Two former local women go from teachers to strikers

By Pamela Powers
Menomonie New Bureau

MENOMONIE — Greta Munns and Carly DeLeu made their way from the Chippewa Valley to Chicago to teach students, but they now find themselves enveloped in a strike that is attracting national media attention.
Munns, a UW-Stout and Eau Claire Memorial High School graduate who is teaching at Piccolo School of Excellence on Chicago's west side, and Carly DeLeu, a 2007 UW-Eau Claire grad who teaches social studies at Richards Career Academy on the city's south side, are first-year teachers in the Windy City. They have been on the picket lines, marching with other teachers in support of the strike that began Monday.

Chicago Public Schools says the strike was prompted by concerns about proposed teacher evaluations and teacher layoffs. Munns and DeLeu said for them, the strike is more about ensuring students have the resources they need to receive a quality education than their receiving higher pay.

The teachers have found difficult teaching conditions prompted by everything from poverty to poorly funded schools to unusually warm classrooms, because the school year started earlier than normal in an effort to add instructional days.

"I kind of was looking for a position in urban education," Munns said. "That's what I'm passionate about is working with a populace with a huge need."

Munns, 24, who started teaching Aug. 13 at the Piccolo School, said nearly all the 500 students there come from impoverished families. All the school's teachers last year were replaced because of students' poor standardized test scores.

Many of her students face homelessness, hunger and violence, which obviously impacts their education and readiness to learn, Munns said.

"My kids have said they didn't feel safe going to school every day," Munns said.

Many schools in Chicago lack educational basics, she said. And while everyone appreciates a pay raise, teaching is about something bigger, Munns said.

"Nobody goes into teaching for (the money)," she said. "The reward is 20 years down the road kids come back and tell you you had an impact on their lives."

DeLeu, 27, teaches 11th- and 12th-graders. Poverty and violence are frequent issues at her school, DeLeu said.

"If we had a good support system in the city schools it would be a lot easier," she noted. "I definitely would rather be teaching. Students don't need to be out of school. They need the structure."
DeLeu supports the strike because school days were extended about 1.25 hours per day, but the change only allowed for 14 more minutes of instructional time. The added time was supposed to allow for a more well-rounded education for students, which is not possible with only about two minutes added per class period.

Teachers union officials and administrators are meeting to reach an end to the strike and are hopeful classes could resume as early as Monday. DeLeu and Munns said most people they meet while picketing are supportive of their cause. But other city residents oppose the strike, saying the city can't afford to pay teachers more.

"People who are dependent on the Chicago Public Schools to educate their children want it to be better," she said.

*Powers can be reached at 715-556-9018 or pamela.powers@ecpc.com.*