It’s a Wednesday night in early September and senior Colleen Connor, a nursing major from Massachusetts, is gathered with other Catholic University students around a kitchen table at Bethlehem House in Brookland, a residential home for adults with intellectual disabilities. Sitting under strings of paper hearts inscribed with messages like “Stay Strong” and “You are made in God’s image,” Connor and the other students are there to spend time with their friends, many of whom have mental or physical disabilities.

Though friendships between college students and Bethlehem House residents may seem unlikely, they are a common result of Catholic University’s chapter of Best Buddies, an organization that pairs college students and adults with disabilities in one-on-one friendships. The students are responsible for forming relationships with their assigned buddies — calling or visiting at least once a week and serving as a friend when times get hard.

Tonight, the students and buddies are gathered for Mass and dinner, something that has happened every Wednesday night at Bethlehem House since the home was opened 33 years ago. The homily for the September Mass at Bethlehem House.

Senior Colleen Connor watches as her buddy Helen reads the responsorial psalm during a September Mass at Bethlehem House.
“If there’s anything our friends with disabilities have wanted all their lives, it’s a friend,” she said. “I think everyone, at the end of the day, needs support,” she said.

“Most of our time is spent talking.”

“Being able to see them in the church with all of my family and friends was a way to recognize that it was almost 10 years after 1 had met them and they were truly part of my family and the community that I supported me wholeheartedly,” she said.

“As the end of the night after getting her water and snacks, I asked if she needed anything else,” McElhiney said. “She looked at me and said, ‘No, you’re all I need.’”

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“They’ll bring you joy.”

Senior Juliana Mitchell, a nursing major, has been volunteering with Best Buddies as service work, McElhiney says she has gained as much as she has given. In trying to help Colleen, she has discovered a community filled with rewarding experiences to work there,” she said.

“I moved into the house in Riverdale and immediately fell in love with it,” Traveline said. “I started doing things I never thought I would have been able to do and I still don’t think I would be able to do if I hadn’t had those established relationships beforehand.”

“I had never spent time with people with disabilities before I went to college and I was a little hesitant,” he said. “Best Buddies really opened my eyes and helped me realize they’re regular people just like us who deserve the same friendships and the same rights.”

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“You have so much time through college to try new things.”

“I like to look at it as a holistic treatment of the person,” he said. “The whole point is to help the person do what they want, which goes beyond just treating an illness. It’s treating the person to help them function and reach their own potential.”