

BEST FRIENDS

Pushing past labels & barriers

By Mark Billings

From behind, with her flowing auburn hair and tall stature, second-grader Jeice Tibor appeared in charge and ready to conquer any obstacle in her way.

In front though, Tibor's speckled glasses framed blue-green eyes masking the reality of her life at Heart River Elementary School: An insecure place in which she was afraid to raise her hand in class or talk to anyone outside her tightly-held inner-world.

"If she could squeeze herself into my leg, she would have been happy," said Tibor's mom, Jenna Roth.

Seeking options, Roth took the advice of Liz Olheiser, a former second-grade teacher at Heart River, and signed her daughter up for the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP). Having grown up in Dickinson and a Heart River graduate herself, Roth said she could see herself in her daughter, described as "very shy" by the school.

"I was just like her at her age, the one who always wanted to blend in," said Roth, who is raising Tibor as a single mother with the help of her mother, Cleora Roth.

Having a new BFMP friend show up during her lunch and recess hour helped Tibor develop self-confidence and created an outlet for the bookish and artistic student to express herself. She continued with several mentors at Heart River and into the third grade before moving to Roosevelt Elementary to complete the fourth and fifth grade.

At that point, Tibor met a new mentor, Jalyn McGill, a stand-out double-major who graduated Summa Cum Laude from Dickinson State University in 2016. With her busy schedule finally free to pursue mentoring, the soft-spoken and articulate McGill was the perfect match for Tibor.

And as a full-time youth worker – she became a full-time youth pastor at the River of Life Church International last year – the experience allows McGill to see youth first-hand in their own environment.

"It's a reminder of the challenges, peer-pressure and other influences students have in school, which sometimes aren't so great," she said. "With Jeice, I have seen a huge difference in her socially since we have been meeting the last one and one-half years at Roosevelt. Especially this past year, she's more vocal and excited about things. She submitted one of her pieces into an art contest and she loves to draw."

After observing how Tibor could more easily express herself when the pair was engaged in an art project, McGill started bringing inexpensive adult coloring books with her. Coloring pencil in hand, Tibor seemed more relaxed and engaged. "I noticed it was easier for her to talk while her hands were busy," she said.

The experience has pushed McGill to relate to younger youth more, she said, and served as a catalyst for personal growth during the process.

“High school-aged kids were more of my connection point and mentoring younger kids has been a growing process for me,” she said. “I’ve learned to be more creative to establish a connection. The support of BFMP staff has also made it easier to navigate different challenges I’ve experienced.”

McGill and Tibor participated in a professional photo shoot to showcase BFMP this past fall; the organization is using a picture of the once very-shy Tibor as its Facebook profile picture.

For more information about becoming a mentor, contact Mark Billings with BFMP at (701) 483-8615 or mark@bestfriendsnd.org. Candidates must be at least 16 years old and a high school junior or above. Depending on the program, the mentoring commitment is once per week for about one hour during school hours or early evenings and weekends.