**Scituate’s C.O.R.S.E Best Buddies program encourages kindness and inclusion**

By Ruth Thompson

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Aurora Avallone is doing her part to bring kindness and acceptance into her high school community.

The 17-year old has been involved with the Best Buddies program since she was in elementary school, and is now proud to be part of the leadership of the program at the high school. She recently served as the vice president of the Scituate High School Best Buddies program, and in the fall she will be named president.

“I have an amazing older sister who is ‘abled’ differently, so I have grown up being a best buddy 24/7,” she said. “This program is the highlight of my high school experience as it has formed me into the person I am today. I have made so many amazing memories I will cherish forever.”

Best Buddies is a program that enhances a caring and compassionate school community that practices inclusion, involvement, peer assistance and acceptance of differences.

Offered through the Scituate C.O.R.S.E – Community of Resources for Special Education – Foundation since 2013, the program provides high school and middle school students with training to give them sufficient knowledge and skills to enable them to serve as peer supports for students with disabilities.

Best Buddies includes in-school activities throughout the year, plus after school activities and field trips for K through 12 students who are enrolled in the program.

Best Buddies is C.O.R.S.E’s biggest and most popular program.

“Members will play an important role in the student community at SHS, Gates, and the elementary schools,” said Amy Pischel, vice president of the C.O.R.SE Foundation. “The peer mentor can facilitate by providing social connections, easing anxieties, and role modeling a culture of inclusion and support.”

The high school and Gates programs run for the entire school year. The programs for younger students run from January through May.

“I think this program is so popular because everyone is a peer and everyone learns from one another, regardless of ability,” Pischel said. “It creates a common experience and allows kids who might not have the opportunity to participate in school events to become involved and, in some cases, become leaders.”

Best Buddies is a prime example of how acts of kindness can have such a large impact on both the lives of the “buddies” and the lives of other students in Scituate schools, Avallone said.

“I encourage everyone to get involved in Best Buddies and to spread kindness and inclusion everywhere you go,” she said.

Brian Lannon, 15, became involved with the program in the seventh grade after being told he could help and have fun with other kids.

“I had a friend in elementary school who was in a wheelchair and I helped him out a lot,” Lannon said. “I wanted to be able to continue doing what I could for other people and getting to know them no matter how different or similar we were.”

What Meg Baird enjoys most about the program is “watching the peer interactions and seeing relationships grow.”

“I love seeing the kids support each other and cheer each other on during our activities,” she said.

Baird is a special education teacher with Grade 5 at Jenkins. She is also the C.O.R.S.E academic and social skills program coordinator and has been working with the organization for more than eight years.

“It is an amazing program,” she said. “The staff support for this program is amazing and the students that participate are an absolute joy.”

The field trips and the opportunity to meet other kids they might not normally meet, and make new friends, is the common thread among the students of all ages who are in the program as to what they enjoy best.

“I believe it is important because, if you are having trouble making new friends, you could do Best Buddies and start making new friends from different schools around Scituate,” said 11-year old Luke Lenzi . “The adults who run Best Buddies are very nice and kind to all of the kids.”

Sawyer Korman, 6, thinks Best Buddies is great because it gives kids something to do “so they’re not bored.”

This is his second year in the program, and he really likes the field trips.

“I loved Pirate Day and getting treasure,” Sawyer said.

He also likes visits by the Nona’s Ice Cream truck.

Meredith Hilditch is the special language pathologist at the Gates. She became involved with Best Buddies because she works with students who have communication and social skills challenges.

“I want them to have opportunities to be and feel included,” Hilditch said. “It’s a great opportunity for all kids to be included. It also helps students step out of their comfort zone and interact with peers they might not otherwise have the opportunity to do so.”

Violet Ahern, 8, enjoys helping out with different people and going to fun places together.

This is her second year with the program.

“I am going to do it again until I’m older,” Violet said. “It helps you to make new friends with all different people. My mom said our little brother takes a little longer to learn things and that we can learn how other people learn too.”

Twelve-year old Liam Holden was in the first grade when he started with the program. He has been involved every year since.

“I thought it would be fun to make friends with kids who have special needs and are not always in my classroom,” he said. “I feel kids should try Best Buddies to see how great it is.”

The Gates Best Buddies program has become so popular kids have to write an essay as to why they want to do Best Buddies, Pischel said.

“This program really highlights how inclusive the town is and collaborative between the C.O.R.S.E Foundation and the Scituate school system,” Pischel said.

The positive environment and enthusiasm the students bring to the program is what Heidi Branca, a special education teacher for Grades 6 to 8, enjoys about Best Buddies.

“I have been part of the program every year,” she said. “It is very important to offer this type of program as it brings awareness and acceptance of all people no matter the differences, challenges, or strengths.”

For information, or to sign up for programs with the C.O.R.S.E Foundation during registration periods, visit corsefoundation.org.



