talented chefs paired with sous-chefs with IDD. This extraordinary evening raised a record-breaking $380,000 to directly support programs in Western Pennsylvania. At the Best Buddies Staff Leadership Conference, TasteBuds received national recognition, earning the inaugural Impact Award for its dedication to mission-driven excellence, creativity, and consistent growth over the years.

As we look ahead, we are excited to build on the successes of this year, strengthening our programs, expanding our reach, and fostering more opportunities for individuals with IDD to live, work, and thrive inclusively. Thank you for being part of our journey and for making 2024 a year to remember. Together, we will continue to create a more inclusive future for all.

Samantha Civitate, State Director, Pennsylvania

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Emily and **Anthony**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Anthony & Emily

One-To-One Friendships

Marple Newtown High School, Newtown Square, PA

High school can be a time of intense social and emotional growth, and it's not always easy to navigate alone. But in Best Buddies chapter advisor Michael Winterbottom's classroom at Marple Newtown High School, friendships like Emily and Anthony's have a safe space to grow and thrive.

Before joining Best Buddies, Emily felt isolated and unsure about making friends, often feeling like she didn't belong anywhere. Everything changed when she joined Best Buddies her freshman year. "I made more friends and experienced a meaningful connection with my buddy, Anthony," Emily shared.

Emily and Anthony both joined Best Buddies during their freshman year and have been matched in a one-to-one friendship for three years. Anthony loves being friends with Emily, especially when they compete in games like musical chairs and Jenga or hang out together at school events like pep rallies and football games. "I like that Emily and I can hang out every week," Anthony said.

Beyond their friendship, Emily and Anthony also lead their chapter together. For the past two years, Emily has served as Chapter President, while Anthony is the Buddy Director. Watching them lead announcements at weekly chapter meetings truly reflects the Best Buddies mission of inclusion. Emily knows she can always count on Anthony: "I like that our friendship is not just a friendship but a partnership. We support each other. Anthony always cheers me up and gives me moral support."

At Marple Newtown, the Best Buddies chapter transforms lives through friendship, with Emily and Anthony leading the charge toward a more inclusive future.

> "I like that our friendship is not only a friendship but a partnership." **- Emily**

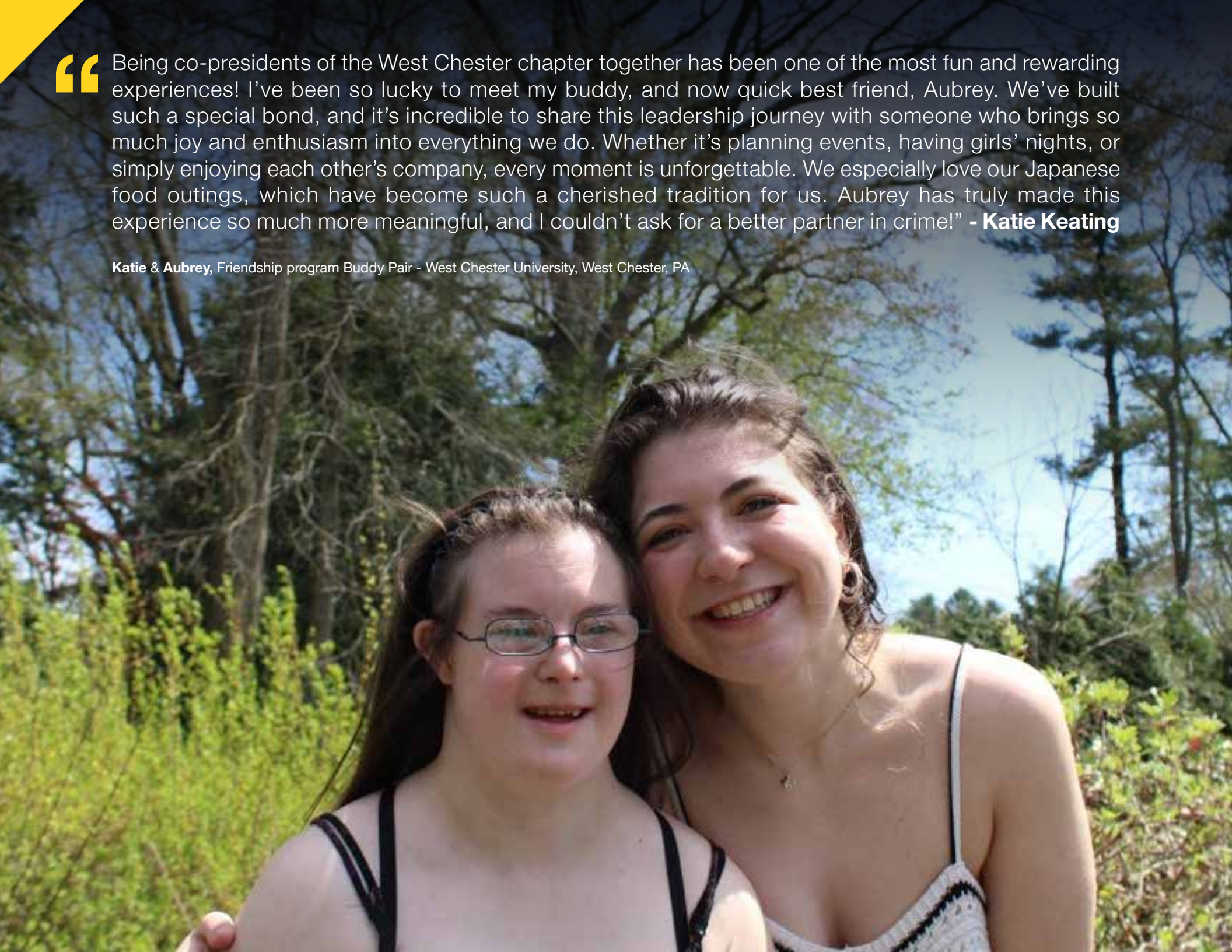
One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats PA

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
30 Chapters	**954** Participants	**42** Chapters	**1,175** Participants	**60** Chapters	**3,650** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
26 Chapters	**1,681** Participants	**276** Participants	**258** Participants

“Being co-presidents of the West Chester chapter together has been one of the most fun and rewarding experiences! I’ve been so lucky to meet my buddy, and now quick best friend, Aubrey. We’ve built such a special bond, and it’s incredible to share this leadership journey with someone who brings so much joy and enthusiasm into everything we do. Whether it’s planning events, having girls’ nights, or simply enjoying each other’s company, every moment is unforgettable. We especially love our Japanese food outings, which have become such a cherished tradition for us. Aubrey has truly made this experience so much more meaningful, and I couldn’t ask for a better partner in crime!” **- Katie Keating**

Katie & **Aubrey,** Friendship program Buddy Pair - West Chester University, West Chester, PA





Maria, Best Buddies Ambassador

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats PA

Ambassadors	Promoters	
25	**62**	**1,726**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Maria
Leadership Development
Ambassador, Pittsburgh, PA

I joined Best Buddies in 2013 during my first year at Duquesne University in the St. Anthony Program. Before Best Buddies, I had friends through my activities, but I never had the chance to participate in so many programs, build true, lasting friendships, or take on leadership roles. Best Buddies opened so many doors for me and gave me the confidence to grow in ways I never thought possible.

