



MED STUDENTS EMBRACE THE BEST BUDDIES PROGRAM

BY VICTORIA WINSLOW

This fall, at my medical school Activities Fair, little did I know that I was going to be invited to join Best Buddies, an international organization that fosters friendships between individuals with and without intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. It is a group that I have actively supported since my high school days. Justin Pespisa, a second-year University of Massachusetts medical student, caught my attention with his charisma and evident passion for the Best Buddies mission, a passion that he and I share.

As a new member to the Best Buddies organization back in 2006, I formed a close friendship with a designated peer with intellectual disabilities (ID). I now have many friends with ID, who all form a natural part of my inner circle of friends. Justin reports having similar experiences with James, his Buddy from high school: "Forming a friendship with James has changed my life and made me realize that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are equal to those of us without intellectual disabilities." Justin adds, "My hope is that the UMASS medical students who participate in our Best Buddies chapter will have similar experiences with their Buddies."

I share similar sentiments. Befriending members of the community of people with IDD (intellectual & developmental disabilities) has opened my eyes to issues of inclusion, as well as the disparate treatment that individuals with disabilities face in healthcare settings time and time again. As such, it comes as no surprise to me that many physicians report some level of discomfort interacting with patients with intellectual disabilities. Or that my friends with IDD, their educators, parents, and extended family members

express frustration. Why aren't patients with disabilities more of a focus in our undergraduate and ongoing medical education?

The good news is that there are many students at UMASS Medical School interested in getting to know members of this important population. And the "word on the street" is that the administration is working to incorporate disability education into the curriculum.

This increased interest is evidenced by no less than 20 medical and nursing students joining Best Buddies during its first year of existence on the UMASS Medical School campus. Buddy pairs are made based on interviews that leaders have with each interested participant. Medical and nursing students are asked to maintain weekly contact with their Buddy via phone, email, or text message and to plan on spending at least four hours per month with their Buddy, out in the community. However, many Buddy pairs report hanging out more.

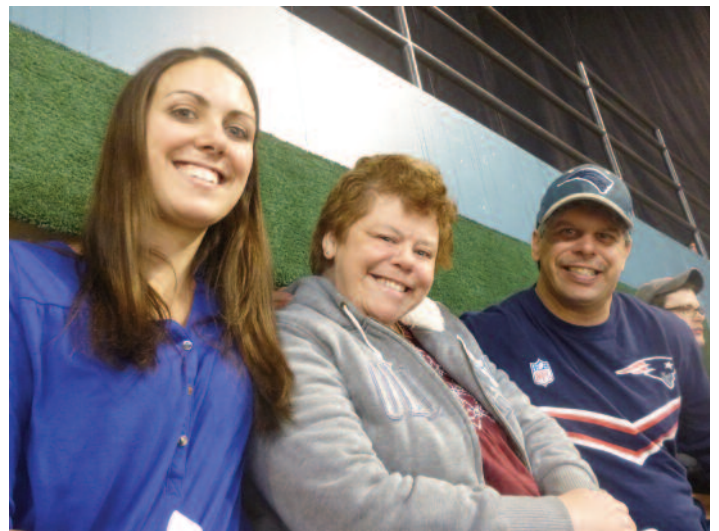
When asked about their experiences with the Best Buddies program so far, participants gave very positive feedback. First-year medical student, Simone Miller reports that, "Getting to know my Buddy, John, has been one of the best parts of my whole year. As I get to spend more time with John, I can already see how our friendship has had a positive impact on my experience in medical school and most likely on my entire career as a physician. I feel that I'm developing a much greater understanding of some of the challenges to health and well-being that are often faced by people with IDD, and why it's so important for future physicians to appreciate this in the context of their own practice."

Member of the IDD community, Jason Major of Worcester also gave positive feedback when asked about the Best Buddies program.

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BUDDY SYSTEM: (Clockwise from left) Best Buddies members attend a Worcester Sharks game in January; Bowling at AMF in Shrewsbury in December; a welcome treat after bowling. (Opposite page) Members of the Best Buddies UMass Medical School chapter.



“When I met Justin (chapter Founder) I really liked him. I like him because he was fun. I also like my Best Buddy Nick. I like going to the movies and to Jillian’s arcade with him and other Buddies like Tyler and Dino. My experience has been good. I’m excited for next year.”

Sharon Frohock, ASPIRE CBDS & Transitional Program Director at the Seven Hill Foundation in Worcester comments that, “this chapter is fantastic. They understand that our goal is to promote and encourage the empowerment of people with significant challenges so that each may pursue their highest possible degree of personal well-being and independence. UMASS student participants work hard to get to know their Best Buddies. They take the time to collaborate with parents, guardians, and the Seven Hills Programs to become better informed of what steps they can take to promote a successful relationship.”

Founder, Justin Pespisa comments: “I think that the overwhelming support and enthusiasm from students really speaks to the high quality of students that we have here at UMASS. So far, our student participants have been enjoying getting to know their Buddies. I have heard stories of Buddy pairs going out to eat, watching a game, going bowling, and going shopping. It has been a pleasure, watching these friendships develop.”

And the friendships and fun will by no means end here. Our chapter has been making plans for *Cinco de Mayo* and forming a team for the Friendship Walk in Worcester (scheduled for April in Elm Park), organized by the National Best Buddies organization. We value these kinds of group events since they build community and offer opportunities for newcomers to find out what our organization is all about.

We are lucky that UMASS Medical School administration and faculty have been so supportive of our endeavors. Student organizations have expressed interest in sponsoring future Best Buddies events as part of their long-term community outreach programming. Additionally, the Seven Hills Foundation has invited medical and nursing students to attend training sessions and outings with individuals with disabilities and staff in order to provide additional



opportunities for education and meaningful interaction. We look forward to collaborating with our school and outside organizations to significantly expand programming this upcoming year.

However, Justin Pespisa reminds members that “Best Buddies is a chance for us as medical students to meet new people and have fun in the community. It is not a medical training program or part of our medical curriculum. However, I believe that through participation in Best Buddies, medical students can learn a lot, and it has the potential to teach us how to be more compassionate physicians.”

Although it may seem ambitious, I fully expect the UMASS Medical School Best Buddies chapter to double in size come the 2014 to 2015 academic year. It is not difficult to recruit members for something as fun, rewarding, or exciting as this program. The energy that the incoming class will bring to our campus will surely bring membership up. With overwhelming community support, Justin Pespisa, and faculty advisor Dr. Joyce Rosenfeld at my side, I have no doubt that individuals with disabilities living in greater Worcester area will continue to positively impact the lives of medical and nursing students. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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For more information about the UMass Medical School Best Buddies Chapter visit: www.bestbuddiesumassmed.weebly.com