Big tracks following small footsteps

MENOMONIE - Ian Billings noticed two children on the playground who were not getting along and rushed over to them.

The 6-foot-1-inch Billings towered over the 1 1/2-year-olds but dropped to his knees and gently separated them while giving a few kind words of instruction.

In scenes conjuring up images of lead actor Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1990 movie "Kindergarten Cop," Billings then observed children climbing on playground equipment, tied a child's shoe and took two smiling boys for a ride on a wagon.

"To be able to help and guide children, it's very rewarding," said the 24-year-old Billings, who spent eight weeks as a student teacher at UW-Stout Child and Family Study Center.

He graduated May 12 from UW-Stout with a degree in early childhood education. Come fall he hopes to teach young children full time in elementary school.

Male teachers in early childhood education, such as Billings, still are far from the norm. According to 2011-12 National Education Association statistics, only 16.2 percent of U.S. elementary school teachers are men; in Wisconsin, it's 21.5 percent.
Early childhood education has been a female-dominated profession for generations, but Jill Klefstad, an associate professor in the UW-Stout School of Education and the early childhood education program director, said young children benefit from being taught by male teachers too.

"Young children need positive male role models in their lives while in school, beginning in preschool programs," Klefstad said.

Billings, who grew up in Loyal, said he never had a male teacher until middle school. He had some special female teachers as role models, however.

His mother is a fifth-grade teacher in Loyal, and his grandmother and an aunt also taught elementary school students. His older sister and her husband teach at Marshfield Columbus High School.

Teaching seemed to be his calling even before he enrolled at the Menomonie university. As a student at Loyal High School, Billings volunteered to help third-graders with science. While on the varsity football team, he mentored younger players.

Billings first went to UW-Milwaukee to study architecture, but "teaching was in the back of my mind," he said. He switched majors after one year and transferred to UW-Stout another year later.

Although Billings seldom had more than two other men in his early childhood classes at UW-Stout, he said teachers, administrators and fellow students welcomed and encouraged him.

Jamie Lynch, his cooperating teacher at the Infant and Toddler Lab, is impressed with Billings' professional skills and kind and caring manner.

"I've seen children drawn to him from day one, and the parents love him. His drive takes him a step beyond. He'll shine," Lynch said.

She also noted Billings' artistic and creative skills, pointing out a large piece of fish artwork, the individual scales of which were colored by toddlers. It was one of many such projects Billings coordinated at the lab.

While at UW-Stout, Billings helped the university win two Rube Goldberg Machine Contest national collegiate championships, worked as a guide at the outdoor Challenge Course and volunteered at a summer camp in southern Wisconsin for inner-city youth.

Billings has a knack for understanding child development and is able to "adapt lessons appropriate to their needs and abilities," Klefstad said.

Billings believes his strengths as a teacher are his strong work ethic, creativity, ability to engage students and calm demeanor. He likes early childhood education because he can teach students all subjects as opposed to specializing in one subject at the middle or high school levels.

"Kids soak things up. Everything you do is modeling for them," he said. "I really enjoy the younger age - the energy they bring to school."
He is excited about the potential of working with new technology, such as the iPad and interactive whiteboards, in the classroom.

"We're just starting to tap the potential of technology in school, and it adds a level of interactivity that wasn't there before," he said. "This is big in the UW-Stout program now."

Billings worked with second-graders at Wakanda Elementary School in Menomonie this year and finishes his student teaching this summer in a kindergarten preparation program at Parkview Elementary School in Chippewa Falls.

With his degree from UW-Stout, he is licensed to teach children up to age 8, or third grade. He plans to obtain his middle childhood certification through UW-Stout and be certified to teach through sixth grade.

Billings met his fiancee, Gracie Bowen, of Alma Center, at UW-Stout. She will graduate in December with a master's degree in school counseling.

"It would be cool to work in the same school (with her) someday," he said.

The origins of UW-Stout's early childhood education program date to about 1900. For more information on the program, go to uwstout.edu/programs/bsece.