

## **BEST FRIENDS**

### **In the wake of uncertainty and despair comes connection and hope**

***By Mark Billings***

For 4<sup>th</sup>-grade student Kutter Berger, life was an uncertain place where the people he knew and trusted could be gone at any time, like distant images glimmering in a hot desert sun.

Starting the 2019-20 school at Prairie Rose Elementary, there was a familiar face the 11-year-old did not see any more in the evening or on the weekends, that face which had taught him how to fish, hunt and ride a horse. His father Derrick "DJ" Berger had passed away from cancer only three months before the start of school. His main male role model gone, there was an emotional hole growing it seemed almost daily.

Thanks to former 4<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher Becca Natwick, now a school counselor at Lincoln Elementary, Berger was in good hands at Prairie Rose and through other support networks known at the school, which included the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP). With the referral in hand, Best Friends paired Berger with Pit Mueller, a former youth exchange student at Dickinson State University in September of 2019.

The connection the two formed while meeting over Berger's lunch and recess hour at Prairie Rose was almost instantaneous, said Crystella Berger, Kutter's mother. The mentoring relationship provided almost an immediate infusion of regularity and hope.

"Pit was just an amazing person, who made such a tremendous impact in such a short period of time," said Crystella Berger. "You could see Kutter's confidence and mental health beginning to improve within those first couple of months of their meeting."

When COVID became a worldwide pandemic, organizers of Mueller's Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange for Young Professionals told Mueller he should start thinking about selling his car, quitting his job as an intern at the Stark Development Corporation office and prepare to move back overseas. Within five days, the 24-year-old was on a plane out of Dickinson jetting back to his native Wilnsdorf, Germany.

The pandemic impacted numerous BFMP matches but Mueller and Berger continued their mentoring relationship virtually until this past summer. Although the Dickinson Public Schools were closed to the public, including mentors through this past spring, BFMP set up alternative meeting locations, including Subway at 401 W. Villard. With this arrangement in place, BFMP paired Berger with a second mentor, Matthew Meschke. A member of the Theodore Roosevelt Honors Leadership Program at Dickinson State University, Meshke was ready for his third match since becoming a mentor in 2017.

"I heard about Best Friends at Dickinson High School through the National Honor Society, and at the time, I thought it was a good way to make an impact while adding youth mentoring to my resume," said Meshke. "I never had formal mentors in my life other than my parents and coaches."

Meschke, who has also forged a strong mentoring relationship with Berger by regularly meeting for lunch at Subway and now at Prairie Rose during the now 5<sup>th</sup>-grader's lunch and recess, said there are strong rewards for continuing in his volunteer role. It is not unusual to find Meschke and Berger engaged in deep conversation while eating in the Prairie Rose Elementary library.

"A highlight for me is seeing a kid's smile when you come to see him," said the 20-year-old majoring in Exercise Science with a minor in Leadership. "There also are a wide variety of activity options available to mentors when they are at the school seeing their mentee, whether it's going to the computer lab or outside for recess, eating in the library or helping with homework."

Crystella Berger, who is raising Kutter and a younger son while working as a hairstylist at the Men's Den in Dickinson said the two mentoring matches with her son have gone a long way in helping heal the emotional wounds left after the death of DJ Berger. "Kutter had so many needs in his life back in 2019, from his lack of confidence to uncertainty to being unsure about life in general," she said. "There was some anxiety and depression. Having a mentor has helped build Kutter's confidence and over mental health."

She said her son is involved in 4-H Shooting Sports and the Dickinson Youth Football League. Meshke, who works at Phat Fish Brewery, said Berger has already asked him if he plans to be his mentor at the Dickinson Middle School next year when he starts the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and he has already committed. In lieu of hazy images on the horizon for Berger, there is certainty and hope.

BFMP is an independent mentoring program based in Dickinson, and celebrates 2021 with 26 consecutive years of youth services impacting an estimated 3,700 children and teens throughout southwest North Dakota. Mentors serve voluntarily while committing to nine or more months of meeting with their mentee once per week for one hour.

For information on how to become a mentor, visit [www.bestfriendsnd.org](http://www.bestfriendsnd.org) or call (701) 483-8615.