

The City of Naperville and the Accessible Community Task Force would like to congratulate the 2019 Student Recognition Award Winners

The following students are being honored for their exemplary service and outstanding commitment to affirm individuals with disabilities in their school and in the community:

Emma Gatz

Emma is a senior at Metea Valley High School who is passionate about helping and encouraging students with disabilities. She currently serves on the board of Best Buddies, an international organization that creates and fosters friendships between students with and without disabilities, at Metea Valley and has been a peer buddy to a student with a disability since her freshman year. Emma is always present at Best Buddies meetings and events and is always one of the first to jump in and assist students with special needs. Due to her involvement in Best Buddies, she was also selected to be a Peer Partner during her physical education class, where she assists with students who require extra support to participate in physical education classes. Somehow Emma also finds time to help out with Special Olympics after regular school hours. She is always asking how her school and community can do more to help individuals with disabilities. She spearheads many of her school's fundraisers and activities to support her peers with disabilities. Metea Valley High School is a more inclusive place because of Emma.

Zoe Koulos

Zoe is a student leader in the Adapted Physical Education class at Naperville Central High School. In addition to her involvement with Adapted PE, Zoe has chosen to be a peer-helper in Adapted Art and is also a teacher assistant in a special-needs classroom. She coaches Special Olympics and participates in F.U.N. Club (Friends Uniting at NCHS) which is an after-school social club for special-needs students and their typical peers. Zoe does all of this yet still finds time to nanny a special needs student in her free time. She has a unique way of making each student she interacts with feel more comfortable and independent. The fact that Zoe is involved in numerous activities that include the special-needs population speaks volumes regarding her passion and commitment, as well as her "leadership" mentality. She is always patient, energetic and has a pleasant disposition. She is one of a kind, constantly pursuing many kinds of experiences and opportunities to interact with special needs students in preparation for college where she will be pursuing a degree in Special Education.

Jackson Mayor

Jack is a student in the School District 204 STEPS Transitional Services program and serves as a global ambassador for Best Buddies International. In his position as a global ambassador he gets to deliver speeches about the benefits of the Best Buddy program to many different audiences. Jack has delivered speeches to grade school children, high school students, professional business groups, and many other organizations, just to name a few. His speeches are centered on the positive and profound impact the Best Buddy program has had on his life and in doing so hopes to make certain that this program will continue to be available and will continue to flourish for other students with special needs. The passion and enthusiasm in his delivery is obvious to all of his audiences and serve to make his overall message about the program memorable and therefore highly effective. The Best Buddy program is positioned to continue to flourish into the future due to individuals like Jackson.

Dominykas Mockapetris

For the past two years Dom has been a student in the School District 203 Connections Transition Services program. Upon his arrival in the United States in 2013 from his birthplace of Lithuania he spoke and understood only Lithuanian. Initially a student at Naperville Central High School he was able to increase his understanding of English used within context in just a couple of months and since being a student at Connections he has been able to fade the use of an interpreter. While Dom may still have difficulty at times expressing some of his thoughts he does not give up persists until his communicative partner understands what he is trying to express.

Dom is a hard worker, always willing to lend a hand to help peers or staff. This is the second year that he has work trained at the Naperville Police Department, willingly completing all tasks assigned to him. Most recently Dom advocated to be placed at the Naperville Fire Department for work training, persisting until the Connections Staff and the Fire Department made arrangements for the placement to take place. When he returns to Connections after completing his tasks at either the Police or Fire Department the look of satisfaction and pride are always apparent. Dom is an inspiration to everyone. Despite the many obstacles he has faced he has never let them stop him from reaching his goals.

Taylor Wessel

Taylor is a senior at Naperville North High School and is passionate about helping others. In order to pursue this passion, she has served as an Adapted Physical Education Leader and as an Adapted Art Leader where she works in the physical education and art classes with students with disabilities. It is not this alone that makes Taylor stand out. She continues her work with students with special needs outside of the classroom. For example, she took the initiative to take many of the special needs students she met in her adaptive art and physical education classes to several football games and into the Dawg Pound student cheering section because these students expressed a desire to participate with their peers. Also, over the summer Taylor coached a 21-year-old swimmer with Autism who qualified for the USA Paralympic games. She takes the time to work with every student and learns about their interests, their families and exactly who they are. She is beyond patient with the students but also has the skill of pushing them to achieve as much as possible. Next year, Taylor will be going to Indiana University to study Special Education and will be a fantastic teacher when she graduates. And although Taylor is not one to let you know, she is also one of the leading scorers on the Naperville North girls water polo team.