Huntington — Towards the end of this past school year at Gateway Regional High School, I was offered the position of Best Buddies chapter president for my senior year. For those who don’t know, Best Buddies is a nonprofit organization founded in 1989 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver, whose mother—Eunice Kennedy Shriver—was the founder of Special Olympics. The mission of Best Buddies is to offer one-to-one friendships, leadership development, and integrated employment to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In a Best Buddies Chapter, each person who has a disability, also known as an IDD, is paired with someone who does not have a disability to create a friendship unlike any other. The person who has the disability is referred to as a buddy, while the person without is known as a peer buddy.

Each year, Best Buddies International holds a leadership conference open to members of Best Buddies from every state in the U.S. as well as other countries. As Gateway’s Chapter President, I was granted the amazing opportunity to attend this conference at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana last July. This year’s conference theme was “Pass the Torch.”

My first thought when I arrived at the Indiana campus was, “Woah, there’s a lot of people here!” In fact, there were over two thousand people at the conference ranging from middle schoolers to adults in the workforce. Around two hundred of those attending were from Massachusetts—the second largest delegation at the event. All two hundred of us walked down the streets of the campus to opening ceremonies, sporting our Patriots-themed shirts while carrying giant cardboard cutouts of Julian Edelman and Tom Brady. At the ceremony, the conference kicked off with a dance party, followed by some words of wisdom from the Best Buddies founder. It ended with speeches by some of the most amazing people I’ve ever had the pleasure to hear speak. They spoke of inclusion, friendship, and kindness.

That opening ceremony sparked my true passion for Best Buddies, but the inspiration didn’t stop there. Throughout the four days of the conference, I was graced by so many people who shared amazing stories about themselves and their buddies. One story that I found particularly cool was from someone who, along with his buddy, was able to meet Tom Brady and play football with him. I was honestly pretty impressed!

While I spent a lot of time being inspired and having the best time of my life, each attendee of the conference did have to take part in some workshops in order to grow their ability to be a productive member of Best Buddies. Everyone was split into groups according to state and age. In the high school workshops we learned more about our roles was as chapter presidents and how we can grow our individual chapters into something great. We talked about fundraising, event planning, how to be as inclusive as possible, and how to make sure everyone involved in Best Buddies is having an enjoyable experience.
In between all of the hard work (and dance parties), I was able to interact with people I never would have met otherwise. I had the pleasure of meeting the Best Buddies founder himself, Anthony Kennedy Shriver as well as GLEE actress Lauren Potter. A friendship walk took place post meet and greet where I was overwhelmed with a feeling of happiness.

The last night of the conference was bittersweet. I was beyond excited for closing ceremonies and the dance that was to come after, but I was not ready to leave the amazing people that I had met over the four days. Closing ceremonies further confirmed my passion for integrating and including those who have disabilities into society, because people who have an IDD are capable of doing anything they set their minds to.

The final ceremony of the conference tied together everything that we had talked about throughout the weekend including a few very important phrases and mottos. The motto that was passed around the entire conference was “Don’t Limit Me”, coined by the star of the reality TV show “Born This Way” Megan Bomgaars, who has Down Syndrome. The most important phrase of the conference was the theme itself, “Pass the Torch”: teach others the Best Buddies mission so they can continue the work that others have begun. It also means to pass on leadership skills to those with IDDs so they can pursue their dreams and passions. The Best Buddies International Leadership Conference immersed me and so many others in the world of inclusion, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Gateway’s Best Buddies Advisor Meghan Wasiak looks forward to this year’s activities, after Gamble’s attendance at the conference. “I truly believe that this leadership conference prepares students to take ownership of their school’s Best Buddies organization and lead the rest of the members to have a successful, productive, and most importantly, fun, year!” Wasiak said. “I am excited to see the fresh and innovative ideas Audrey is going to bring to the club!”

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*Photo: (left to right): Gateway Best Buddies Chapter President Audrey Gamble with founder Anthony Kennedy Shriver and two other Best Buddies Chapter Presidents from Western Massachusetts: Taryn O’Sullivan from Holyoke High School and Greyson Young from Frontier High School.*