



Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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Creekside Best Buddies earn chapter, advisor of year

While much effort is put in, the reason Creekside Middle School's Best Buddies program is one of the best in Illinois is simple: These friendships are real.

Creekside's program was named Illinois Middle School Chapter of the Year for the fifth time, while teacher Julie Stone was also selected as Chapter Advisor of the year during festivities celebrated on April 28 in Chicago.

"I think this program is so special because the members really do form friendships with people they would never otherwise become friends with," Stone said.

Best Buddies is a nonprofit organization that matches students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in one-to-one friendships with students without those disabilities. They play games, eat lunch together, take on service projects and do a lot of socializing and laughing together.

The Creekside chapter has 62 students this year. Students connect each week along with monthly social events under the supervision of Stone, special education teacher Alyssa Niemic and literacy teacher Megan Nelson.

CMS Principal Ryan Doyle said the entire school community takes great pride in the success of the Best Buddies chapter and the ripple effect it has in the building.

"The positive impact these one-to-one friendships have extends far beyond the 60+ students involved. Our Best Buddies program is the backbone of the inclusive environment we have at Creekside. I couldn't be more proud to walk through the hallways and witness these connections on a daily basis. The time and energy Julie puts forth is key to the success of Best Buddies. She is a rockstar!" Doyle said.

In addition to the individual relationships formed, the Buddies also learn to be advocates for inclusivity, which organization representatives hope is something they continue into high school and beyond.

Stone has overseen the CMS Chapter, one of 28 in the state, since one year after it began in 2008. She traced her passion for inclusivity back to her time in a service sorority while she attended Northern Illinois University.

“One of my favorite places to volunteer was a tutoring club. There was a little girl who had Down syndrome who stayed after school for extra help. I remember the other kids avoiding her. I told myself that one day, I would prevent that from happening in my classroom,” Stone said.

Stone and three students from the Creekside chapter — Olive Schreiber, Gretchen Sebastian and McKenna McAdow — will attend the Best Buddies International Leadership Conference from July 19-22 at Indiana University.

Creekside was named International Chapter of the Year in 2012, something Stone and this year's Best Buddies students are hoping to repeat.

“My favorite thing about the program is the kids. I love to see the smile on their faces when they make a new friend or when I see them at an event or in the hallway,” Stone said.