As I continued participating in Best Buddies, I became more of an advocate and a leader with each passing year. The Pittsburgh leadership team recognized my dedication and offered me Ambassador Training in 2015. It was, and still is, an honor to be an ambassador for such an incredible program. Through self-advocacy and training, as well as the experience of giving speeches, I have grown so much in my skills and confidence.

This year, I've taken the next step by joining the Citizens program, which has been a meaningful new chapter in my life. My buddy in the Citizens program is not only a close friend but also a mentor to me. Attending the International Leadership Conference three times over the years has further shaped me and given me opportunities to share the Best Buddies message with more people.

Being involved with Best Buddies for over 10 years has allowed me to show the world how important this organization is to both my community and my fellow peers with IDD. Fundraising has been such an important part of supporting these programs, and I've been proud to participate in events like Champion of the Year (where my partner and I achieved 2nd place!), Tastebuds, the Friendship Walk, Spread the Word events, conferences, and trainings. Each program has shaped me into a stronger self-advocate, but most importantly, it has brought me true and lasting friendships. That's been the biggest change for me.

I'm excited about the opportunities that could come from my involvement with Best Buddies, including the possibility of employment. Best Buddies has shown me that I have the power to make an impact, and I encourage all individuals with IDD to get involved.

More importantly, I want others to help spread the mission of Best Buddies: creating opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Best Buddies makes our differences feel so small and brings us together in a way that makes the group even stronger—like many different flowers coming together to make a beautiful bouquet.

I will forever be grateful to the Best Buddies organization!

South Carolina







South Carolina Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in New Jersey set ambitious goals to expand our reach and deepen our impact across the state. We aimed to increase participation in our core programs: one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Through concerted efforts, we successfully launched new chapters in several schools and communities, resulting in a 15% growth in membership. Our Jobs program placed nine individuals in competitive employment positions, and our Transitions program serviced over 50 participants across New Jersey. We successfully partnered with our first Project Search site at Novo Nordisk, where three interns spent the school year gaining job experience and receiving hands-on training through various internship rotations across Novo Nordisk's campus. Additionally, over 25 participants benefited from our leadership development workshops, empowering them to advocate for inclusion within their communities.

A significant milestone in 2024 was the launch of Best Buddies Living in New Brunswick, NJ. This program provides inclusive housing opportunities where individuals with and without IDD can live together in a supportive environment, promoting independence and social integration. The establishment of this new pillar reflects our ongoing commitment to fostering inclusion beyond schools and workplaces, ensuring people with IDD have access to a fulfilling and independent life.

The Best Buddies Friendship Walk is the leading walk in the country supporting inclusion for people with IDD. In 2024, New Jersey hosted two Friendship Walks across the state: on April 23 at Bergen Community College in Paramus and on April 29 at The College of New Jersey in Ewing Township. These events collectively attracted over 1,000 participants and raised more than $70,000. The walks featured family-friendly activities, live entertainment, and opportunities for participants to connect, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

On November 15, 2024, we celebrated our annual Champion of the Year Gala at The Grand in Totowa, NJ. This event is a competitive fundraising campaign that honors local leaders who champion inclusion. The gala brought together over 300 attendees and raised a total of $100,000. We are proud to announce that Kristen Beriloff was named New Jersey's Champion of the Year, raising $23,267 for Best Buddies.

As we reflect on 2024, we are inspired by the strides we've made toward a more inclusive New Jersey. Looking ahead, our goals for 2025 include expanding our school-based programs, increasing employer partnerships for our Jobs program, and enhancing our virtual engagement platforms to reach even more individuals. Additionally, we aim to further develop our Best Buddies Living program in New Brunswick and explore opportunities to expand it to other parts of the state. We remain committed to our mission and are excited to continue building a world where everyone feels included and valued.

Courtney Rambo, State Director, South Carolina

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Cece and **Santino**, Friendship program participants

Cece & Santino

One-To-One Friendships

Beck International Academy Middle School, Greenville, SC

Before joining Best Buddies, Cece felt disconnected at school. Her days were predictable, and while she enjoyed participating in after-school activities, they often left her feeling exhausted. "I was going through the motions," Cece recalls. "I didn't feel like I truly belonged anywhere." That all changed when she became part of the Best Buddies chapter at Beck Academy. Matched with Santino in October 2024, Cece quickly discovered the life-changing power of one-to-one friendship.

Cece and Santino share countless joyful moments—dining out, dancing to Chris Brown, and laughing together. "We have so much fun," Cece says. "It's easy to be myself around him." As the social media coordinator for the Beck Academy chapter, Cece loves highlighting the deep bonds formed in Best Buddies. "I take pride in showing how important these friendships are," she says.

Santino, in turn, adores spending time with Cece. "I love Cece," he says. "She's smart, kind, and always there for me. I love when she walks me to the bus every day." Their friendship has taught Cece the value of patience, connection, and inclusion. "It's amazing how much we learn from each other," she shares.

