Ansley Morrison

M. Wenzel

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What important texts exist within the Best Buddies community and how are they functioning within it?

Since I first began working with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in middle school, I have taken a special interest in recognizing the importance of a club like Best Buddies. I built my first relationships as a peer tutor, where in seventh and eighth grade I had an entire class period devoted to working with students in reading, math, and science as well as non-academic activities such as crafts, games and physical education exercises. My first buddy ever was named Haley, we became good friends in my peer tutor class in middle school and remained friends as I joined the Best Buddies club at my high school. Not only did this club bring me new friendships, it taught me the true importance of diversity and inclusion.

Here at Florida State University, there are five pillars which are glorified and upheld to their fullest potential. ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ is one of these pillars and is an accurate representation the Best Buddies club as well as it’s community. Despite being a school sponsored club, it is all inclusive to many in the Tallahassee community, welcoming people of all ages who live with or without disabilities. Best Buddies focuses on one-to-one friendships, building confidence, and uplifting others to their fullest potential. While analyzing Best Buddies as a whole community, I will focus on this essential question: What important texts exist within the Best Buddies community and how are they functioning within it?

Best Buddies is an international nonprofit organization that, according to the Best Buddies International Organization website, has four mission pillars: one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for people all of the world with IDD. The organization was founded in 1987 and has grown internationally for the past 32 years. The club performs at multiple chapter levels, such as middle school, high school, and college level, mainly introducing young adults to the community through schools. However, especially at the college level like here at Florida State, it is an all-inclusive club where anyone in the community is free to join at their leisure. According to a study conducted by Michael Hardman and Christine Clark from the University of Utah, “Eight of 10 College Buddies and Buddies reported they enjoyed their experiences with Best Buddies and would do it again. As can be seen in Table 4, nearly all of College Buddies and most of the Buddies would recommend the program to others.” (Hardman, Clark). This quote as well as the remainder of the article analyzes many Best Buddies programs across the country, specifically in 16 states and at the college level. The article conducted multiple surveys from both the buddy and peer buddy perspective, analyzing how Best Buddies impacts the lives of those who are living with and without disabilities. The surveys consisted of questions such as how Best Buddies stands as a chapter, the effectiveness of Best Buddies staff members, the specified number of friendship matches based upon size of the chapter itself, and the availability of “necessary human and material resources” for participants in the survey. The survey concluded many positive outlooks, not only on Best Buddies as an organization but from the personal gain it brought to a diverse group of people’s lives. This mutually beneficial program is impacting the lives of many through an action as simple as joining a club at school, and this article provides support through the conduction of multiple surveys.

Despite my experience with the Best Buddies program in the past, I had never first-handedly experienced Best Buddies at a college level. When I first became involved with Best Buddies at FSU, I knew from the start who I should go to for my additional source of information. Her name is Haley Brockway, and she is the President of the Best Buddies club here at FSU. When I attended my first Best Buddies meeting, she was the first person to greet me at the door, and when I explained it was my first meeting, she became extremely welcoming. She walked me through what the meeting would look like, then following the meeting she reached out on how I felt about it. I was then added to the club’s Canvas page and immediately felt welcomed to the community. Because she is extremely approachable, I knew I would gain an accurate representation of Best Buddies through her perspective. About a week later, I interviewed Haley on her personal experience with Best Buddies and what it means to her, and not only did I learn more about who she is, she expanded my knowledge of the Best Buddies community as a whole. Haley was first introduced to Best Buddies at her high school where it was a very popular club. After meeting her first buddy Kevin, she fell in love with the club right off the bat and expanded her role within it. Her sophomore year she became a member of the executive board, where she was able to nominate a couple of their buddies for homecoming court. All of their peers came together in support of the couple and they won king and queen that year. This was a distinctive moment in Haley’s high school career that made the Best Buddies club so special to her. Going into her senior year of high school, Haley attended a leadership conference of over 3,000 people with IDD, focusing on inclusion, diversity, and making sure everyone can have a friend in the world. Following this conference, she became an intern for Best Buddies International where she spoke about how best buddies works on different chapter levels at conferences, as well as working with ambassadors, who are people with IDD training for public speaking skills. Once getting to FSU she obtained the presidential role as a sophomore due to her mass amounts of experience with the organization. She enlightened me with her favorite parts of FSU’s Best Buddies program: her favorite events such as the talent show, which she loves because of the true positivity of everyone involved, buddies can feel special as they shine in their own spotlight. Haley also enjoys the fundraisers the organization promotes internationally such as the friendship walk, which is a huge march put on by the organization which raises money as well as promotes everything that Best Buddies does. The march takes place in 55 different cities across the United States, typically during the month of March. According to the Best Buddies Friendship Walk official website, “The Best Buddies Friendship Walk is the number one walk in the country raising awareness and funds to support inclusion for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)” (Best Buddies Friendship Walk). The walk promotes awareness for people with IDD but also is made to be a positive, welcoming environment of dancing and laughter.

