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LOCAL NEWS

Local musician Ryan Woodard leading Best Buddies prom fundraiser in Santa Rosa

Ryan Woodard fuels drive to support special needs students



Kent Porter / The Press Democrat file

Ryan Woodard, pictured in 2023, will headline a fundraiser Saturday to benefit the county-wide Best Buddies Prom 2026. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat file)



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Ryan Woodard didn't have much time last year to pull off the biggest fundraiser supporting the 2025 Best Buddies Prom.

Still, the event last spring netted approximately \$7,500.

This year?

"We hope to crush that," Travis Woodard, Ryan's dad said.

To that end, the second annual Ryan Woodard Best Buddies Prom benefit concert Saturday, Feb. 28 at Cooperage Brewing Company on Airway Court in Santa Rosa will again have a lineup of four bands and will also feature a haul of raffle and live and silent auction items.

"I have been going around to businesses, local businesses around Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Petaluma, Healdsburg," Ryan said. "We've been getting donations every day."

As a refresher, the Best Buddies Prom is something special.

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 also those in general education classes. A long list of high schools in Sonoma County have active Best Buddies programs that help support athletic events — soccer, basketball and track and field — between multiple schools that draw hundreds of participants three times a year.

But it was in 2024 that a handful of leaders from Best Buddies clubs around the county decided to throw a prom not just for students in special education programs, but all students.

Held at Poppy Bank Epicenter, the event has all of the trappings of a high school dance: Dance floor and music, glamorous gowns and sweet suits, boutonnieres and corsages.

But there are also extras at this Best Buddy event meant to help all students enjoy the night: An early start time, headphones for students who might feel overwhelmed by the lights and sounds, boxes of fidget toys, and a sensory cool-down room.

Need more? Food. Plenty of it. A chocolate fountain and dessert bar, pizza, nugget and churro bites. Attendees will also have access to the arcade, laser tag and bowling.

Parents and loved ones are invited to attend, but that isn't required.

Fundraisers allow all of that to happen and for all of that to be included.

Fundraisers also keep the ticket prices from being a barrier to entry. Tickets

● Opt-Out Signal Honored Friends, A Night of Magic" on April 19 will be \$10.

"It's important to have kids have an awesome prom," said Ryan Woodard, a 2024 graduate of Montgomery High School. "I just want to help out raising money for the kids to have this amazing prom."

Ryan Woodard has a special connection with the Best Buddies Prom even though he has never attended the dance.

Woodard was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and was largely nonverbal until he was 10. But when he was 8 years old, music struck a chord. He listened to albums start to finish, over and over again. He started playing guitar at age 9 and began learning songs at an incredible clip.

Today he's a working musician. He plays live shows. He posts his work to a growing [YouTube](#) audience.

He has shared the stage with Buddy Guy and was [gifted a guitar from John Mayer in 2023](#) after a video of [Woodard singing "Gravity"](#) on the street went viral. He released ["Should've"](#) late last year.

And his band will headline the fundraiser Saturday night, taking the stage after performances from Soph & Jake, Half Mile High, and the School of Rock house band. A continuous run of live music is slated to start at 2 p.m.

"It's going to be super fun," Danica Schwan, Best Buddies Club president at Montgomery.

Schwan credits her fellow Viking with creating more buzz for the Best Buddies Prom but also raising crucial funds to help make it happen.

"To start, Ryan is awesome," she said. "He has done such a fantastic job. He organized most of it but has been so involved in keeping us in the loop. Having someone like him who has such a huge connection with people, it makes it awesome."

The "us" Schwan refers to are the student leaders from the Best Buddies clubs around Sonoma County who are working together to pull off the April 19 prom.

In addition to Montgomery, students from Rancho Cotate, Elsie Allen, Ridgway, Roseland University Prep and Analy high schools are coordinating to pull off the dance.

"So much planning goes into the Best Buddies prom that goes on behind the

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People who do not attend the benefit concert on Saturday [can still donate online](#) through the Montgomery High School website.

Having Woodard take on the lion's share of this fundraising event is a massive help, Schwan said.

"He's amazing," she said. "We wouldn't be able to do this without him."

How to attend

The second annual benefit concert to support Best Buddies Prom 2026 will be from 2-7 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28 at Cooperage Brewing Company, 981 Airway Ct., Santa Rosa.

The live music lineup will feature:

Soph & Jake 2-2:50 p.m.

Half Mile High 3-3:45 p.m.

School of Rock house band 4-5:30 p.m.

Ryan Woodard Band 5:45-7:45 p.m.

The event is free and all ages are welcome.

To donate to Best Buddies Prom 2026, go to <https://mhs.srscschools.org/> and go to the student store tab.

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