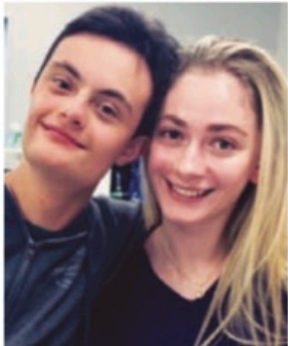


EDUCATION

Beverly Hills High School "By Your Side" Is a Bridge-Builder Set to Expand



Ethan Artal and Madison Heller
Photo by Jocelyn Arias

By Sandra Sims

The mission of Beverly Hills High School (BHHS) clubs is to help students foster a sense of community with each other. The By Your Side Club (BYS) extends that concept. Club president Madison Heller tells the Courier that BYS was created as a venue to unite students with and without special education needs, as well as encourage companionship and friendship.

"BYS has made an indelible impact on me and promotes a culture of acceptance to everyone who participates," said Heller, a BHHS junior.

BYS was founded in 2014 at BHHS by Jonathan Artal, who is currently a sophomore

at Stanford University. "By Your Side was born out of my experiences with my younger brother Ethan, who has Downs Syndrome. Growing up by his side, I became pretty intimately aware of the struggles students with special needs can face; struggles in feeling accepted, feeling as though they have friends, and feeling as though their school or community has a place for them. I founded By Your Side to fill that void for students, to help them develop friendships and confidence while deconstructing stigmas surrounding disability," Artal told the Courier.

He added, "It's been meaningful to see how many students have emerged from the program having found friends and community and a space where they felt at home. It's also been powerful to hear from students without special needs, those who were able to relate across differences and find value in their peers regardless of disability."

Because of the success of BYS at the high school level, the club has expanded to Beverly Vista Middle School. Special Education staff member Phyllis Funchis-Brown is the club's official sponsor. Heller is actively involved in BYS at both campuses.

BHHS Special Education

teachers Kathy Khorramian and Elizabeth Schwab are both impressed with Heller's commitment.

"Madison joined By Your Side Club as a freshman. She met with the students at the first meeting and started to notice them coming into my class and would come in at passing periods and nutrition break to hang out with them," said Schwab. "She loved the students and spending time with them and they all loved her. I suggested to her coming back next year as a teacher's assistant for the classroom and she did. The students all love having a peer they can talk with and give high fives to in the hallway. Madison acts as a great positive example to the students," she added.

For Heller, the most rewarding part of BYS is making new friendships that extend beyond the weekly lunch meetings. She explained that while the Special Education students gain confidence and feel more included and accepted, the general education students in turn gain profound respect and genuine compassion for a population they might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact with.

"Students learn to appreciate that every person, regardless of their abilities or disabilities,

has joy, warmth, humor and empathy as well as challenges to overcome," she noted.

During the BYS lunch meetings, students naturally form small groups and begin conversations in a relaxed environment. Throughout the year, BYS also participates in various "bridge" events and outings that give the special needs students opportunities to bond with other student groups on campus. In February, BYS will partner with the BHHS Dance Company for the second annual BYS Dance Day. "In April, a citrus packing house, Classic Harvest, is slated to collaborate with us for a fun-filled, citrus-inspired event at Roxbury Park," said Heller.

Heller and Artal plan to continue expanding BYS locally

and nationally. After graduation, Heller hopes to continue supporting the Special Education community. "I may ultimately forge a path as an advocate for the Special Education community, while running my family's farms. My grandfather is a citrus grower in the Central Valley and I've spent considerable time helping him. The time spent with my special needs friends and on the ranches have given me a sense of mission," she said.

Artal added, "Moving forward, I'm excited to be working with faculty at Stanford and with a great team of peers to further develop By Your Side. As we expand it to schools across the country, I'm hopeful that more and more students will benefit from the program."

Beverly Vista Middle School 6th Graders win 36 to 6 against Culver City.



Beverly Vista Middle School Girls Volley Ball Games Oct. 29



BV 8th vs Wilder's Prep
Game 1: BV 25--WP 20
Game 2: BV 15--WP 25
Game 3: BV 15-- WP 5

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