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School News

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Haunty starts Theater Arts Fund with award money

by PERRY HIBNER

MCPASD

Alex Haunty certainly proved to be a best buddy to 19 of his friends at Middleton High School recently.

He started the Alex Haunty Theater Arts Fund with an award he won last year and paid for his classmates in the special education department to see the opening night of "Beauty and the Beast" at the Overture Center for the Arts in Madison on Tuesday, Dec. 6.

"It was great and everyone really liked it," Haunty, who was profiled in the *Middleton Times-Tribune* last year, said recently.

Haunty, 19, received a \$1,000 "I See You Award" from Best Buddies Wisconsin last year. The award is available to active Best Buddies Wisconsin members with or without intellectual or developmental disabilities. Haunty, who is cognitively disabled, is the first student with a disability to receive the award.

MHS Best Buddies adviser Rachel Wimer forwarded the award information to Alex's parents and wrote a recommendation for him. Was she surprised he won?

"No, because I thought his goal was so fantastic," Wimer said. "He makes a positive impression on just about

anyone he meets because he is so friendly."

He received the award at the MHS Senior Awards Night last May.

"When I won it, I wanted to give something back to my friends," said Haunty, who will remain a student at MHS until he is 21.

His mother knew right away what he planned to do with the money from the award.

"He's been talking about taking his friends to the Overture for two to three years," Mary Beth Haunty said. "He wanted to take them to a special musical. Once he learned 'Beauty and the Beast' was coming he was convinced that was the musical they had to go see."

There were 19 students, 10 parents and seven MHS staff members who went to the play. Haunty's fund paid for the tickets for students and staff. Thanks to a substantial discount from the Overture Center, the 37 tickets cost about \$750 and Haunty's fund covered all but \$100 of that.

"It takes so much commitment to make this happen," Mary Beth said. "That's the type of cultural experience many children don't get."

MHS Best Buddies adviser Rachel Wimer also attended the performance. She said some students were so excit-

ed that they were chest-bumping after the play finished.

"The students had a fabulous time," Wimer said. "I had much more fun watching the students watch the play than watching the play. ... They were so excited that they were talking and singing on the bus on the way to the back to school."

He plans to have an art show at the Prairie Café in December 2012 and will put one-half of what he makes into the fund. He has already finished four pieces. His father, Thomas, is working on a website where Alex's work can be displayed.

"I try never to tell him any idea," Mary Beth said. "He has his plans. He's convinced he can do anything."

Alex has been to New York City and has attended Broadway performances. After finishing high school, Alex plans to attend Edgewood College through the Cutting Edge program. He wants to be involved in drama and sing in the choir.

He also gave a commencement speech at the MHS graduation at the Alliant Energy Center last spring.

"He's out there," Mary Beth said. "Everybody knows him. ... He is one of the first kids I've seen with disabilities to cross over. He wants to do what everyone else is doing and he



Photo contributed

Haunty, eighth from the left, and some of his many friends on a recent trip to the Overture Center.

seems to find a way to make that happen."

Students volunteer and commit to meeting with their buddies at least twice a month at MHS, Wimer said. There are 27 buddy relationships this school year and another 30 associate buddies who attend monthly meetings and occasional get-togethers.

The volunteers decorate their buddy's lockers to celebrate their birthdays. They also will hold a "Spread the Word to End the Word" day on March 7 to help create awareness about disabilities and foster

acceptance, Wimer said.

Best Buddies is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1989 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver. It has nearly 1,500 chapters worldwide and its mission is to establish a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment and leadership development for people with disabilities.

Editor's note: Hibner is the MCPASD's community relations director.