



STUDENT ORGANIZATION BEST BUDDIES HAS RESULTED IN LIFE-CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS

It's a Wednesday night in early September and senior Colleen Connor, a nursing major from Massachusetts, is gathered with other Catholic University students around a kitchen table at Bethlehem House in Brookland, a residential home for adults with intellectual disabilities. Sitting under strings of paper hearts inscribed with messages like "Stay Strong" and "You are made in God's image," Connor and the other students are there to spend time with their friends, many of whom have mental or physical disabilities.

Though friendships between college students and Bethlehem House residents may seem unlikely, they are a common result of Catholic University's chapter of Best Buddies, an organization that pairs college students and adults with disabilities in one-on-one friendships. The students are responsible for forming relationships with their assigned buddies — calling or visiting at least once a week and serving as a friend when times get hard.

Tonight, the students and buddies are gathered for Mass and dinner, something that has happened every Wednesday night at Bethlehem House since the home opened 33 years ago. The homily for the

day reflects on the feast of St. Teresa of Calcutta and Monsignor Joseph Ranieri talks about her legacy, saying, "Every single one of us has a ministry to bring God's way, God's healing, and God's forgiveness to one another."

After Mass, the students and their buddies eat chicken with roasted vegetables donated from a nearby garden. Kimberlee, who lives at a Bethlehem House location in Maryland, shares gifts of roses and colored pictures with everyone in the room while Tom, another resident, talks with students about his plans for the week.

The casual, comfortable atmosphere reflects the easy friendships that have formed between the students and their buddies.

Connor said she was first drawn to the Best Buddies program because of its warm and welcoming atmosphere.

"Everyone was so nice and you could tell that it was such a good community and everybody cared for each other," she said.

At this point, visiting with her buddy Helen and seeing the people at Bethlehem House every Wednesday night has become much more

than a service obligation. Now, the group is like her family.

"Being away at college, it can be hard to find your community or the spot where you feel comfortable," Connor said. "The group at Best Buddies just reminds me so much of home."

DECADES OF CONNECTIONS

Rich bonds like the one between Connor and Helen are exactly what Anthony Kennedy Shriver had in mind when he founded Best Buddies International in 1989 as a volunteer organization dedicated to fostering one-on-one friendships and leadership opportunities for people with disabilities.

Shriver, whose brother Timothy, M.A. 1988, chairs the U.S. Special Olympics, started the first Best Buddies chapter at his alma mater Georgetown University. Catholic University's chapter was second in line, founded in 1991. Today, there are more than 1,500 Best Buddies chapters around the world, including more than 400 college chapters.

Emmjolee Mendoza Waters, B.A. 2001, M.S.W. 2009, associate director of campus ministry and community service, became involved with Best Buddies as a student in 1997 and called her time with the club "one of my most formative experiences at the University."

Beginning her freshman year, Mendoza Waters was paired with Seamus Roles, a nonverbal man who lived with his parents as his primary caregivers.

"Every other Sunday, I would meet the family and we would have tea, crackers, and a little snack," Mendoza Waters said. "Mr. and Mrs. Roles had two children with disabilities. Their family was just an example of love and I don't know if I fully understood that then, but as a parent now I can see it so clearly."

She and Seamus grew very close in four years. As a thank you, the Roles family gave Mendoza Waters a claddagh ring when she graduated.

"It was the most special thing that I owned and I still have it," she said. "It is a symbol of love and friendship and that's really what that family was to me."

Now serving as the advisor for the University Best Buddies chapter, Mendoza Waters sees the same kind of relationships being formed by current students. This year, there are about 20 students paired up with adults from the community, and around 40 to 50 students who attend events but are not paired with a specific person. Mendoza Waters believes the relationships formed in the organization are authentic.

"Often, with me and Seamus, there were no transactions of words, it was just me holding his hand, me being present," Mendoza Waters said. "I hope that our buddies feel loved and that they're made to feel important and not so different. They're a part of our lives, and a part of our family."

Another person who has seen the power of Best Buddies relationships is Dolores Wilson, the founder and director of Bethlehem House. Along with other local organizations such as L'Arche of Greater Washington and Catholic Charities, Bethlehem House has been a partner of Best Buddies since the University chapter was established.

According to Wilson, Best Buddies is beneficial to people with disabilities because it gives them opportunities to learn, feel love, and build friendships.

Senior Colleen Connor watches as her buddy Helen reads the responsorial psalm during a September Mass at Bethlehem House.





Top Left: Senior Juliana Mitchell and her buddy Kimberlee. Top Right: Senior Beth McElhiney and Angela, a Bethlehem House resident. Bottom: Catholic University students and Bethlehem House residents and staffers (including Dolores Wilson, fourth from left) serve dinner at Bethlehem House.

“If there’s anything our friends with disabilities have wanted all their lives, it’s a friend,” she said. “I get to see the faces that answer the phone at Bethlehem House when their friends call and all they can do is smile. They’re using computers and other technology in a way to keep in touch with people they’ve grown to love, and I’m on top of the world because that’s exactly what you would hope would come from these relationships.”

‘THEY’LL BRING YOU JOY’

Senior Juliana Mitchell, a nursing major, has been passionate about helping those with disabilities for years. That’s why joining Best Buddies was one of the first things she did her freshman year. Soon after, she was matched with Kimberlee.

