

## Our City

I have been meaning to conclude my last three columns with more details about a remarkable thing that is happening in our community. In failing to do so, I thought I would dedicate this column to it. As mayor and a teacher, it is one of the cooler things I have been a part of.

It started with an email last July 10 from Judge Paul Laggis to Korey Mereness the Director of ISU Outreach and myself, as both the Ag teacher and the Mayor. ISU was trying to figure out a way to reach more potential students in our community who would be interested in earning their GED. If you follow this column at all you know that along with the Ag program's advisory committee, I have long been an advocate of growing our own. Like Judge Laggis, I saw the opportunity to do just that. What I didn't quite foresee was how it would all come together.

What has developed is the first of its kind program in Idaho and perhaps the nation according to Mereness. It is an idea that was developed last summer between three bilingual students Odalis Gonzalez (now a freshman at Notre Dame), Mitsy Ledesma (now a junior), Angelica Hernandez (now a senior), the folks at ISU, and me. The three high school students showed wisdom and insight well beyond their years as we worked to establish what is now being implemented. That in them are tomorrow's leaders, I have no doubt.

The initial meetings transpired into subsequent meetings with two of our major employers Lamb Weston's manager Jon Schutte and Driscoll Potatoes Human Resource Manager Bill Lasley. They, like many in Idaho, have a difficult time finding a skilled and educated work force. The idea developed by the three high school students, Mereness, and me would over time help alleviate that constant problem. I have always believed that regardless of the curriculum I teach it is only a tool used to produce a more productive person and member of society. This new Growing Our Own program is no different except the employees at Driscoll's and Lamb's are gaining technical skills as they learn how to better read, write and speak English and apply computer skills that will allow them to move up in their individual roles within each company.

Our own Blanca Torres (a unique story unto herself) and Claudia Cornejo of Aberdeen are the facilitators of the classes that are being taught at Lamb Weston and Driscoll's. Mitsy Ledesma, Angelica Hernandez, Elizabeth Torres, Erika Martinez, Jose Gonzalez, Eduardo Ramirez, and Sandra Montelongo are the bilingual high school tutors who are volunteering two to three times a week to work with the adults in these new classes from January through the end of June. While traditional English language learning curriculum is being taught initially, the thing that makes this program unique is that the adult students are also learning technical material and computer skills, specifically related to their potential new positions within each company.

In our first meetings last summer, Mereness and I thought we would be lucky to have five to seven adults enroll in the program. We were very wrong. Seventeen employees at Driscoll's and seven at Lamb Weston have been identified by their employers as employees who have the ability to move up with just a little help. English language and communication skills have been evaluated and taught this past month. Technical curriculum and computer skills are being introduced this week. The high school students are not only volunteering after school during the week but are taking turns on Saturdays to tutor any of the adults at the library.

As Mayor, I want to sincerely thank Driscoll's and Lamb Weston for investing in the future of their employees. As the employees gain skills and capabilities, soon they will gain more earning potential thus raising that bar for everyone they work with. In doing so, they will also decrease the number of my students who qualify for free or reduced lunch by raising the economic stability of our entire community. Twenty-four adults in a county of a little over 7600 may not sound like much but given time I think this program, our selfless high school students, and our employers with a vision of long term sustainability will continue to make American Falls the very best place to live for anyone and everyone regardless of who they are or where they start in life.

Until next week...