

Best Friends

'Seeing each other's lives a little differently, with more perspective'

By Mark Billings

While *Forbes Magazine* ranked Casper Wyoming as one of the best small cities to raise a family in 2010, close-knit relationships were elusive there for Shauna Sprague.

As the daughter of alcoholic parents, Sprague grew up low-income in Casper, sometimes feeling like she was raising herself.

"My mom had a traumatic incident when I was young and never fully recovered," said Sprague, now a Dickinson resident and mother of Zachary Sprague, a Dickinson High School senior and mentor with the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP). "She had a hard life, and ever since I could remember, I generally took care of myself, making my own meals, sometimes not knowing where I was staying and moving from couch to couch."

Shortly after her 12th birthday, Sprague moved in with her grandparents and stayed with them for four years, stabilizing her life and moving toward greater independence. "Looking back, I was trying to survive – just to function day to day," she reflected.

While decades now separate Sprague from her formative years, the experience has seared her outlook on life, and how she is just one generation away from poverty. It is a backdrop she has used to encourage two of her children to become BFMP mentors, including Zachary Sprague and an older daughter Clarissa Roberds, active 10 years ago and now married with children of her own.

"When I was younger, it wasn't the people who provided hand-outs who influenced me, it was the people who dropped into my life with a sense of normalcy who made the biggest impact," she said. "My grandmother cleaned offices, and I'd go with her and see peoples' desks, and how neat their pens and pencils were organized, and how successful they were. Every bit of normalcy like this shows you how life can be and how life can be better."

Sprague used those experiences to set down deep roots building her family and earning a University Studies Degree with a minor in Geographical Information Systems from Dickinson State University in 2018. She works for MBI Energy Services. Meanwhile, hearing his mom's stories and how one person can make a difference prompted Zachary Sprague to sign up for BFMP last fall as a DHS junior. He was paired with Christopher Pete, a new fifth-grade student at Roosevelt. Teacher Mary Ann Reisenauer referred Pete – originally from central Montana -- to BFMP to help him connect with a positive role-model. The pairing was more than what Pete's parents, Josh and Kate Pete expected.

"Christopher is the oldest of our five kids and he shoulders a lot of responsibility," said Josh Pete, an Army veteran and stay-at-home dad. "Being new at Roosevelt, he felt isolated. It meant a lot to have Zachary almost as an older brother looking out for him."

Towering at more than six-feet tall, Sprague – a former Roosevelt student himself -- indeed looked out over Pete, one of the shorter students in his class. At first, their conversations were labored as they searched for commonality. Soon, however, they connected on sports and other topics, and Sprague became known to Pete's inner-circle as the student who has a "DHS hockey player as a friend." Their bond continued into the 2019-20 school year when Pete endured several transitions, first to the Dickinson Middle School and then to the New England Public Schools, where Pete is now a sixth grader.

Sprague invited Pete to his final home hockey game of the season, where the seniors received recognition in front of parents, friends and spectators. While Pete physically stood just above Sprague's elbow in the pictures which ensued, in many ways he had grown beyond his years through his association with Sprague, who plans to major in bio-engineering at either Montana State or the South Dakota School of Mines.

In turn, Sprague felt he had grown through his friendship with Pete, said Shauna Sprague.

"A lot of times Zachary would say, 'You don't know what these kids go through,' and how they pick on one another," she said. "I think their Best Friends match gave both Zachary and Chris something to look forward to – for each of them to see their lives a little differently, with more perspective."

Note: *The Best Friends Mentoring Program acknowledges the hundreds if not thousands of parents and guardians who have encouraged and supported their high school and college-aged children to become mentors during the organization's nearly 25-year history. Through your positive role-modeling, thousands of local youth have received positive guidance, empathetic listening and friendship when they need it the most. For more information about becoming a mentor, contact Mark Billings at (701) 483-8615 or by email at mark@bestfriendsnd.org.*