

## Our City – A Tribute to Neil Andersen

The annual districtwide teacher and staff meeting began last Thursday with our new Superintendent, Randy Jensen, asking for a moment of silence in memory of Neil Andersen who tragically passed just two days prior. The moment of silence was followed by a video that Mr. Jensen had compiled of several graduates of American Falls; kids like Neil who grew up here, whose families were from here and who attributed much of their life's success to the teachers who touched their lives and helped them in some small way achieve their dreams. All the students are adults now with families of their own; but all faced adversity during their time here yet somehow managed to build a successful career and life for them and their family. Like Neil all were either students or athletes that I had taught or coached and many were FFA members. Like all teachers I hope I contributed in some way to the lives they now enjoy.

I had a difficult time holding myself together this past week as Neil Andersen's life was cut too short by multiple decades. Coach Robert "Bob" K. Brulotte used to tell parents, "They may be your kids but they are mine too." As a teacher you don't invest your heart and soul into your students and not come to love them. Love them for who they are and the promises you help shape for their tomorrows. In my life as a teacher I have buried too many of the ones I truly love from Guy Heaton at Raft River to Neil Andersen this past Monday, and the score in between. For the first time in 34 years I will miss the first day of school to help Ardean Andersen and Melissa Olson bury their son Neil. It may sound cliché but until you have done it you know that no parent should have to bury their child and while Neil wasn't my flesh and blood he was mine.

Neil loved the greenhouse not as much as he loved his small herd of cattle but like with his cattle he found peace within its walls. If you knew Neil you know what his early life challenge was. I know he was not the first or the last to pass through the halls of American Falls High School who had the same challenge. I can only imagine how it must have been for him sometimes as I saw the pain from the lack of acceptance by many on his face. When the pain wasn't there, which thankfully was most of the time; he had a smile that would light up the room and a laugh that warmed my heart. Neil, unlike most students, could make me laugh almost at will; which if you ask most students that is no easy task and some take it as a challenge to try. On the flip-side of that coin he could make me mad almost as fast; how is it the ones we love have that ability? One of my now favorite stories about Neil is about such a moment and to be fair he had help.

We were in my dual enrollment plant science class covering a lesson on plant hormones and their effects. In all my years of teaching I have never had a seating chart; which shows you how dumb I am. Neil and his merry band of Cheyanne Howell, Kenzie Olson and Torri Permann sat at the back table and they were on a roll. It was impossible to teach and I was getting really mad. Before I said something that would have likely gotten me fired I banned everyone to the greenhouse to deadhead, because they hate deadheading, it is monotonous and boring. All except Neil; no for Neil I had a special job because we had a bit of an aphid problem at the time. I handed him a bottle of chemical and told him to mix it in the sprayer and get to work. He did, no questions asked.

Have you ever woke up in the middle of the night wide awake in a cold sweat because your subconscious just told you that you made a huge mistake? That was me about 16 hours after the class with Neil. I threw on some clothes and drove out to the greenhouse, went to the shelf and found the bottle I had handed Neil and went weak at the knees and got light headed. "Killzall" was on the label. I did what I could but in the end I had killed nearly a third of that year's greenhouse crop because I didn't follow my own teaching and directions; I didn't even look at the label until I woke up in a cold sweat. In the years since Neil and I always got a good laugh out of that story.

Neil was one of the best greenhouse managers our program has produced and likely could have made a career in that field, but his true heart was with livestock and cattle; primarily fitting and showing arguably some of the best cattle in the country at various shows throughout the United States. And, like the greenhouse he was exceptionally good at it. Doing what he loved he met the one he loved; isn't that how life should be? I first met Kyzer Stoddard when he came to the Power County Fair with Neil three years ago. I had never seen Neil so happy and my heart warmed for them both. It had been too long since I had seen Neil smile so contentedly.

Weeks before his passing one of Neil's life goals was realized as he watched a current FFA member, Halle Romero, show a steer born and bred from his small herd. Through an excellent feeding regimen and months of working with the steer she had bought from Neil, Halle placed as Reserve Grand Champion in quality, won the steer fitting and showing, and the Round Robin event where she was named the best overall showman of all five species exhibited at the fair. Like any good teacher Neil coached her but didn't do the work for her. The pride and satisfaction he felt came from knowing he had successfully passed something on. If you are a parent or teacher you may know what that feels like; it is no small thing.

A little over a month prior to the fair I saw Neil at the wedding of Abby Nulph and Jared Kress. He was happy. He was happy for his lifelong friend Jared having like himself found love. As we talked I noticed a band on his ring finger and asked him if he had gotten married too. He said no but that he was engaged and that he and Kyzer planned to be married next summer. As I told him congratulations I also told him how proud I was of him. No sooner was the word proud out of my mouth that he started crying and hugged me. I cried too. As we broke the hug he said as he quite often did, "Thank you Mr. Beitia for everything you have done for me. I want you to know I love you." I told him that I loved him too.

Stop. Stop what you are doing or thinking just for a moment. Look around you. Think of all those close to you, important to you, who in no small way love you. Think what tomorrow would be without them; today Neil is gone from our lives but not out hearts, but then tomorrow is promised to no one, not you, not me and certainly not Neil. Yet, in recent years that is how he lived his life; like he was determined to make each new day he was given the best day of his life. Last week upon hearing of Neil's passing Caroline Wight came to me with condolences and shared with me something from Neil's Facebook page. I doubt it was an epiphany; I think it was the way he chose to live his life. It says, "Life is too short not to be happy!" I believe those words and the way he lived were his life lesson to all of us.

Live - be happy...