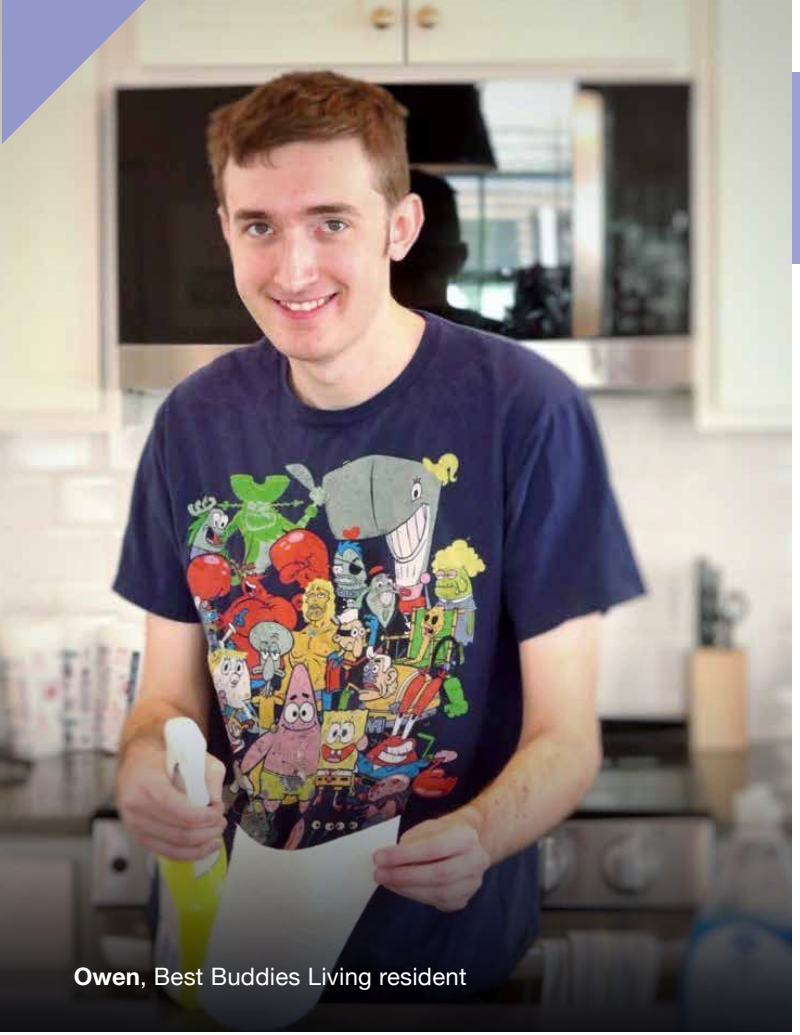
Since joining Best Buddies, Cece has found new motivation and purpose. "I wake up excited to see my buddy, Santino, and make a difference," she says. For Santino, the bond with Cece has brought joy and a sense of belonging. "Best Buddies is special," he adds. "I'm happy we're buddies." Through their one-to-one friendship, Cece and Santino have experienced the transformative power of connection.

> "Every moment we spend together is filled with laughter." **- Cece**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats SC

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
8 Chapters	**252** Participants	**6** Chapters	**301** Participants	**12** Chapters	**324** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
7 Chapters	**451** Participants	**0** Participants	**46** Participants



Owen, Best Buddies Living resident

Owen

Best Buddies Living Resident

The One, Clemson, SC

Before joining Best Buddies Living, Owen Whitaker had friends but found it hard to make new ones. Without school, social opportunities felt limited, and he longed for a sense of belonging. Living with his parents in Maryland, he dreamed of more independence but wasn't sure how to find it. That all changed in November 2024 when he moved to Clemson and became part of the Best Buddies Living community—an experience that has truly transformed his life.

For Owen, the best part of being a resident is the friendships and experiences he now shares every day. "I love making new friends and being part of fun activities that would have been harder at home," he says. He's gained confidence in social settings, learned how to cook, and mastered the art of balancing his own schedule. Most importantly, he's found a community where he feels truly included. "There are so many ways to get involved with people in Clemson, and I have plenty of independence."

Owen enjoys spending time with his housemates, whether it's chatting about hobbies, sharing meals, or even simple moments like taking out the trash together. He recently started a job at The Shepherd Hotel, where he's already embracing new challenges and making connections. "I love meeting more people and making new friends," he says with a smile. Moving to Best Buddies Living has given him a level of independence he never had before. "Back in Maryland, there was nothing like this. This is exactly what I needed."

His message to others with IDD is filled with encouragement: "Don't let anyone tell you different. If this program feels right for you, go for it. It's an incredible opportunity—not just for people with IDD, but for everyone."

Inclusive Living
Key Program Stats SC

Living

1
Residences

4
Participants

> "I have a little more independence and more solo ability. It's easy to make friends now." **- Owen**



Taylor, Best Buddies Ambassador

Taylor

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Charleston, SC

Before joining Best Buddies, Taylor was focused on school, volunteering, and internships but had yet to experience the true power of friendship. In October 2022, she joined Best Buddies at the University of South Carolina Beaufort, finding not just an organization, but a family—a space where inclusion thrives, differences are celebrated, and friendships transform lives.

"My mom encouraged me to join Best Buddies, but it was the people I met who made me stay. From the moment I joined, I felt seen, valued, and included in a way I never had before. Now, as a Best Buddies South Carolina Ambassador, I want to share that same feeling with others—to show the world that everyone deserves a friend and a place to belong."

Through Best Buddies, Taylor formed a life-changing friendship with Jason, who supported her through the loss of her father in 2023. "Jason's kindness and encouragement helped me heal. Friendship isn't just about time spent together—it's about lifting each other up and finding strength in one another. Because of Jason, I live by the word's faith, dedication, and love."

Taylor's journey shows the power of friendship and inclusion. As an ambassador, she hopes to inspire others, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to embrace the opportunities Best Buddies offers. "Best Buddies isn't just about making friends—it's about belonging and believing in yourself. Inclusion has the power to transform lives." As Dr. Seuss said, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Best Buddies proves that when people care, include, and love, everyone belongs—one friendship at a time.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats SC

Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**7**	**188**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "Best Buddies provides a space for growth, skill development, and the ability to make a lasting impact." **- Taylor**

Tennessee







Tennessee Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in Tennessee took significant strides on our path to inclusion. Beyond sustaining our core programs, our team prioritized statewide growth with a simple goal: to ensure that more Tennesseans with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have opportunities—for friendship, gainful employment, leadership development, inclusive living, and family support.

Our first step toward achieving this goal was investing in our team. After a successful 2023, we were able to hire a Program Manager in Memphis to support our programs across West Tennessee. This marked the first programmatic hire in that area since 2018, and we saw immediate results through more engaged school chapters and a strengthened Citizens program. This success was mirrored in our signature events; led by school chapters and corporate partners, the Memphis Friendship Walk reached new heights in both participation and fundraising. In the fall, we were especially proud to host our first Champion of the Year Gala in Memphis, which was a resoundingly positive engagement. In addition to achieving 150% of our revenue goal, the event brought the broader community together, celebrated our Champions, and established a pipeline of support for the future.

