

The Hawk Eye

August 6, 2006, Sunday

Burlington, Iowa

Billionaires Build Bridges with Youth

Warren Buffett, Bill Gates spend time with Mount Pleasant students.

By KILEY MILLER

COUNCIL BLUFFS — Warren Buffett leaned back in his chair and threw his arm around 13-year-old Makenzie Kauffman.

"Here, take my picture with her," he said, smiling wide. "It might improve my reputation."

Buffett and his pal Bill Gates may have the wealth of kings, but hanging out with a herd of Mount Pleasant middle schoolers at a bridge tournament here Saturday, they were just a couple of average joes.

For the better part of an hour, America's richest men joked, mugged for photos and dispensed wisdom on bridge — and life.

"I think it's great for the kids to see important people with humility (who are) giving back," said Lori Werner, whose son, Ross, not only was a winner in the tournament, but also got his "Bridge is Cool" T-shirt signed by Gates.

Bridge is an egalitarian endeavor. Eighty-year-olds can play with 10-year-olds, billionaires can play with ... not-quite billionaires.

In other words, bridge builds bridges.

It also builds minds — at least Gates and Buffett think so. And they're known as pretty smart fellows.

Gates co-founded Microsoft and is worth an estimated \$50 billion, according to Forbes.com. Buffett, who lives in Omaha, Neb., is the wizard behind holding company

Berkshire Hathaway. He recently pledged \$31 billion to Gates' charitable foundation, the largest in the world.

Certain their game of choice would give youngsters a hand up with math, problem-solving and communication skills, they each kicked in \$1 million to start a bridge-in-the-schools program.

While interest was meager at first, an article on their partnership spurred some Mount Pleasant bridge buffs to start cutting cards with youngsters over the lunch hour. The students who came to Council Bluffs for a youth mini-tournament within the larger regional tournament learned to play in those schoolhouse sessions, winning and losing tricks between bites of chicken sandwich and slurps of milk. They squared off Saturday against one another and eight youngsters from inner-city Atlanta.

"Anybody who loves bridge sits around and tries to think about ways to let more people know about it," said Gates, who played in July at the World Bridge Championships in Italy. "And if you walked around this tournament, you'd see there's not as many young players as we'd like to see."

The Nebraska Regional Bridge Tournament drew about a thousand people from across the country — every state but Alaska, according to one tournament official.

But Gates had read the cards right — most players looked to be on the high side of 60. That's not always the case, of course. This weekend's tournament

happened to overlap with the junior world championships in Bangkok.

"It's really hard for us to figure out exactly how many young people are playing because so much is happening on-line," said Jay Baum, an Iowa native and head of the American Contract Bridge League

Sharon Osberg, a world-champion player running the school program for Gates and Buffett, made a promise to the Mount Pleasant youth: If they would go online, they could play a hand with her bosses.

"Bridge is a great way to learn from inferences," said Buffett, who uses the nickname T-Bone in cyberspace. "A lot of decisions in life you make by inferring from what you know."

"He told us after a tournament our brain should be mush," said Eric Hahn of Mount Pleasant.

At least lunch was laid back. Gates and Buffett, who gave all the kids autographed dollar bills, also sat down with them for cheeseburgers and curly fries — perfect brain food.

Parents in the banquet room wore proud smiles as they watched the billionaire businessmen with their children.

"I just hope they listen because obviously (the two men) know something," said Karen Kauffman, Makenzie's mom.

OK, so let's make an inference.

Based on his joyful, grandfatherly gregariousness Saturday, Buffett is a heck of a good guy.

At one point, surrounded by the Mount Pleasant students and facing a squad of parents with cameras, he leaned toward a boy named Bernard Pollmeier.

"Now I'm going to give him a stock tip," he said, flashing a grin at the adults and then cupping his hands around Pollmeier's ear in mock conspiracy.

Where his older acquaintance was a joker — relaxed and expansive — Gates was friendly in a quieter way. Hunched a bit in his chair, he rocked forward and back continually as he talked to the kids, mainly about bridge.

One thing is certain. The Mount Pleasant students listened to their instructors. In the unusual scoring of tournament bridge, Kauffman and David Litchfield came in first among the East-West pairs, while Werner and Hannah Taylor were tops for North-South.

Steve Rod, one of the instructors on the trip, had no trouble explaining the success.

"It was outstanding teaching."

Jokes aside, Rod could only marvel at the time Gates and Buffett had invested in a bunch of kids. They clearly had hearts — in spades.

