



PHOTOS: DIANA EIMWA

Barrington High School Best Buddies Club participates in the 2011 Homecoming Parade. ABOVE: Andrew Wadlington and Joey Lagoni.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION IN BARRINGTON 220: A buddy system without beeping balls or cabin curfews

LIKE ALL PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS, BARRINGTON 220 is responsible for meeting the needs of every student. We take that charge seriously, whether addressing the learning requirements of the average, gifted or challenged child. Illinois law wisely mandates that students with special needs can access public education from the age of 3 until the eve of their 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. In Barrington 220, we meet that challenge with a modern Early Learning Center for children ages 3 to 5, in our elementary and secondary schools, after high school in our Lifeco program, and through other services too numerous to list.

Once a child is diagnosed with special needs, our team of trained professionals creates an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that provides a unique and supportive plan for learning. Let's face it: most of us need some accommodations at various times in our lives. For example, many – myself included – can read effectively, but take away my glasses and that skill quickly diminishes.

My classroom career consisted of teaching

high school math from pre-algebra through advanced calculus. My pupils came in all sizes, with various talents and abilities. As their teacher, I had to meet the needs of every student. While I worked with many kids diagnosed with various deficits, typically their IEPs required only minor accommodations for them to be successful. Curiously, my first real exposure to assisting children with special needs was not in the classroom, but in the woods.

While in college, I spent summers working as a counselor at the YMCA residential camp near Lindenhurst, Ill. If you ever saw the movie *Meatballs*, I was the Bill Murray character. Campers ages 6 to 14 came for two-week sessions where we hosted the traditional summer activities: sports, horseback riding, boating, swimming, arts and crafts, and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. For one month each summer, the grounds became Camp Lions of Illinois. Since 1957, Illinois Lions Clubs have sponsored a summer camp for kids with visual or hearing impairments - a truly wonderful experience for both the children and adults.

I have two memories from Camp Lions. The first was my introduction to “beeper ball.” Think of softball, but the ball emits a distinct beeping sound so it can be detected by the visually impaired. In the campers-versus-counselor game, all kids on one team were legally blind while all their counselors on the other team were blindfolded.

I had played baseball since second grade, but beeper ball was a humbling experience. I'll never forget standing at the plate, holding my bat and listening intently for the beep as I swung with futility at the unseen pitch. While I was hitless in many attempts, batting was not nearly as hazardous as playing the infield. Guarding my position at third base was truly frightening. When a lucky camper did connect and lined one my way, the beep, the bruise or even the blood were often simultaneous sensations.

The second unforgettable experience demonstrated the resourcefulness of some campers who were totally deaf. Each night, “lights out” occurred around 9:30. The counselors then left their duties and were free to socialize until midnight, except a single colleague who remained on duty to watch over the slumbering youths.

One night, the college co-ed I was dating was assigned to monitor five cabins of deaf children. Around 11 p.m., I visited her post at a nearby picnic table. She was not a happy camp counselor, as the kids in one cabin were still awake. Every three

Dr. Tom Leonard receives a shirt from the Best Buddies Club at Barrington High School.

PHOTO: JEFF ARNETT



to four minutes, the bungalow would erupt with banging and screaming. She wasn't sure what was going on inside, but it didn't sound good. Trying to win her affections, I offered to investigate. I snuck up to a window and watched what was transpiring. In the darkness at the other end of the lodge, a flashlight from a top bunk illuminated a pair of hands. The child quickly signed a joke and, once he reached the punch line, the other kids whacked the walls, floors and bunks to signal their laughter. They had adapted. Hoping to prove my valor, I promptly confiscated the flashlight and solved the dilemma for my dearest.

My early lessons from Camp Lions provided a philosophical and compassionate compass. While we all encounter obstacles that require adaptation sometime in our lives, the challenges are greater for some than for others. We should show empathy and appreciate the resilience of those who must navigate demanding circumstances – whether they are physical, mental or emotional. A great example of this kindhearted approach is the Best Buddies Club at Barrington High School under the direction of Diana Emma.

As an inclusive organization that befriends those with intellectual or developmental disabilities, Best Buddies values people with special needs and raises awareness of the offensive “R-word.” The R-word, representing the expression “retard,” is slang vocabulary that describes something with a negative connotation. It is common to hear someone exclaim, “Oh, that’s so retarded!” The word has shifted from being an outdated medical term to a painful and derogatory phrase.

Student Joey Lagoni is a peer to his Best Buddy Andrew Wadlington. Joey said, “People know it’s wrong to use words like this. It is no different from words that discriminate against others based on race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation or gender. People often don’t realize that the R-word is the same. They don’t understand the effect it has on people with disabilities.”

In any one of the many special education classrooms found in every Barrington 220 school, our expertly prepared staff is there to help students on this journey and to help us understand their unique needs. This is a buddy system in the truest sense. Enabling all children to achieve their potential is a goal worthy of our collective efforts and partnerships – thankfully without the aid of any beeping balls or cabin curfews. U



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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