



Buddy Up Program Demonstrates the True Power of Service Learning

Zoe Armour is a fun-loving 17-year-old who enjoys making new friends and playing games (particularly if the game involves dogs – but more on that from Zoe later).

For a few hours every fortnight, Zoe has been visiting St Peter's College as a participant in our Buddy Up Program. This is because Zoe lives with Cohen Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that affects only 1,000 people worldwide.

Our Buddy Up Program was initiated to provide a brief period of fun and respite for families just like Zoe's. There's no doubt the program is achieving this goal but perhaps the best part is that it's families just like Zoe's who have in fact been reminding us about the true power of service learning – how a simple, inclusive idea really can benefit the community as a whole.

As a Support Coordinator working in the disability sector, Sarah Armour knows first-hand the challenges many families are facing. She also happens to be Zoe's mum.

"To be honest, I was surprised when I heard a mainstream school wanted to do something like this because I don't know of anything else out there like the Buddy Up Program," she said.

"But when I was asked by the School to provide some guidance on establishing it, I quickly got the sense that the intent was to do it right and to do it well.

"Zoe has loved being involved in the Buddy Up Program. She is incredibly chatty and has had a great time making friends and enjoying games as part of an activity that is completely designed for her.

"I usually drop her off and then go and do my grocery shopping or get some work done.

I'll then often come back and join the group for dinner which is lovely."

Sarah has been impressed by the level of interest from St Peter's College students to be involved in the Program.

"The boys are the most patient, kind, courteous students I've ever known," she said.

"They have been naturals at interacting with Zoe and have quickly understood how to communicate on her level."

"There's benefit for all with this Program; I know some of the boys want to do it in part for the leadership growth it represents but I've also witnessed them growing and learning as people."

Sarah is well aware that there is a long way to go in terms of equality and inclusion for people with disability.

"Children like Zoe are really no different to you and me in that they want to be loved and cared for and included – and that's exactly what the Buddy Up Program is teaching these boys," she said.

"There's benefit for all with this Program; I know some of the boys want to do it in part for the leadership growth it represents but I've also witnessed them growing and learning as people."

While Zoe says she was initially a little nervous to attend the Buddy Up Program she now thinks it's great. Her favourite activity is to enlist the boys help in a game of playing dogs.

"I've made some really great friends here and we have a great time together," she said.

"I enjoy playing tag and I also love playing dogs with them. The boys are really cool!"

From 4pm-7pm every second Monday, the Buddy Up Program sees us welcoming eight guests into our School. Students from Years 11 and 12 have been hosting these guests with a range of activities, including arts and craft, swimming, ball sports and more. They enjoy afternoon tea together and have dinner in Da Costa Dining Hall.

"Before starting the Program, all St Peter's College students receive training from our Diverse Learning Needs teacher," Service Learning Coordinator Ed Ruediger said.

"We also received support from an Occupational Therapist and external organisation VolunteerAbility, to ensure the Program could be delivered safely and appropriately for participants. Student to student handover has also been very important.

"Sarah and Zoe's story is a powerful example of how this Program is encouraging all of us to share more fully in our common humanity.

"The lesson for our students is about service and character but we've all been reminded of how important it is for us to broaden, actively contribute and nurture the community within which we live. It's clear the benefit of doing so is invaluable."

1 Year 11 students Zig Jonats and Angus Crawford with Buddy Up participant Zoe Armour
 2 Harrison Sheridan (Year 11) and Buddy Up guest playing with bubbles
 3 Year 11 students Harry Orchard and Sam Lacy with Buddy Up guest
 4 Charlie Milne (Year 11) painting with Buddy Up guest

Fostering Empathy and Community Engagement

Aligning with our School's core values of truth, respect and service, an array of Service Learning opportunities are embedded in our curriculum. With a focus on providing authentic and relational activities that promote personal growth and benefit the needs of the wider community, this year the School has established 'Buddy Up', an after-school respite program.

The objectives of the Buddy Up Program are threefold: to support parents in our greater community who have a child living with a disability by giving them a well-deserved break, to provide a safe and friendly environment where children living with a disability can participate in engaging activities, and to provide our students with an authentic opportunity to learn from individuals with unique life situations.

The children who join us are supported by our senior students (their buddies), parents and staff at the School in an environment that meets their needs. Together, they engage in a variety of activities including crafts, cooking, treasure hunts, reading and games. The children enjoy afternoon tea and dinner with their buddies before they are collected by their parents at 7.00pm.

The Term 1 pilot was a wonderful success with positive feedback received from participating families and the student and parent volunteers

involved. Through supporting their buddies, our students developed valuable critical thinking skills and empathy and all involved found the experience both rewarding and humbling.

Here are some testimonials from program participants that reflect the positive impact of Buddy Up:

"It was the highlight of William's week, every time." **Danielle, mother of William (age 10)**

"I thoroughly enjoyed the experience provided by this program. It took me out of my comfort zone, as it was challenging and not something we do every day. Seeing the benefits, including making a new friend, and providing respite for their parents was a rewarding and humbling experience. I would recommend this program to any students or parents who love a challenge and experiencing something new."

Zig (Year 11 student)

"I was so amazed by the genuine kindness and support and welcome I felt from your parents and students. It not only allowed me a couple of hours to myself, I had a lovely time engaging with the parents – something I don't often get to do being a full time working single mum of a child with additional needs. Charlotte had an absolute ball and chatted non-stop about her experience on the way home."

Julie, mother of Charlotte (age 10)

"It is difficult to be empathetic of other people's everyday challenges when you have no direct experience. The respite care helps break down barriers and any ignorance of our young SPSC men." **Andrew (SPSC parent volunteer)**

In Term 2, we hosted seven children on a fortnightly basis, with 14 students serving as buddies. We look forward to continuing to grow the Buddy Up program to provide respite to more families and involve more student volunteers.

Thank you to our Years 11 and 12 student volunteers for your incredible efforts this semester, to our staff volunteers, and to our Year 11 parents who volunteered alongside your sons. Thank you also to the Mission Guild for your generous support of the program in Semester 1 2023.

If you would like to learn more about Buddy Up or share information about similar programs, please email ServiceLearning@stpeters.sa.edu.au. We are always open to new opportunities that positively impact our wider community.

Ashleigh Day | Service Learning Coordinator




1 Sam Lacy (Year 11) with Buddy Up guest

2 Tim Browning, Edward Weeks (Year 11) and guest shooting hoops

3 Harrison Sheridan (Year 11) and Buddy Up guest chasing bubbles



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