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The Essex Foundation Helps Fund Valley Unified Buddies Life Skills Trip to Disney *Awards \$10,000 Grant to Underwrite Student Travel Expenses*

Essex, CT – In March 2024, 23 local area teens will be taking the ultimate life skills trip to Disney World in Florida thanks to the organizational efforts of Valley Unified Buddies and a \$10,000 grant award from The Essex Foundation. Valley Unified Buddies is a nonprofit group made up of Unified Sports, a registered program of Special Olympics, and Valley Buddies. The group provides high school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities every opportunity to succeed in school, their jobs and in life. They are provided a safe space to play team sports and are paired with peer mentors. Together, they enjoy team dinners, movie nights, football game outings, and other organized activities including a Unified prom open to other special needs kids from surrounding schools.



“Valley Unified Buddies is so grateful to The Essex Foundation for partnering with us,” said Susan Strecker, president of the non-profit Valley Unified Buddies booster club. “It is only with their support and generosity that our kids will be able to go on this ultimate life skills trip to Disney World. A big part of our mission is awareness and inclusion. The Essex Foundation is a huge part of helping us achieve these goals.”

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most students, the entire trip is designed for them to put everything they've been learning into practice - from following directions to get through security; to displaying proper social behavior while traveling by airplane and during the hotel stay; to planning their time and paying for meals. The cost of \$2400 per student is prohibitive for some. Every \$10,000 raised reduces the cost for each of the 21 students by \$400. Thanks to The Essex Foundation grant and other community fundraising efforts, the group is that much closer to hitting its \$40,000 total goal. Those who wish to donate, can do so online at www.valleyunifiedbuddies.com, or by sending a check to Valley Unified Buddies, PO Box 242, Essex, CT 06426.

Pictured Above: Members of the Valley Unified Buddies are “all ears” as they accept a grant award from The Essex Foundation board members in support of the group’s upcoming life skills trip to Disney World. Presenting the check on behalf of The Essex Foundation are (front row l-r) Jay Tonks, and Cheryl Harger to Kate Ely and Susan Strecker of Valley