

BEST FRIENDS

Building up the next generation

By Mark Billings

Few high schoolers return to their old elementary schools for anything, let alone to encourage the next generation.

Not so for Dickinson High School (DHS) senior Alex Praus, who travels to his youth stomping grounds -- Lincoln Elementary School -- once a week as a role model and guide for fourth-grader Kenzo Atohoun. Praus is one of nearly 20 DHS students who are helping local youth see the best in themselves as volunteers with the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP).

The 18-year-old Dickinson native said he can still remember mentors visiting other kids at Lincoln when he was a student there. That positive memory, coupled with other DHS students he knew were mentors, including Brendan Johnson and Matthew Meschke, now freshman at Dickinson State University (DSU), drew him to BFMP last year.

"I honestly didn't know that much about Best Friends prior to joining and I wasn't sure if I would have enough time to do it but I'm glad I'm a mentor," said Praus.

Third-grade Lincoln Elementary teacher Sandra Hood referred Atohoun last year to BFMP because of issues he was having in class. In addition, Atohoun was struggling with transition, having moved from Minnesota to Watford City and then Dickinson. Prior to Lincoln, he briefly attended Prairie Rose Elementary.

Praus, who combines athleticism with an easy-going, quiet nature, was the perfect choice for the 9-year-old. The pair began meeting just before Thanksgiving last year.

Over the course of their many lunch and recess hours, along with other activities organized by BFMP now spanning one year, Atohoun says he has gained a trusted friend he looks up to and can count on.

"Alex is a lot of fun, he's nice and a lot of people think we're brothers," he said. "That's kind of funny because I do have a brother at DHS who is Alex's same age. It's a good friendship. Alex is fun, cool and nice and I look forward to him coming."

Praus, a DHS wide receiver, was the first to commit to the DSU's 2020 Blue Hawks football recruiting class. With other club and organizational commitments he maintains, he was not sure about continuing to commit to BFMP. In the end, he says, he's glad he has persisted. The extra effort is rewarding.

"Now that DHS has a long lunch period on Wednesday, spending an hour or so at school with someone like Kenzo is worth it," he said. "There is a personal benefit to mentoring I didn't realize came with it, where you feel good about yourself, of giving to someone else."

Praus and Atohoun have continued to cultivate their mentoring relationship by taking advantage of several BFMP organized activities. Last summer, they joined a group of 20 mentors and mentees on a half-day trip to Badlands Ministries and hiked, played sports, contributed to a mentoring “quilt” and made s’mores around a campfire. The duo has also volunteered together at BFMP events.

“Starting the mentoring relationship was probably the most challenging but once you establish it, the conversation and connection just better and better, and you create a situation where the kid wants you there, “added Praus.

In addition to the 20 DHS student mentors, BFMP’s mentoring team includes more than 50 others from various stages of life from Bowman, Billings, Hettinger, greater Stark and western Morton counties. Mentors commit to spending one hour per week with their mentee either in a public school or community setting. There are certain age and other requirements.

For more information, contact BFMP Program Coordinator Mark Billings at (701) 483-8615, mark@bestfriendsnd.org or by visiting www.bestfriendsnd.org.