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Marshfield student helps launch social club for developmentally challenged

By Patrick Ronan

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MARSHFIELD — The idea behind Furnace Brook Friends is simple: one classmate caring about another.

Furnace Brook Middle School seventh-grader Allison MacVarish has a good friend with autism who, she said, often struggles to fit in as day-to-day student activities are taking place. This didn't sit well with Allison

"I was thinking about ways to help him out in school, both socially and in class," Allison said.

Over the summer, Allison helped organize a lemonade/craft sale that raised more than \$350, enough to launch Furnace Brook Friends. The purpose of the club is to pair students with classmates who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, and to promote social inclusion and long-lasting friendships.

With the support of Furnace Brook Vice Principal Patrick Sullivan, the group recently held a kick-off event in the school cafeteria. It attracted nearly 200 students.

A select group of student leaders will meet once a month to brainstorm ideas for outreach events.

The preliminary ideas include a bowling outing, a scavenger hunt and a sports day. The group also hopes to make an impact during the school day by pairing classmates at lunch and through tutoring sessions. For starters, the club will work directly with up to 10 students with social disorders.

"Middle school students have a tendency to be not so nice because of their developmental stage," Sullivan said. "This club takes them away from bullying and gets them together under one positive goal."

"Now when students see each other in the hallways, they can say 'hi' instead of feeling like strangers who might be different."

Furnace Brook Friends is an extension of the school's Peace Builders initiative, which has five principles: praise people, give up putdowns, seek wise people, notice others' hurts, right wrongs and help others.

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