

Kenosha Unified Awards Bouwma High School Teacher of the Year



Kandi Bouwma ('95) and the Bridges program at Hillcrest School are growing up together.

She joined the staff six years ago just as the program was starting. Now, for her efforts in teaching so-called "at-risk" students who are referred by courts or other programs or expelled from other schools, she'll receive the High School Teacher of the Year award from Kenosha Unified Schools.

"This is my niche," she said. "My (University of Wisconsin-Parkside) graduation came up and all this came together at the same time. I knew I wanted something untraditional."

"When I was student teaching, I was just drawn to these kids. I enjoy them. The longer I'm here, the more I like it."

The classroom where she teaches math and elective classes like leadership and consumer education is indeed untraditional. Only a handful of desks are near the windows. Students also can sit on a couch or upholstered chairs.

Her class sizes are small, averaging a maximum of eight students so she can provide the one-on-one instruction they need.

While they concentrate on schoolwork, Bouwma's students can open a bag of snacks from a cupboard that she keeps

stocked. They can play with one of the many small toys she keeps on a windowsill. They call her "Kandi," not "Mrs. Bouwma."

"This program is based on building relationships," she explained. "If they call me 'Mrs. Bouwma,' there's a line there. In academics, the line doesn't get crossed. But for emotional needs, we try to help. If we don't know what to do, we can send them to someone who does."

"Some days we have to get through crisis after crisis before we can get to the material. But I don't badger a kid about math when everything fell apart at home last night."

"Sometimes I have to remind myself that I'm the teacher, not the mom."

About half of the students are referred from court programs, residential treatment or group homes, the other half were expelled. They can decide to serve out their expulsion time at home. Some come once, leave for awhile to sort out some problems, then return. Most are there for a semester or two, sometimes longer, she said. A few have been around for several years.

"I lovingly call them 'lifers' - I'm one myself," she said.

Bouwma admits she doesn't always "mesh" with some students right away. But she said she believes there's a spark of goodness in everyone.

"You can find something to love about everybody," she said.

Not long after she started at the school she felt particularly drawn to the plight of one of her students, and he became a foster son about five years ago. The boy some said should be locked up forever now has a job, will graduate from high school in Racine, and is looking into either accepting a college scholarship or joining the Marine Reserves.

He came into her class when he was 13. He never knew his father, and drug problems ran in the family. He started skip-

UW-Parkside Prepared Bouwma for Teaching Career

A university experience is many things to many people. For Kandi Bouwma, her experience at UW-Parkside helped her decide what she wanted to do with her professional career. She graduated in 1995 with a bachelor of science degree and her teaching certificate. Bouwma said she knew then that she wanted to teach in a nontraditional environment.

"I figured that out in my first year (at UW-Parkside). The education program puts you in touch with the school districts in both Racine and Kenosha (Wis.) – they gave us a lot of field placements," she said.

That in-field experience led Bouwma to her current teaching position at Hillcrest School in Kenosha. Hillcrest is a school for at-risk students – a very nontraditional environment (see main story).

Bouwma enjoys working with the at-risk students and she excels at her chosen profession. So much so that the Kenosha Unified Schools recently named her High School Teacher of the Year.

Bouwma said her experience at UW-Parkside prepared her well for her professional life.

"The education program at UW-Parkside is intense and it's a lot of work. There weren't many classes where I sit back now and wonder, 'Why did they make me take that?'" she said.

"And I liked the smallness of the school. You know your professors and you know what they expect. And outside of class you could contact them. I still have regular conversations with Dr. (Dwayne) Olson and Dr. (Thomas) Fournelle. And I was in rather close contact with Dr. (Donna) Carr before she died."

In addition to her high school teaching responsibilities, Bouwma has been an adjunct math professor at UW-Parkside for the past three years.

ping school in third grade to go to another school and steal hot lunches because he had no food at home.

"He chose to show people how ugly, mean and self-centered he could be and ended up in jail," Bouwma said. "He was so busy being angry he didn't notice that people liked him."

When she realized what he needed most was a mom and a safe, secure home, she and her husband decided to be foster parents. He now shares the house with 15- and 17-year-old brothers, a 13-year-old sister and three dogs.

"I know this is God's plan for me," Bouwma said.

"I do love my students and believe they need a caring, nurturing place. Many do have people out there who care. Sometimes there's just more junk out there than they or their caretakers can deal with at one time."

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