Meeteetse Youth Learn, Prepare and Work

by Press Stephens

The atmosphere in the Meeteetse High School Gym on the first or second Friday in April is one of energy and excitement. The Meeteetse Youth Work Program (MYWP) “Program Workshop” is taking place, and those interested in securing a local, summer job are abuzz in learning just what they have to do to participate. One might plan to work on a ranch for 100 hours, then switch to working at a local café for another 100 hours... or for the Town Hall, the Recreation District, the Meeteetse Museum, or a local motel. As questions are answered, some fourteen or fifteen high school students begin to make their plans.

In another week or so there will be a “Program Awareness Evening” in the same place, where parents, youth, and business owners, together, can ask and answer questions of each other. A “Labor Laws Meeting” for participating businesses facilitated by Wyoming Workforce Services will have already taken place by that time. Then, in mid-May, an enrollment deadline coincides with last minute interview opportunities by employers visiting the school. By then the youth will have had to learn how to write a resume and prepare for a face-to-face interview.

By the end of May all youth between the ages of 14 and 19 will have a job lined up. But one more event is mandatory: a “Student/Employee Training,” which reviews expectations employers will have regarding punctuality, time scheduling, cell-phone use, dress codes, age restrictions regarding equipment use, and general work ethics. These young people might start their jobs the very next day.

St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Meeteetse stepped up in 2009 by directing a Mustard Seed Grant of $2,500 to help place the program on solid financial ground. “St. Andrew’s saw the MYWP as an important part of the community,” says Linda Seaton, Senior Warden of St. Andrew’s, “we took it as part of our mission to be the hands of Christ in the world.” Since then St. Andrew’s has leveraged their outreach dollars with grants dollars from the Foundation for the Episcopal Diocese of Wyoming. The third and final grant in 2017 included dollars for a revolving fund at the church which will allow the directors of the MYWP to access money when needed without having to fundraise “hand to mouth.”

The MYWP provides teens in Meeteetse (population 351) opportunities for work experience they might not otherwise have had and also allows employers to hire much-needed workers they might not otherwise have been able to afford. Before the inception of the program in June 2007, many students had to drive 30 miles north to Cody if they wanted jobs. Gas prices coupled with unsafe driving conditions made that situation less than good.
The program pays appropriate wages to these young workers and requires that participating employers train them, keep track of their time and paperwork, and otherwise advance their capacity to work so they might be able to secure jobs more readily in the future. The students’ wages are paid through the Town of Meeteetse, using funds contributed by foundations and donors.

The MYWP turns local “mom and pop” businesses into more effective contributors to the local economy while training local youth to succeed in various workplaces. The program trains local high school youth in various job skills, and instills in them a sound work ethic, and businesses share the responsibility of creating strong Meeteetse youth workforce members. The program demonstrates to Meeteetse youth that the community values them enough to sustain this kind of program, and proves to them that it is possible to live, work and raise a family in the area with the hope that small businesses can be established there, grow there, and provide jobs to young people and young families.

Youth can also experience a sense of giving back to their community in this program. Meeteetse is a very small rural community with a limited number of employers and a very limited workforce. The interaction between youth and employers aids in bridging the gap between youth and the general community in Meeteetse. When the community sees a youth hard at work a more positive perception of youth is established. Youth delinquent behavior and youth crime drop; youth become better students.

St. Andrew’s Church hopes that local youth experience the important lessons of learning how to work, learning new job skills, learning how to interact and communicate with people, and learning to understand what it means to hold a job and be responsible to an employer and to one’s self. “It’s fun to watch the kids mature and go through the program,” continues Linda. “They learn how to be valuable – not just valuable in the job, but how to value themselves.”