

## Our City

Last Wednesday morning at 6:00 found me on a conference call at school with several other Ag Teachers and FFA Alumni. Part of the conversation dealt with our current shortage of agricultural employees. Later that same night I sat in the Driscoll Potato boardroom, prior to taking a tour of their fresh-pack facility, as Mayor listening to their presentation about their seven-generation family-owned business and their current need for employees. My mind raced back to that same morning's conversation, then to a previous meeting I had at the Department of Labor with our regional welding industry, and finally to a meeting with Lamb Weston management in July. My mind settled on some current labor research and reports as related to agriculture and manufacturing.

A new five-year projection from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Purdue University states that from 2015 through 2020 there will be an estimated 57,900 job openings for college graduates with a degree in agriculture. During that period, there will be an annual average of 35,400 new U.S. graduates with a bachelor's degree or higher in agricultural-related fields. That means there will be 22,500 jobs not being filled by those trained in agriculture. The project predicts that almost half of the job opportunities will be in management and business. Another 27 percent will be in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics areas. Jobs in food and biomaterials production will make up 15 percent, and 12 percent of the openings will be in education, communication, and governmental services. How is it that over one-third of the job opening go unfilled by graduates trained to fill them? Where are we going wrong?

A recent report called "The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing 2015 and Beyond" projects that, "Over the next decade, nearly three and a half million manufacturing jobs will likely need to be filled, and the skills gap is expected to result in 2 million of those jobs going unfilled." However, this is not by any means a new issue. Even as companies moved manufacturing jobs overseas, much of our skilled workforce has been left lacking; now, as they begin to move back, it is even more so. Why as a State and country have we chosen not to invest in advanced skill training before it became a serious problem? A problem I am asked to address more and more under both my hats as a teacher and mayor.

The short and sweet answer is money and misplaced perceptions. The lack of a long term vision and willingness to pay it forward; the avoidance of the training investment. For over three decades, K-12 educators nationwide have been steering students away from careers that feed, clothe and house the world and produce goods of tangible value. And today we wonder where our work force has gone. A few make money researching and reporting its loss when all along it has been our society's own short-sighted efforts that have led to the deficit.

I distinctly remember a dinner conversation about eight years ago that I had with Sally and my youngest daughter, Suzanne. We were discussing her future after high school. Of course being in my short-sighted teacher mindset I was steering her to some kind of four-year degree. "No," she said, "I am going to the Paul Mitchell School in Salt Lake for cosmetology and aesthetics." The synopsis is that she graduated in cosmetology with an excellent skill set and chose to stay six more months and become a Master Aesthetician. In less than 18 months she found a job earning more than her mother, who had been a paralegal for over 25 years. Today she travels the world as a professional educator teaching others how to do what she does. Who is the short-sighted one now, I ask myself?

Yet, as parents and educators we continually direct our kids away from much needed and dare I say well-paying jobs right here at home. My middle daughter Frances, after going through the Culinary Program at ISU, found her place for a while in the retail side of the food industry. Today she is in a middle management position at Lamb Weston making what I would make as a veteran teacher with a nine-month contract, who has bottomed out on the pay scale. “Who’s the dumb one now Dad,” I ask myself.

My oldest daughter Leona went back to school to become a court reporter and will finish in about a year and make more than I do with my Master’s Degree, extended contract and 30 plus years of experience. Who is the dumb one now?

Surprisingly, although probably not a conscious choice, Suzanne and Frances found a home in agriculture. You may wonder how a Master Aesthetician’s career is involved with agriculture until you understand where all of the products come from. Suzanne trains for a French company, Phytomer, whose North American headquarters are in Salt Lake City, and whose products are all natural and allmarine based; not our local agriculture, but agriculture nonetheless.

The conversation the City Council and I had with Thane Driscoll and others on the Driscoll management team focused on finding a way to grow our own. Or, as in the case of Frances, bring our own home. In talking to my principal, Travis Hansen, last week I explained the growing problem, a shortage of agricultural and manufacturing employees. He realizes the validity of the concern and has agreed to work with me to help find a local solution. Perhaps now at American Falls High School we won’t have a College Day but a Career and College Day where we invite local agricultural businesses, processors and manufactures to share the careers that await our students right here at home. Of course the solution will be more complex than that; but it will be a start in what at least locally may help stem the tide of our best and brightest seeking the American dream elsewhere in a career far from their roots.

For those of us who have put down roots here, the cool weather of harvest and the colors of fall seem to be upon us. My thanks to Don Johnson and the Historical Commission for their work on selecting the homeowners who have not only put down roots literally and figuratively but have a green thumb as well. After canvassing all of the City's yards and gardens, the Commission reports there were 28 yards that were selected as especially nice - all warranting commendation. Their report reads as follows. “After scoring them, the following six seemed to deserve special mention: Grand Prize was 905 Hillcrest which is clearly the outstanding City of American Falls flower garden. 193 Howard and 169 Polk were thought to be the next most colorful. Runner Ups were 236 Washington, 385 Jefferson, 554 Hillcrest, and 530 Highland.”

American Falls truly is the best place to live. That so many take such pride in our community is a blessing. That so many leave for something else is a concern, but one that as a community steeped in an agricultural tradition we should be able to reconcile if we focus on what today’s agriculture really is and what its opportunities are. My mind is settled on finding the solution.

Until next week...