

AZ Giving: The Power of Ability

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In a society formed by cliques, children and adults with disabilities can find it difficult to make friends outside of the special education classroom, but one organization has a solution.



Best Buddies is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating one-on-one friendships, integrated employment and leadership development for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) since 1989. The organization pairs an individual with IDD, called a Buddy, with a volunteer without IDD, creating a Buddy Pair. "True friendship in turn will instill confidence, education for both, and inclusion for the individuals with IDD to be accepted at events, a dance, a football game, lunch with the entire school population and not just the special education classrooms," says Timothy Bolen, state director of Best Buddies Arizona. Best Buddies Arizona was formed in 2001 as part of Best Buddies International's goal to have offices in all 50 states by 2020. The program focuses on building middle school and high school chapters throughout Maricopa County as well as a few state college chapters. Currently, more than 2,000 youths are served in the 45 local chapters (with a Northern Arizona University office coming soon) and another 10,000 family, friends and students that are directly affected by Best Buddies Arizona programs. Best Buddies Arizona is attempting to educate as many people as possible about the abilities of its Buddies—and not just the disabilities that they have. To help accomplish this goal, the local chapter is striving to serve more Buddies by bringing the Ambassadors 2 and JOBS programs to Arizona. Ambassadors 2 educates those with IDD after high school by teaching them life skills including how to secure a job, work ethics, bus routes, dress codes, work hours and meal planning. JOBS pairs IDD individuals with employers and ensures they both hold each other to the standards of someone without IDD. "With nearly 279,000 individuals with IDD in Maricopa County alone, we have to do more to ensure the future for these very capable and talented individuals who can be successful contributors to our economy," Bolen says. However, Bolen can't do this alone. In February, he traveled to Washington DC to shake hands with the Arizona State Senate and House of Representatives. With the help of Special Olympics Arizona, Bolen gave a presentation on the importance of individuals with IDD and how we can help them. As Bolen and Best Buddies Arizona's staff and volunteers get their voices heard, the organization continues to grow and thrive, helping Buddies across the state.

TO LEARN MORE

This year, Best Buddies Arizona is introducing several new events to help spread its noble mission. June 9: Best Buddies Criterium Bike Race
Oct. 26: Spirit of Friendship Gala **Dec. 8:** Second Annual Best Buddies Prom Best Buddies Arizona www.bestbuddiesarizona.org.