

# The Press Democrat

## Best Buddies Prom revving up for return to Santa Rosa this spring.



Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat Teacher Jasmine Clewis, of Santa Rosa High School, back row second from left, poses with students including, Caleb Almond, left (red shirt), GG Parajon, front, next to Krystina Mattos (green dress) and Aliyah Cortez (horned hat), along with others, during Sonoma County Best Buddies Prom at Poppy Bank Epicenter in Santa Rosa on Saturday, April 6. Best Buddies Prom is for special needs youth including their families and friends. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

A little more than two years ago, student leaders at five Sonoma County high schools put their collective party planning skills together and hosted a countywide prom for students with special education needs.

It was a smashing success.

Born from the various Best Buddies clubs at Analy, Petaluma, Elsie Allen, Montgomery and Santa Rosa high schools, student leaders raised funds, booked a venue, contracted with vendors and hosted a massive party for hundreds of students, and in some cases, their chaperones.

It was dubbed the “Best Buddies Prom,” and this spring it will return for its third run. “I feel a lot of gratitude that we are able to do that and pull it off,” said Montgomery High’s Best Buddies Club president Danica Schwan. “Everyone has a great time.” Best Buddies is an international program that works on local school campuses to promote activities, events and field trips with students in special education classes and those in general education classes.

That means the prom is open to all — students with special needs as well as general education students.



**Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat** Elijah Munshaw Von Arx of Santa Rosa, dances with others in his wheelchair during Sonoma County Best Buddies Prom at Poppy Bank Epicenter in Santa Rosa on Saturday, April 6, 2024. Best Buddies Prom is for special needs youth including their families and friends. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

There are modifications at the event to make it more welcoming to all students. Headphones are provided should the noise become overwhelming. There are boxes of fidget toys if students need to work out some nerves or anxiety. Last year there was a sensory cool-down room.

Parents and family members are invited to stay, but they also are assured that with a plethora of volunteers, Epicenter staff and general education peers, all students would be well supervised.



**Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat** : Nate Patrick and Destiney Mercado-Jimenez, both of Santa Rosa, talk while sitting down for a meal during Sonoma County Best Buddies Prom at Poppy Bank Epicenter in Santa Rosa on Saturday, April 6, 2024. Best Buddies Prom is for special needs youth including their families and friends. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Although in the early stages of planning for the event this spring, organizers hope to again have the event at Poppy Bank Epicenter, where partygoers can dance if they like, but also have the option of bowling, playing arcade games and, as always, eating from a wide expanse of food items, including a chocolate fountain. An exact date and location have not yet been locked in

“I feel like that works so well,” Schwan said of the Epicenter.



Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat : Hope Carver of Petaluma bowls during Sonoma County Best Buddies Prom at Poppy Bank Epicenter in Santa Rosa on Saturday, April 6, 2024. Best Buddies Prom is for special needs youth including their families and friends. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

To help kick off fundraising for this year's extravaganza, organizers have again tapped musician and Montgomery High grad Ryan Woodard to headline a fundraiser.

Last year, with a mere three weeks to plan it, Woodard and his team put together a four-act lineup at Cooperage Brewing in downtown Santa Rosa, hosted a raffle, and raised more than \$7,000 of the prom's \$20,000 goal.



**Kent Porter / The Press Democrat:** Billie Rooney, a student of Anova Center for Education, shows excitement as the Best Buddies prom gets underway at Poppy Bank Epicenter in Santa Rosa, Sunday, April 27, 2025. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Part of those funds go toward vendors and supplies, but it's also meant to keep the ticket price down. Last year, tickets were sold for \$10 a piece. That part is key, said Analy High senior Alexandra Ballantine, who is again helping with the spring event.

"Last year, my (general education) prom ticket was \$70. That ticket cost can make it so you don't even want to go," she said.

Ballantine credited Woodard and his event with taking a big chunk out of ticket prices.

“Ryan Woodard is such an amazing help and he’s so vocal about his support,” she said.

Indeed, Woodard is all in for a second installation of the fundraiser, an event he called a highlight of his year.

“Like last year, I wanted to do this fundraiser for kids that have special needs, (intellectual developmental disabilities), autism,” Woodard said. “I want to do this for kids to help give them an awesome prom and a special prom.”



Kent Porter / The Press Democrat, 2023: Ryan Woodard, a Montgomery High School graduate, rehearses at the School of Rock, Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2023, in Santa Rosa. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat, 2023)

“There were so many people there for support, it was mostly the best time of this year,” he said. “I’ve really been proud to throw this fundraiser and really grateful for all the people who came out and we can’t wait to put on another one.”

The Best Buddies prom holds a special place for Woodard. He was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and was largely nonverbal until he was 10. But at around 8 years

old, he caught the music bug, listening to albums on repeat. He started playing guitar at age 9 and began learning songs at an incredible clip.

He formed a band. He plays live shows. He posts his work to a [growing YouTube audience](#).

He has also jammed on stage with blues legend Buddy Guy and [received a guitar from John Mayer](#) in 2023 after [a video of him singing "Gravity"](#) went viral. His latest single is ["Should've."](#)

No date is yet on the books for the fundraiser, but it's in the works, according to Ryan's dad, Travis Woodard.

"It'll be bigger and better than last year," he said. "Last year we did it all in three weeks."

That is likely welcome news to Schwan and the rest of the student leaders who are starting to look ahead to year three of the Best Buddies prom.

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