When speaking on Best Buddies as a whole community, Haley truly believes that Best Buddies is developing skills and boosting the self-esteem of people with disabilities as well as finding a range of job opportunities for people living with IDD. There is a very valid claim that the United States has discriminatory issues against people in the work force, and that companies don’t see the benefits of having a disabled person apart of their team. Best Buddies is building to tear that stamina down, and Haley is a voice of this motion. She considers Best Buddies apart of her lifestyle and doesn’t know where she would be without it. She describes the program as so much more than just a club, as it is centered around creating friendships and opportunities for those with and without disabilities and is a life changing organization that anyone is welcome to be a part of.

The topic of discrimination against people with disabilities is a never-ending issue. Whether it be in the classroom, workforce, or just in daily activities, people living with IDD are often viewed as less capable of these activities versus people living without these disabilities. Specifically, in the workforce, big businesses and companies are denying people living with IDD even the opportunity to attempt to become an employee. A study was conducted by *Rehabilitation Psychology* examining patterns in workplace discrimination against people living with disabilities. The research concluded that “In general, regardless of disability type, individuals experience the highest frequency and proportion of workplace discrimination in the areas of termination and reasonable accommodations.” (Rehabilitation Psychology). This quote explains the ways in which people living with disabilities are being discriminated in the work force, how businesses are failing to provide the basic accommodations with no repercussions. This type of unlawful act is what the Best Buddies organization is trying to promote and end. Best Buddies builds the skills of those living with IDD to become ambassadors, proving themselves capable to major companies that otherwise wouldn’t take them seriously. Through Best Buddies Leadership Development Programs, many people with IDD have found their voice and can advocate for themselves in the workforce.

When analyzing texts within the Best Buddies community, there is one specific tradition that comes to mind. Each month, the Best Buddies club here at FSU holds a Buddy Pair of the Month ritual, in which all peer members and their buddy submit photos of what the pair did that month, being any sort of out-of-club activity. At the end of each month, one pair is selected and is announced at the last meeting of the month, the pair wins a prize, and it is posted to the FSU Best Buddies Instagram page. For this past month of October, a peer named Marisa and her buddy Brian were selected as the Buddy Pair of the Month for their submission of a photo of Brian eating a milkshake at a park here in Tallahassee. Marisa provided this quote as the context to her photo: “*Best Buddies has brought me so many fun memories and laughs. I have developed the most amazing bond with Brian and his family. His love for Pokémon Go and playing sports always keeps my energy high! Brian’s smile shows how huge of an impact Best Buddies can have and I’ve loved growing this AMAZING friendship with him!”* (Marisa Rossomano). This is a tradition among many Best Buddies organizations, as the organization’s international program promotes the submission of the buddy pair photos. The Best Buddies Organization International Russian website shares stories similar to those shared in our club’s Buddy Pair of the month in October. One specific story is about Sonya Zanitullina and Marina Moizykh, a peer and a buddy who met through one of the organization’s welcoming parties. They realized they rode the same metro, exchanged numbers, and became close friends. Sonya had never met or let alone become friends with someone with IDD, and thanks to Best Buddies their friendship has continued to blossom ever since. This quote is translated from Russian: “From the first minutes of my acquaintance, I realized that I have nothing to fear, if being open and humane, then nothing more is needed. These are the same people as we do not need to assign them to certain categories. We are equal with Marina, I am interested in her, because she is very open. People don’t have to be like closed books, therefore I really like “Best Friends”, nobody is keeping my distance, everyone is very friendly” (Sonya Zanitullina). The “Best Friends” reference in this quote is referring to the Best Buddies Organization and is a prime example of how the organization is making a difference internationally despite its American roots. The page includes many photos of the two-spending time together, providing examples on how a text as simple as Buddy pair of the month can provide impact.

 Haley explained to me the importance of this text within the community, as the organization uses this as a direct way to see impactful friendships being made within the club and also is a useful tool for directing much of the organization’s funds to specific clubs. Best Buddies is a non-profit organization that gains the vast majority of its funds through pure fundraising, and the organization uses those funds raised to contribute to existing clubs as well as building new clubs internationally. Buddy Pair of the Month is a great way to bring in these funds directly to FSU’s Best Buddies club and is utilized each month to promote the club here in our community. These examples of friendships being built are visual proof that Best Buddies is succeeding its mission of one-to-one friendships and is a perfect way to show people making direct donations the impact being made.

As Best Buddies continues to surprise and amaze me with its accomplishments over the past 32 years, I am reminded of why an organization like Best Buddies is so important to me and to communities everywhere. Of course every nation in the world should eventually reach a point where an organization like Best Buddies is in full effect and discrimination against people living with disabilities is irrelevant, however until that time comes, having an international non-profit organization that can serve as a voice for those living with IDD is extremely important. Best Buddies clubs performing at the middle school, high school, and college levels allows young people to be educated on the importance in inclusion and building friendships, and how a friendship with a person with IDD can be no different than any other friendship. Throughout my time at FSU, I hope to remain involved with the Best Buddies club. The organization is truly important to communities everywhere and the amount of voices that can spread awareness on the topic is extremely impactful. The missions of building one-to-one friendships, building confidence, and uplifting others are definitely being succeeded under the Best Buddies organization as the organization continues to grow and provide more people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities all over the world the opportunities they need to succeed.

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