

# Franklin boys protect classmate

## New friendships blossom as result

- By Tim Krohn tkrohn@mankatofreepress.com
- Jun 2, 2015
- 



The group of fifth-graders from Franklin have been getting plenty of attention lately for taking a stand against bullying. Photo by John Cross

[John Cross](#)

The Franklin School boys, from left: James Willmert, Jack Pemble, Landon Kopischke, Tyler Jones, Jake Burgess and Gus Gartzke. Photo by John Cross

For a lot of adults and Minnesota media, and even nationally, six boys at Franklin Elementary School are a big story. For the fifth-graders, it's no big deal. They're just friends who hang out playing video games and sports.

Classmates Gus Gartzke, Jack Pemble, Jake Burgess, Tyler Jones and Landon Kopischke knew James Willmert since the third grade, but Willmert wasn't a close part of their group. He was just another kid at their school.

But they also watched as Willmert, who was adopted from an orphanage in Colombia and who has special needs, was too often picked on. Nothing major, maybe, but other kids would call him names or get Willmert to do things that would be embarrassing.

At the start of this year, the five decided they would rally around 12-year-old Willmert if he was bullied.

"We didn't want anyone picking on him," Pemble said.

During the course of the school year, the pack of five friends became a pack of six.

Their teacher, Mallory Howk, said other kids in the class and school changed, becoming more accepting of Willmert and others, too.

"It's a real sense of community and real acceptance of everyone in the class," Howk said.

The story could have ended there. But Howk decided to nominate the boys for the Outstanding Youth Group award for the district's annual Spirit of Youth Awards. When a letter about the nominations went to the kids' homes, it was the first time most of their parents knew anything about what had unfolded over the year.

"I was surprised because he didn't mention anything about it," said Gus' mom, Amy Gartzke. "I didn't even know James was special needs."

"They just accepted him," Renae Kopschke said of her son, Landon, and the other boys.

Soon KARE 11 TV's master storyteller Boyd Huppert caught wind of the story and he and a crew spent a long day at Franklin Elementary a couple of weeks ago videotaping and interviewing the boys and others. When the story aired this week, it was a sensation with the story ranking a distant first all day on the station's website.

Huppert told one of the parents that of all the TV stations in 50 states operated by Gannett, Minnesota was the only place where the Bruce Jenner story was not No. 1 in the ratings: That spot was reserved for the Franklin boys.

Already James' mom, Margi Willmert, has been fielding requests locally, statewide and nationally about the story. The MoonDogs want the boys to throw out the first pitch at a game; Huppert forwarded the story to the "Today Show," where they loved it; other area groups want the boys at their events this summer, and other national media are making inquiries.

Willmert said that since the other boys and her son have become close friends, James has blossomed. The boys began playing some sports with him. James didn't have a dad around to toss a ball with. Willmert said her husband died in a bicycle accident six years ago in Mankato, six years after they had adopted James.

As the friendships deepened, Willmert said the boys found out James didn't own a video game system — something they decided to fix.

Willmert said Jack Pemble called her. "He was just so kind and innocent when he called. He said, 'Do you know someone named James Willmert?' And I said, 'Yes, that's my son.' And he said, 'Me and my friends would like to put on a birthday party and with your permission give him a PS3 player.'"

Principal Travis Olson said the school regularly integrates the message about not bullying and accepting people.

"We want kids to know how to interact with each other. Of course, parents have a big role in that," Olson said.

"But in the end, these guys took a real leadership role and knew what they had to do and did it."

Nationally, reports of bullying in schools has been steadily declining, and Olson said he sees evidence of that here. "Anytime you emphasize something, you see improvement. I think it has made a difference."