Other major programmatic advancements for our state came in the form of two brand-new initiatives—Eunie's Buddies and Inclusive Living. We were honored to pilot Eunie's Buddies under the newly established Family Support pillar, with a goal of assisting families in finding community and navigating the journey of raising a child with an IDD. We celebrated the launch of this program by hosting the Best Buddies Celebrating Mothers event at Southall Farm & Inn, where we were thrilled to recognize Tennessee's own Ellen Boyer as the Best Buddies International Mother of the Year.

This event served as a significant catalyst for our state. Not only did it lay the foundation for hiring a strong Deputy Director to oversee Eunie's Buddies, but it also fueled conversations around bringing Inclusive Living to Nashville. Just three months later, we secured a lease with Signature Music Row in the heart of Nashville, neighboring Vanderbilt University. In November, our first residents officially moved in, and we are excited to help Tennesseans achieve their goal of living independently.

Our fundraising successes in Middle Tennessee continued to serve as the foundation on which these programmatic developments were built. In the spring, we moved our Friendship Walk to First Horizon Park and received a national prize from AlphaGraphics to support the event. That same spring, we also facilitated a national partnership with SkyZone and received our first-ever funding from the State of Tennessee, before hosting a record-breaking Champion of the Year Gala in the fall. We were immensely proud to have Anthony Kennedy Shriver in the room with us as we celebrated our Nashville Champions and raised $700,000 for our programs led by the top Champion nationwide, Nathan Dean, whose campaign accounted for more than $360,000 of that total. We capped off the year by winning the State Showdown end-of-year giving campaign for the second year in a row, earning a match to further support our efforts.

In 2025, we are well-positioned and poised to build on this momentum. Our team has never been more engaged or motivated to serve our constituents and to reach even more!

Will Macon, State Director, Tennessee
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David and **Trennie**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

David & Trennie

One-To-One Friendships

Citizens, Nashville, TN

Before joining Best Buddies, I was looking for more ways to connect with people who shared my love for sports. I've always been a huge University of Tennessee fan and enjoy staying active, but I wanted a true friend—someone I could hang out with and have fun. In 2023, I was matched with Trennie through Best Buddies, and we hit it off right away. We both love sports, bowling, and just having a good time.

Since being matched, Trennie and I have done so much together. We go bowling, watch our favorite teams, and always find something fun to do. One of the best things about our friendship is how easy it is—we just get each other. We also got to participate in the 2024 Champion of the Year Gala, which was an amazing experience. It was great to be part of an event that celebrates friendship and inclusion, and it made our bond even stronger. We are part of the Best Buddies Friendship program, and I can honestly say Trennie is one of my best friends.

Being part of Best Buddies has made a big difference in my life. Having Trennie as a friend means I always have someone to talk to, hang out with, and share great experiences. Whether we're competing in a game of bowling or cheering on Tennessee, I know we'll always have fun. He's like a brother to me, and our friendship keeps getting better.

> "Me and Trennie are like best partners together. We are like the same oldest dudes." **- David**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats TN

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
16 Chapters	**380** Participants	**33** Chapters	**574** Participants	**44** Chapters	**2,203** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
13 Chapters	**617** Participants	**460** Participants	**132** Participants



Walter, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Maintenance Technician, Nashville, TN

Walter

Integrated Employment

Maintenance Technician, Nashville, TN

Before joining Best Buddies, Walter was searching for a meaningful job where he could contribute his skills and be part of a supportive team. Through the Best Buddies Jobs program, he previously found employment. When he was ready for a new opportunity, Best Buddies helped him secure his current role at the Grand Hyatt Nashville. He started as a maintenance technician in their engineering department in January 2024. In this role, he handles room repairs, electrical and plumbing issues, and various building projects. This position has been a great fit for his long-term career goals in engineering.

Since starting his job, Walter's life has improved in many ways. He loves being part of the Grand Hyatt's engineering team, which he describes as one big family. The teamwork and support he experiences daily make his work enjoyable. He takes pride in answering "Hot Sauce" calls—his team's nickname for room requests. He also enjoys working on different projects around the hotel. One of his proudest moments was receiving a Hyatt Value award for "Inclusion" at a company meeting. This recognition from his colleagues highlighted his hard work and positive impact.

With a steady paycheck and growing experience, Walter has set new goals for himself. He wants to continue developing his technical skills, especially in electrical and plumbing, so he can take on more responsibilities. He has already mastered tasks like painting repairs, assembling furniture, and maintaining hotel facilities. Now, he is eager to expand his knowledge even further. He also enjoys attending company events, including the employee gala, where he recently got to celebrate with his team and show off his dance moves.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats TN

Jobs

22
Participants Employed

24
Participants

"I love my job and the family I've built here—it makes every day exciting!" **- Walter**



Fancy, Best Buddies Ambassador

Fancy

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Rhea County, TN

Before joining Best Buddies, I struggled to make friends and often felt alone. School was not a place I enjoyed because I wasn't good at reading, and many people made fun of me. I didn't feel like I belonged, and it was hard to connect with others. Everything changed when I joined Best Buddies!

Through the Best Buddies, people started opening up to me, and I began building real friendships. For the first time, I felt accepted and valued. As I grew more confident, I wanted to do more, so I became an Ambassador. I wanted to help others feel included and find their voice. Best Buddies gave me the courage to speak up, and now I share my story to inspire others.

Since joining Best Buddies, my life has completely transformed. I have gained friendships, confidence, and the ability to believe in myself. My reading has improved, and I have learned to stand up for myself. I even started enjoying school. I joined Best Buddies and ever since, I've had a support system that lifts me up and encourages me to be my best self.

To anyone who feels alone, you are important, and you deserve to be included.

> "Best Buddies changed my life, and it can change yours too." **- Fancy**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats TN

Ambassadors	Promoters	
7	**50**	**1,329**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Texas







Texas Year in Review

In 2024, Best Buddies in Texas rolled up our sleeves and dug deep into our mission and footprint across the state. With our staff expanding from 16 to 21 at the end of 2023, we closed out 2024 with 135 school chapters from elementary through college serving 5,518 participants and impacting more than 55,000 people across 61 cities and 24 counties throughout the great state of Texas!

