

Meet the WBLAHS BEAR BUDDIES

WE ARE BEARS. WE HAVE EACH OTHER'S BACKS



BY ZOUA VANG

The Bear Buddies group was founded in the fall of 2024, by Jonathan Wong, a past senior at White Bear Lake High School and Hugo resident. Jonathan wanted to spend more quality time at school with his sister Alyssa Wong who is disabled and in the special education program, and a high school freshman at the time.

"Alyssa and I have never been on the same campus our entire lives," he said. "It was my last year in high school and I wanted to hang out with my sister and all of her friends, but there was no place to do that. So, that's when I realized I needed to do something." With support from a handful of students and under the guidance of teachers and staff, Jonathan created a student-led group where general education and special education students are brought together and form authentic friendships that might not otherwise form in the classroom.

"When Jonny started this, it felt like a huge opportunity," said Cayla Helmberger, a sophomore and Co-President of the group. "It's not just about hanging out - it feels like you're part of something that's making the world better."

Bear Buddies grew from a handful of students to nearly 50 within months of its inception. Members say the growth reflects the desire for connection and friendships. "People just didn't know this existed," said Aryanna Charles, a sophomore and Co-President of the group. "Once they hear about it, they want to join. It's for everyone." In its first year, members made friendship bracelets, signs, and cheered on athletes at the school's adaptive hockey game, and helped host the Polar Plunge event to raise funds for the Special Olympics.

The group's mission is to "create a safe, welcoming environment where all students feel included, valued, and empowered to be themselves. Through meaningful connections and friendships, members learn from one another, celebrate differences, and promote a culture of acceptance and mutual respect regardless of abilities or backgrounds." Bear Buddies has become more than a group; it's a campus-wide movement for empathy, inclusion and unity.



Bear Buddies Co-Presidents Cayla Helmberger and Aryanna Clark, along with member Alyssa Wong, working to educate and encourage new members to join the group. (Photo credit: Kate Wallin)



Bear Buddies Polar plunge team. (Photo Credit: Zoua Vang)



Bear Buddies group meeting in April 2024 at White Bear Lake High School. (Photo credit: Bear Buddies Instagram page)

"We're a club that bridges differences between special education and general education students by doing fun activities and building strong friendships," said Aryanna, explaining how the club has filled a gap students have long noticed. "In middle school, there were few opportunities to form meaningful relationships with students in special education and that only gets tougher in high school. Bear Buddies is about inclusion and making sure everyone feels connected."

Kate Wallin, a paraprofessional and long-time Bear Buddies advocate and supporter, sees the immediate impact of the group. "It's amazing to watch students just meet each other where they're at," she said. "The friendships are genuine. And it's not only life-changing for students in special education - it's just as valuable to their peers."

High school students who are interested in being a part of Bear Buddies are encouraged to watch the daily announcements for more information about upcoming meetings and events.