

BEST FRIENDS

Going Beyond the Accolades

By Mark Billings

With a bedroom full of medals and winning race bibs, Dickinson High School (DHS) athlete Aiden Jung is proving himself a top competitor over and over again.

Last year alone, the 18-year-old senior placed 11th in the state cross country meet on top of capturing seventh in the mile and eighth in the 2-mile race at the state track meet. The *Bismarck Tribune* named Jung one of its Teens of the Week in October and through support from MDU Resources Group, awarded him a \$5,000 scholarship.

But what the accolades do not show is the human side of Jung, who desires to connect with people outside of his experience. The top-ranked runner has taken three summer mission trips with the St. John Lutheran Church Youth Group to Detroit, Puerto Rico and Missouri. And while he was earning top state titles last fall, he also joined the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP) and became a mentor to Parker Nelson, then a third-grader at Jefferson Elementary School.

“My sister, Ireland was a mentor and my mom encouraged me to do it, telling me I’d like it since I was a naturally caring person,” said Jung.

Over the course of their weekly meetings during Nelson’s lunch and recess, Jung said he experienced first-hand the joy of someone opening up and coming out of their shell. The pair typically spent time in teacher Chantel Heth’s classroom, followed by lunch and outside sports. The normally reserved Nelson, who had challenges in making friends, began to become more talkative and beamed when Jung arrived.

The pair is continuing to meet this school year while Nelson is in the fourth grade and Jung wraps up his senior year. Jung is one of nearly 70 school-based BFMP mentors in the Dickinson Public Schools (DPS), as well as Glen Ullin and Hebron. BFMP also facilitated its first school-based match in Bowman last month; seven mentors there meet in a community setting.

“It has been really fun to see Parker go from being a shy, reserved person to lighting up and becoming much more open,” said Jung. “It has been cool to see that transformation.”

Heather Nelson, a speech and language paraprofessional at the Early Childhood Center (ECC) in Dickinson, said she was searching for extra supports for Parker – the oldest of her three children – and decided to pursue BFMP at the recommendation of Jen Hausauer, a DPS school counselor.

“Parker was one of those kids who struggled to make friends, who wanted to be accepted,” she Nelson. “Being in BFMP has helped him tremendously in having more confidence socially. We have noticed a big difference.”

As the pair has cultivated a mentoring relationship, Jung said he has experienced nothing like the accolades from his running career; rather, he feels he has gained a window seat into a personal transformation.

“Overall, it has been super cool to see how Parker has changed from a person who was super shy to someone who is talkative and just lights up when we’re together,” said Jung. “That’s something really special and I’m not sure where else in the community you would experience it.”

Both Jung and Nelson encourage would-be mentors to apply to BFMP and engage with local youth who could benefit from consistent, one-on-one interaction, empathetic listening and role-modeling.

“Go for it,” said Nelson. “A child could benefit.”

“Especially if you are considering a career in education, consider becoming a mentor to experience the schools and local youth first-hand,” said Jung.

For more information about BFMP, call (701) 483-8615 or visit www.bestfriendsnd.org.