Our Citizens (Adult Friendship) program, now in its second year, boasts 232 participants statewide, with an additional 227 participating in e-Buddies.

Our Jobs program worked with 65 participants this year, placing 49 in meaningful employment. We also launched our long-awaited Pre-Employment Transition Services program, bridging our Friendship and Jobs Programs. The social skills gained through our Friendship and Leadership Programs naturally lead into our participants' desire for careers—just like their peers. This new program provides critical opportunities for career exploration, soft skills development, and work observation—key to not only securing, but also maintaining meaningful employment.

Our two Best Buddies Global Ambassadors completed their two years of active service and now remain Global Ambassadors for life. We held nearly 400 group activities and provided Ambassador and Leadership training to more than 300 high school students across the state.

Spring Friendship Walks across the state celebrated the end of the school year with 2,400 registered participants and 250 teams—more than double our 2023 numbers—raising a total of $232,700.

Ninety-one delegates proudly represented Texas at our global Best Buddies Leadership Conference at Indiana University in July. This group included Board members and community leaders, several of whom presented on panels and workshops.

With great glitz and glamour, our Champion of the Year Galas were a resounding success! Engaging 20 Champions and Mission Partners statewide, we collectively raised $673,000. With exciting themes like "Wild About Inclusion," "Inclusion City Limits," and "Studio 89," nearly 1,000 guests came together to celebrate and support our mission of inclusion for people of all abilities.

Thanks to the incredible growth we experienced this year, Best Buddies in Texas is poised to make an even greater impact in 2025. We are truly grateful for the individuals, foundations, and corporations dedicated to improving the lives of people of all abilities.

Linda Kordek-Milton, State Director, Texas

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Livi and **Will** Friendship program Buddy Pair

Will & Livi

One-To-One Friendships

Westlake High School, Austin, TX

Meet Will and Livi – two extraordinary friends who embody the heart of Best Buddies. Their friendship isn't just a connection; it's a powerful example of how inclusion transforms lives.

Will and Livi have been Buddies since their freshman year in high school. They are both Seniors now and will be moving away from each other, but they know they will always be friends!

Livi shares, “What I love about my buddy is that he makes me the best version of myself. He brings out the empathy and the joy that I have in my everyday life, and he truly just makes me the happiest.”

Will, who has Down Syndrome, says, “Livi and I have the best time. Days we are together are the best days I ever had.”

Livi went on to say, “Best Buddies has given me more perspective than anything I have ever experienced. Getting to be friends with and talk to such interesting and different individuals than myself has created a love for special education, a love for inclusion and a love for empathy overall.”

Will added, “Live and I make each other happy. We have the greatest time – laughing and playing!”

“What I love best about Will is that he is always so joyful, he is always smiling, and he loves to party in the hallways at school!” Livi shared with a big smile. With a catch in her voice, Livi added, “Will makes me feel loved.”

Will added, “Livi and I are the best friends ever!”

After they both graduate in May, Will and his family are moving to Colorado, while Livi will go off to college to study Special Education. But a friendship like theirs knows no bounds and distance doesn’t matter. They are friends forever!

> “Livi and I have the best time. Days we are together are the best days I ever had.” **- Will**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats TX

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
20 Chapters	**539** Participants	**28** Chapters	**530** Participants	**90** Chapters	**3,225** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
17 Chapters	**916** Participants	**323** Participants	**306** Participants



Jessica, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston, TX

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats TX

Jobs

49
Participants Employed

73
Participants

Jessica

Integrated Employment

Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston, TX

Jessica Muessel started her job at the Houston Museum of Natural Science on April 4th, 2022. She worked in visitor services but had a hard time sticking to her duties. Jessica loves history and science, and she often found herself talking with visitors about the exhibits. However, in her role in visitor services, she wasn't supposed to discuss the exhibits—this was the job of the concierge.

In October, she got her first warning for breaking the rules. Her Job Placement Specialist (JPS) arranged a meeting with her manager to how to resolve the situation.

In December 2022, Jessica received her second warning when she talked about the history of the Holocaust with a visitor and misunderstood their interest. Following a complaint being filed she was put on probation. Jessica became very anxious and expressed her concern about possibly losing her job. "I love this job, I was meant for this place, I know so much, and I just want to share it."

Jessica's supervisor noticed Jessica was feeling distant at work due to her worries. She encouraged Jessica to apply for a position as a backup concierge. With help from her JPS and management, Jessica decided to apply for the concierge role. This was a big challenge for her since she would have to handle both her visitor services job and the new concierge position if she was accepted.

Supervisor Apolinar Abonza says, "Jessica is a valuable member of our team. She brings a unique and enjoyable perspective to her work, possessing extensive knowledge about various exhibits. Jessica confidently engages with customers, always greeting them with a warm smile. Her expertise and contributions have significantly enhanced our team's performance."

Thanks to her knowledge and love for history, Jessica successfully became the backup concierge while still keeping her visitor services role. Now, she happily works at the museum, making her new role her own.

> "I love this job, I was meant for this place, I know so much, and I just want to share it." **- Jessica**



Jeremy, Best Buddies Ambassador

Jeremy

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Dallas, TX

Jeremy has been a part of Best Buddies for over 20 years! Before joining, he experienced isolation and loneliness, but today, he has a vibrant social circle and a deep passion for helping others find connection through the program. His journey is a testament to the power of inclusion, and his dedication continues to inspire those around him.

“Before Best Buddies, my life was lonely and I didn’t have a lot of friends.”

“I found out about Best Buddies through my school, Notre Dame. After joining the program for many years I learned about Ambassadors and wanted to join. I wanted to help others create more friendships and help more people get involved.”

I have met so many friends! I joined Best Buddies in 2005.”

“My message to other people with IDD is to get involved with Best Buddies and build up their friendship through this program.”

Each year, Jeremy plays a key role in the North Texas Friendship Walk and Champion of the Year Gala. In addition to serving on the Advisory Board, he recently joined the new Citizens Committee, further strengthening his impact. Jeremy’s dedication and leadership make him an invaluable part of our team, and we are grateful for his continued commitment to Best Buddies.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats TX

Ambassadors

52
Ambassadors

Promoters

25
Chapters

789
Participants

Transitions

25
Participants

“Everyone deserves a friend!" **- Jeremy**

Utah







Utah Year in Review

The year 2024 has been marked by meaningful friendships, impactful events, increased expansion and awareness, and new connections that have enriched the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Best Buddies in Utah continues to grow and foster more inclusive communities each year.