Mitchell and Kimberlee meet up at the Wednesday night Bethlehem House dinners and at Best Buddies events once a month. Those

events range from an annual talent show, to an Elvis dance, to the beginning-of-the-year party, where new buddies are matched. Often, Mitchell and Kimberlee talk and color together. Sometimes they’ll go on walks or go to the movies.

“Every now and then, I’ll make a phone call or sometimes Kimberlee will mail me a picture she’s drawn, which is always a nice surprise,” Mitchell said. “She loves Mariah Carey and she also loves the color purple.”

Though their friendship is not complicated, it is filled with rewards, Mitchell said.

“This is the best decision I’ve made in college,” she said. “The buddies bring a lot of joy to my life, they are just really fun-loving people. I’m always so happy to see them.”

Mitchell has also learned a lot from her buddy about patience and respect, traits she knows will help her in her nursing career.

“One of the most important things I’ve learned is that just because someone has developed differently doesn’t take away from their wisdom or their knowledge,” she said. “A lot of times, people just assume they are incapable or that they’re stupid or can’t hold a job. People are very quick to tell them, ‘Oh, you can’t do that. Let me do that for you.’ I think it’s important to meet them where they are.”

Beth McElhiney, a senior studying biology and Spanish for international service, is president of the University’s Best Buddies chapter. She has been paired with a buddy named Colleen since her freshman year in 2014.

“We love to watch Hallmark movies or *Full House*, and we like to cook,” McElhiney said. “Most of our time is spent talking.”

Sometimes, students have to support their buddies during hard times, whether that means a friend moving away, a health issue, or a loved one dying. McElhiney remembers when Colleen was sick with a stomach bug a few months after they were first matched.

“At the end of the night after getting her water and snacks, I asked if she needed anything else,” McElhiney said. “She looked at me and said, ‘No, you’re all I need.’”

Though she may have initially thought of Best Buddies as service work, McElhiney says she has gained as much as she has given. In trying to help Colleen, she has discovered a community filled with encouragement and laughter.

“You have so much time through college to find your independence, but I think everyone,

at the end of the day, needs support,” she said. “I always tell people, if you’re feeling sad, come to Best Buddies. They’ll bring you joy. They’ll bring you love.”

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Many students who were involved with Best Buddies during their years as undergraduates keep in touch with their friends for years afterward.

Erika Rodkey, B.S. 2008, M.S.W. 2009, Ph.D. 2018, remained involved in Best Buddies well into her graduate studies, continuing to see her buddy Tom every Wednesday and taking him out for activities. The more time she spent with her friends at Bethlehem House, the more she felt a calling to help others like them. Now, her goal is to train college-level social work students to work with people with disabilities.

Her relationships with Tom and the rest of the Bethlehem House residents were so strong that when Rodkey got married, she invited the entire group to attend her wedding.

“Being able to see them in the church with all of my family and friends was a way to recognize that it was almost 10 years after I had met them and they were truly part of my family and the community that had supported me wholeheartedly,” she said.

Megan Travaline, B.A. 2017, also had a life-changing experience with Best Buddies, because of a deep bond with her buddy Mary.

“She is so funny and I know I can always call her and she will make me feel better,” Travaline said. “Friendships kind of shift and change through college, but from freshman year until now, it has always been me and Mary.”

Though she majored in psychology with an interest in policy, Travaline had a change of heart in the summer of 2017, when the house manager at Bethlehem House in Riverdale, Md., offered her a job as a direct support professional.

“The more I thought about it, the more I realized I loved Bethlehem House and all the residents there, and that it would be a really good experience to work there,” she said.

Travaline is responsible for helping residents with their daily activities, accompanying them to doctors’ appointments, running errands, and providing companionship.

“I moved into the house in Riverdale and immediately fell in love with it,” Travaline said. “I started doing things I never thought I would have been able to do and I still don’t think I would be able to if I hadn’t had those established relationships beforehand.”

Mike Thorsen, B.A. 2016, had a similar experience. He began his college career undecided on a major. Though he wasn’t matched with a buddy of his own, he became involved as an activities coordinator with Best Buddies and a service leader for Bethlehem House.

“I had never spent time with people with disabilities before I went to college and I was a little hesitant,” he said. “Best Buddies really opened my eyes and helped me realize they’re regular people just like us who deserve the same friendships and the same rights.”



Mike Thorsen prays with friends at Bethlehem House during a 2016 visit.

Now passionate about disability rights, Thorsen decided to pursue occupational therapy. He’s currently in his second year of a master’s program at New York University.

“I like to look at it as a holistic treatment of the person,” he said. “The whole point is to help the person do what they want, which goes beyond just treating an illness. It’s treating the person to help them function and reach their own potential.”

Volunteering with Best Buddies taught Thorsen a lot about friendship, and the power of small kindnesses.

“I remember sometimes you wouldn’t be able to talk to the buddies because either they were being shy or they couldn’t talk much, but just a smile would be enough,” Thorsen said. “The idea that a relationship can be formed from something so small has always stuck with me. It’s shaped what I want to do with my life, which is dedicate my life to people who only offer love, support, and friendship. What’s better than that?” **CU**