UW-Stout grad hopes to help kids on difficult path

By Pamela Powers, Menomonie News Bureau Leader-Telegram

MENOMONIE - Stephanie Renning has learned plenty about perseverance while attending UW-Stout, a lesson she plans to use to help teach children the same path to success.

During the past seven years, Renning has experienced challenges as a first-generation college student at UW-Stout including trying to find a way to pay for school.

Renning has overcome that challenge and others. On Saturday she will have accomplished her goal, graduating with an early childhood degree with a special education certificate.

"I credit my success to my foundation," Renning said. "My foundation is my family. They always remind me that through hard work anything is possible."

While at UW-Stout, Renning worked with Upward Bound, a federally funded program for low-income, first-generation high school students. The program enables high school students to strengthen their educational skills during the summer.
Renning, 25, taught sign language to the students one summer and supervised students the following year.

"The children involved in Upward Bound were a lot like me growing up," Renning said. "Children that have potential to go to college but need a little assistance figuring out the path they want to take and just how to make it work. I really enjoyed being able to explain the ACTs, college application jargon and how to sign up for financial aid. Seeing the children of Upward Bound succeed was most important to me.

"The program gives children hope," Renning added. "It allows them to see that they have potential and with support they can succeed no matter what may be standing in their way."

Julie Bruggenthies, director of Upward Bound at UW-Stout, said Renning was caring and empathetic toward the students in the program.

"I don't think school has come easy for Stephanie," Bruggenthies said. "She could easily have given up. A lot of people would have quit."

Renning grew up with her mother, an older sister and a younger brother. Finances were tight growing up and funds for college were difficult to come by, she said.

Renning became inspired to be a teacher because of her mother, who taught Sunday school kindergarten for over 20 years.

"In working with the children in her classroom, I realized that I enjoy helping children succeed in all they do," Renning said. "I believe every child has the ability to succeed in life. They just need to be shown the way."

UW-Stout assistant professor of early childhood education Jill Klefstad predicted that Renning will make an excellent teacher.

"You certainly feel the passion she has for education," Klefstad said.

As a student Renning stood out to Klefstad.

"Anything that challenged her, she appreciated that," Klefstad said.

While at UW-Stout, Renning also worked with the America Reads program tutoring River Heights School students in an after-school program. She also student-taught second grade in Boyceville and kindergarten at Hillcrest School in Chippewa Falls.

She currently is working on her last placement to complete her special education certification at River Falls Preschool and Rocky Branch School in River Falls.

For now Renning plans to teach, but she said she may one day return to UW-Stout to seek a graduate degree.
If You Go

What: UW-Stout winter commencement.

When: 9:30 a.m. Saturday.

Where: Johnson Fieldhouse.

Graduates: 692 students will receive degrees, including 102 graduate degrees.