Our Friendship program, active in 15 schools across Utah, reached over 1,000 youth, with more than 200 one-to-one friendship matches. The Citizens program, our adult friendship initiative, supported 60 members with 15 one-to-one friendship matches. This year, we spent time with our local community partners who see the value in ending the isolation of individuals living with IDD—building chapter kits for all of our school chapters. These kits included supplies and materials such as notebooks, pens, snacks, activities, markers, sensory materials, and more! The Leadership Development program provided training for new and returning ambassadors, helping them gain self-advocacy skills and the confidence to lead happy, fulfilling lives.

Best Buddies Utah held one incredible signature event in 2024: the Friendship Walk. This event has been critical to our mission of providing a lifetime of inclusion for people with IDD. In the spring, our Friendship Walk raised over $25,000, with more than 200 participants coming together to celebrate. Nellie Southam, along with her buddy Jane and Murray High School, raised over $800 to earn the Top School Award.

We ended the year by hosting our 2nd Annual Friendship Ball in partnership with MOXIE at an ice rink. As we closed out 2024 and reflected on everything we're thankful for, program participants, families, and staff enjoyed ice skating, warm cookies, and hot cocoa.

On behalf of our Advisory Board and the staff at Best Buddies, I would like to thank our sponsors, volunteers, and donors for your continued support. As we leap into 2025, we're excited to build on this momentum and see what the new year brings.

Arlet Coe, Director, State Operations, National Expansion

Utah Office
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Jefferson and **Weston**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Jefferson & Weston

One-To-One Friendships

Salt Lake City, UT

I am excited to be a part of the Best Buddies in Utah community. I am currently participating in Best Buddies Programs here in Utah with the citizens program. I have been involved involvement with Best Buddies since I was back in High School.

Without the Best Buddies programs at a young age, I would not have found the incredible opportunity to volunteer and now get the chance to be a part of the Citizens Program. Without Best Buddies I wouldn't have made lifelong friendships nor have experienced the profound impact this organization makes in communities across the Salt Lake area. Because of Best Buddies I have found my new buddy Jeffery. Jeffery and I like to go on walks in the park, sit in the sun in the warmer months and watch Star Wars movies.

It has been eye-opening once again to see how Best Buddies facilitates positive impact not only in the lives of those they serve, but also in their local community. I have been so privileged to be able to connect with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and grow with them in friendship and ability. I can't wait to get the opportunity to talk with young junior high school students about my experience and the importance of being inclusive, and of course tell them about my buddy, Jeffery.

I am a strong advocate for what Best Buddies provides for individuals with IDD and the incredible opportunities it opens for members like me to learn and contribute to the growth across communities. I've seen the good this program does for the Utah community, and I can't wait to see it continue to grow.

> "I can't wait to get the opportunity to talk with young junior high school students about my experience and the importance of being inclusive, and of course tell them about my buddy, Jeffery." **-Weston**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats UT

Middle Schools		High Schools	
1 Chapters	**60** Participants	**5** Chapters	**132** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
5 Chapters	**287** Participants	**57** Participants	**43** Participants



Being friends with Katelyn brings so much joy into my life. She is someone I know I can call when I need to laugh or smile, and she introduces me to things I never participated in before, like dance and fashion shows. She has taught me so much about living my best life and not letting anything get in the way of my goals and dreams. Katelyn's confidence and her ability to stand on a stage and captivate an audience truly inspire me. I know we will be friends for a very long time!" **- Sara**

Sara and **Katelyn**, Citizen Program Friendship Pair



Jane, Best Buddies Ambassador

Jane

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Murray, UT

Hi! My name is Jane and I am a student at Murray High School. I have been heavily involved in Best Buddies for about two years year now. I love Best Buddies. I have watched this program change not only my life but my buddies life as well and my fellow classmates. We also such support from out school advisors and all the other students in the school loves Best Buddies and stands for inclusion! Watching my High School come together and support these amazing individuals with intellectual disabilities has been amazing!

Best Buddies is simply the best and because of it I was matched with my best friend, Nellie. I have been friends with Nelly since I was way back in the seventh grade but this year I got to spend lots of time with her. We get the chance to go to school dances together, each lunch together and study. Nellie and I share a love of shoes and when we both smiles everyone around us is guaranteed to always smile.

We like to listen to Taylor Swift and we love to braid each other hair. I'm so proud of Nellie and know that I have a friend for life. I can't wait to see all the things my buddy will accomplish in her life and I can't wait to have around as I accomplish mine as well.

> "Best Buddies has given my the confidence to reach for my goals. With my buddy Nellie, we can do anything!" **- Jane**

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats UT

Ambassadors	Promoters	
1	**1**	**3**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

Washington







Washington Year in Review

2024 was a productive year for Best Buddies in Washington as they worked tirelessly to create a more inclusive state for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The goals for the year focused on expanding awareness, increasing participation, and fostering meaningful friendships. Through strategic partnerships, community engagement, and tireless efforts from volunteers and supporters, Best Buddies in Washington continued to grow the mission in the state. They opened three new friendship chapters and were able to serve 400 individuals with IDD in our friendship programs.

Along with our one-to-one friendship programs, Best Buddies in Washington focused on deepening its impact through the Jobs program. They secured employment for four participants in the community and made new relationships with future employers. These accomplishments represent a significant step forward for the state as they continue to build a more inclusive society where everyone can thrive.

The Friendship Walk was a standout event, bringing the community together in celebration of inclusion. Held at Cougar Mountain Zoo, the walk attracted over 300 participants from across the state, all walking in support of people with IDD. The event was a success, raising a total of $61,000, which will directly support Best Buddies programs throughout Washington. The walk featured a variety of activities for all ages, including access to the zoo, music, and speeches from community leaders and participants who shared their inspiring stories. This event not only raised funds but also amplified the message of friendship and opportunity for all.

The *Champion of the Year Gala* was another tremendous success, celebrating individuals and organizations that have demonstrated exceptional leadership in promoting inclusion. The event took place at The Lotte Hotel and attracted over 200 guests, including philanthropists, business leaders, and supporters of the Best Buddies mission. The event raised $124,000 through silent and live auctions, donations, and corporate sponsorships. The highlight of the evening was recognizing the Grand Champion duo who have made a significant impact in the lives of individuals with IDD, demonstrating that leadership can come in many forms.

Looking ahead, Best Buddies in Washington is excited to continue its momentum into 2025. Future goals include expanding the Jobs program, increasing the number of school chapters, and launching new initiatives, like the Transitions program, that create even more opportunities for individuals with IDD. Together, we are building a world where everyone has the opportunity to belong, succeed, and thrive.

Jordan Lavallee, Interim State Director, Washington

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Avery and **Kate**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Avery & Kate

One-To-One Friendships

Mercer Island High School, Mercer Island, WA

Growing up with two family members with autism, Kate noticed how challenging it was for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to form connections with others. Over time, she came to understand how unkind the world can be toward people with IDD and how often their strengths go unrecognized. This inspired Kate to join Best Buddies during her freshman year of high school to support the creation of friendships that her cousins had always struggled to find.

Now seniors, Kate and Avery were paired in a one-to-one friendship during their sophomore year after meeting through unified soccer. Kate quickly learned that she and Avery share a love of music—especially Taylor Swift. Their favorite activity is going for walks while listening to Taylor Swift, often stopping for a spontaneous dance break. Afterwards, they treat themselves to hot chocolate and pastries from Starbucks. Sometimes, they opt for movie marathons—High School Musical is an all-time favorite because of the music, fun storyline, and, of course, Zac Efron. Even though Avery is nonverbal, she always has so much to share and never fails to make Kate laugh. Avery's joyful spirit and energy always manage to brighten Kate's day.

Beyond her friendship with Avery, Best Buddies has brought Kate into an incredible community of people—both at school and across the country. Best Buddies is special to Kate because it celebrates everyone's abilities and strengths and brings people of all backgrounds together around a shared value of inclusivity. Her experiences with this community have helped her learn more about herself and have deepened her values of kindness, inclusion, and connection.

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats WA

Elementary Schools	Middle Schools		High Schools	
6 Chapters	**1** Chapters	**2** Participants	**12** Chapters	**151** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
3 Chapters	**109** Participants	**132** Participants	**76** Participants

> "I love Best Buddies for everything they do and every door they have opened. But overall, I value Best Buddies because of the incredible people they bring together and the connections they form between us all." **- Kate**



Michael, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Major Retailer, Issaquah, WA

Michael

Integrated Employment

Major Retailer, Issaquah, WA

Michael was first introduced to Best Buddies when the Arc of King County suggested that he join the One-to-One Friendship program at Seattle University. Before joining Best Buddies, Michael was not as active in the community as he would have liked. He was always at home and bored. “I just didn’t feel like I had much to do”, says Michael. While engaged in the Seattle University chapter, Michael learned about the Best Buddies Jobs program.

Previously, Michael worked with a different agency for employment and had a job that didn’t turn out as he had hoped. Michael was struggling with a lack of confidence in himself and didn’t feel like he was learning any new skills. He decided to start using Best Buddies to help him find a job he enjoys, and the decision has made such a positive impact on his life, helping Michael to achieve his goals. Now, Michael has a great job that has allowed him to gain independence, increase his self-esteem, make new friends, and improve his attitude about life. Michael “feels so much more productive” and notes experiencing “purpose in [his] life now”.

As Michael looks to the future, he would like to continue enhancing his customer service and social skills so he can assist with any difficult situations that come up in the workplace. Having a job and earning a paycheck will also help Michael improve his financial situation – one of his top priorities. By gaining confidence from his job, Michael knows that he can do anything!

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats WA

Jobs

6
Participants Employed

11
Participants

> “My experience with the Jobs program has been great – I have learned a lot of things and gained a lot of experience and have found a place where I love to work. I have had a lot more support and success working with BBJ!” **- Michael**



Eric, Best Buddies Ambassador

Eric

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Seattle, WA

Eric first became involved with Best Buddies when he lived in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he enjoyed making new friends and connecting with others through the one-to-one friendship program. In 2007, he moved to Washington and continued his involvement with Best Buddies, expanding his impact as he became an advocate for himself, others with disabilities, and the mission.

When asked what led him to become a self-advocate in Best Buddies, Eric said, "I've been an advocate all my life." Advocacy is a core passion in Eric's life, so he pursued a career that allows him to actively champion the causes he cares about. As a community advocacy coordinator, Eric collects information to share with advocates so they can promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities.

Eric's journey with Best Buddies has been marked by his passion for advocacy and supporting leadership growth. During the 2024 gala season in Washington, he was given the role of Champion Advocate to support his fellow Champion candidates by helping them run their campaigns in alignment with their vision and goals. In the past, Eric served as a Global Ambassador for Best Buddies International, as well as a member of the International Board of Directors from 2009 to 2011. He has spoken at events like the Best Buddies Leadership Conference, the Best Buddies Challenge: Hearst Castle, and even rode on a tandem bicycle with our founder and CEO, Anthony Kennedy Shriver.

Becoming an advocate for Best Buddies has opened many opportunities for Eric to share his story and empower others to be self-advocates. Eric sees himself as a mentor and friend and loves being on the sidelines to cheer people on to become the strong advocates he knows they are. Eric encourages others to "never stop advocating and be yourself."

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats WA

Ambassadors	Promoters	
2	**7**	**2**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "I wanted to make a difference, not just for myself but for self-advocates to be able to share information with one another." **- Eric**

Wisconsin







Wisconsin Year in Review

What a year it's been for Best Buddies in Wisconsin! In 2024, we took inclusion to new heights—expanding our reach, creating life-changing opportunities, and celebrating incredible achievements. With growing chapters, thriving jobs programs, and passionate volunteers, we made a lasting impact across the state.

We touched the lives of over 3,000 students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in 67 schools—and we did not stop there! We proudly launched three new school chapters, extending our mission of friendship and inclusion even further.

Our Jobs program continued to flourish, supporting 60 participants in building meaningful careers. We successfully placed 43 individuals with IDD into fulfilling jobs, helping them gain independence and confidence in the workplace.

In 2024, the Best Buddies Leadership Conference was nothing short of inspiring! Best Buddies Wisconsin brought 35 enthusiastic students who gained essential leadership skills, learned how to run successful chapters, and connected with peers to create even more inclusive communities.

Our annual Friendship Walk was held in May at Wisconsin Brewing Company Park, home of the Lake Country DockHounds. It was our biggest walk yet! With over 1,200 of our closest friends, we crushed our fundraising goal, raising over $98,000 and exceeding expectations by $5,000! With 80 registered teams, including schools from across the state, this event was a true celebration of inclusion.

Our sold-out Golf Outing at Ironwood Golf Course was a huge success. With a full course, we had golfers hitting the greens and raising over $51,000! From exciting on-course games to fantastic raffles, prizes, and a lively post-event gathering, fun was had by all.

Our final event of the year, Champion of the Year at The Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee, was a night to remember! With 300 guests and seven inspiring Champions, we raised over $194,000 to further our mission, all thanks to our generous sponsors, dedicated supporters, and incredible volunteers.

None of this would be possible without our amazing staff, volunteers, teachers, and board members who work tirelessly to make inclusion a reality every day. As we look ahead, we're setting our sights on even bigger goals and serving more individuals in the community.

We know 2025 will bring even more growth, more impact, and—most importantly—more inclusion! Thank you for being part of this incredible journey. Together, we're just getting started!

Laura Brackett, State Director, Wisconsin

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Alex and **Carlyn**, Friendship program Buddy Pair

Alex & Carlyn

One-To-One Friendships

Carroll University, Waukesha, WI

Before joining Best Buddies, Carlyn was already passionate about service, volunteering with organizations and supporting an art class for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). As a freshman at Carroll University, she was eager to find a way to get involved on campus while making a positive impact on others. When she discovered Best Buddies, she knew it was something she had to be part of. Although she felt nervous at first, everything changed at the very first event of the school year—when she met Alex. The two connected instantly, and their friendship has continued to grow ever since. Now a senior graduating in May, Carlyn has been matched with Alex for all four years, building countless memories and continuously learning from each other.

Alex recalls that before Best Buddies, life felt very lonely. While she had supportive family members and caregivers, she didn't have friends—people who wanted to spend time with her just because they enjoyed her company. That changed when she met Carlyn. Together, they enjoy going to the movies, dancing, playing Bingo, attending monthly Best Buddies events, and simply hanging out at places like Starbucks. Even when life gets busy, they stay connected through texts and cards, always making time for fun and meaningful moments. Alex especially loves that Carlyn shows genuine interest in her passion for collecting jumping spiders—something she now hopes to turn into a business by creating educational videos.

Through their friendship, both Carlyn and Alex have grown individually. Carlyn has taken on leadership roles, serving as chapter president for the past two years and completing an internship with the Wisconsin Best Buddies office. These experiences have deepened her involvement and helped her support others in the Best Buddies community. For Alex, joining Best Buddies in 2012 marked the beginning of a more fulfilling life—one filled with confidence, friendship, and new goals. She remains close with past Buddies and has celebrated their graduations, weddings, and baby showers over the years.

Their connection is a testament to the power of inclusion and friendship.

> "I love Best Buddies, and I can't wait to see how Alex and I continue our connection!" **- Carlyn**

One-To-One Friendships
Key Program Stats WI

Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
5 Chapters	**174** Participants	**13** Chapters	**375** Participants	**40** Chapters	**1,387** Participants

Colleges		Citizens	e-Buddies
11 Chapters	**514** Participants	**170** Participants	**87** Participants



Michael, Best Buddies Jobs participant
Quad Graphics, West Allis, WI

Michael

Integrated Employment

Quad Graphics, West Allis, WI

Michael came to Best Buddies Jobs at the recommendation of his high school transitions coordinator, who had had great experiences with Best Buddies Jobs finding the best fit for participants.

After talking through Michael's career goals and available jobs in the community, Michael became focused on one in particular. Michael was motivated to work at Quad Graphics, a prominent printing company in WI. Best Buddies was connected to the HR Business Partner and Quad Graphics and after learning about the Best Buddies Mission and support offered through Best Buddies Jobs, they were committed and excited to work with Michael and his Employment Consultant to find a good fit within the company. After meeting Michael, looking at his work history and talking with him about his interests and skills, the cuisine department was identified as being a good fit for what Michael was wanting. Quad created a job role specific to Michael and he was hired on as a Cuisine Associate.

When looking back at the process, Michael said "Best Buddies helped me find a job when my old job was shut down. It was hard to find a good fit but they kept looking for me."

Michael bonded with his coworkers over his love of football and incredible knowledge of the sport. His team often asks him his opinions on games and for trivia on players. When asked about his team, Michael happily states "I love the people I work with. They try to find new things for me to do and I like that."

Now that Michael is independent on his job he has some great goals for the future of his job. His favorite part? Michael has "learned to use different machines to help my job, which is very cool." Michael is excited about the future.

Integrated Employment
Key Program Stats WI

Jobs

30
Participants Employed

61
Participants

"I hope to keep learning more because it's fun."**- Michael**



Kiontis, Best Buddies Ambassador

Kiontis

Leadership Development

Ambassador, Milwaukee, WI

Before I joined Best Buddies I always played sports in high school. I played Basketball, Cross Country, Track and Field, the programs I was part of the Student Council and FBLA which is Future Business Leaders of America. I was always helping my community and student body, the best I can.

During my Junior year of high school, My basketball coach/Sped Teacher influenced me to join Best Buddies and my other teachers encouraged me to join Best Buddies. During my senior year I was a Chapter President. In my chapter I really had an amazing experience. Best Buddies had Leadership Conference. It was incredible.. It was the greatest experience that I ever had. Just coming back from covid I came back as an Ambassador. I want to bring people together around in Best Buddies to make the world a better place by helping each other by reaching our goals. I just have a passion and motivation to see people win and reaching for the heights.

I joined Best Buddies in the fall of September of 2017. My life changed through Best Buddies because of people around me and believing that I can do anything that I can put my mind to. It changed me to be myself and I don't have to pretend to be another person that I'm not. Best Buddies gave me a voice to change lives.

I believe in you, Don't chase your dreams, catch your dreams. Don't care about what people say, kill it with kindness. Keep on being you. Make the world a better place, you have a special heart.

Leadership Development
Key Program Stats WI

Ambassadors	Promoters	
6	**16**	**581**
Ambassadors	Chapters	Participants

> "I believe in you, don't chase your dreams, catch your dreams. Don't care about what people say, kill it with kindness. Keep on being you. Make the world a better place, you have a special heart." **- Kiontis**



Thank You!

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