

Howard man leads fight of survive

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HOWARD — Part of Randy Parry's motivation for revitalizing Miner County came from his 30 years of teaching, when he saw too many students leave the county for places they perceived as being bigger and better.

Currently, as executive director of Miner County Community Revitalization, he works with several of his former students in an office where everyone is committed to helping the people of Miner County reverse the decades-long trends of depopulation and economic decline.

The teacher in Parry is still very much at work as he tries to educate people about the county's problems and encourage them to formulate creative solutions. Kathy Callies, MCCR's development director, is one of his former students.

"The impression I had then, which has held for some 30 years, is that this is a fellow who lives what he preaches," Callies said. "He doesn't just go to work and go home... He's very engaged with people."

Without Parry and MCCR the people of Miner County would lack a productive leader in their fight against extinction.

The county's population decreased by nearly 50 percent between 1960 and 2002, from 5,398 to 2,807. As a result, the county's economy stagnated and school enrollments dropped. The county came to consist largely of elderly people.

The seeds of MCCR were planted in 1995

when the Howard School District, for which Parry worked as a teacher, began receiving \$150,000 over four years from the Annenberg Rural Challenge through the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal at South Dakota State University.

The money was applied to projects aimed at connecting rural schools with their communities. Behind the approach was the understanding that youth are more open to change, and that seniors will listen to youth-driven ideas.

Efforts at the school produced numerous positive results, including an educational campaign that stressed the importance of spending locally and inspired a 41.1 percent increase in Howard's gross sales.

Parry was heavily involved in the projects.

"I think it was an awakening that, hey, this is our home. Are we just going to let it disappear?" Parry said. "Our forefathers who built this place — are we just going to let what they tried to make this place be go down, or is there something that was in their hearts that we're missing?"

Thoughts like those carried rural efforts forward in the county. Then, in 1999, the county received a big boost from the St. Paul-based Northwest Area Foundation, which is devoted to helping communities reduce power in an eight-state region of the Upper Midwest and West. The foundation signed a 10-year agreement to provide partial funding and guidance for a new non-profit organization called

Miner County Community Revitalization.

MCCR has since hired a staff, renovated a downtown Howard building into its permanent offices and reached out into the county to educate, guide, inspire and fund positive changes.

Among MCCR's most visible successes are the wind turbines on the west side of Howard. MCCR was involved in erecting the turbines, which are tied into the local power grid to help provide utility savings.

One of Parry's former students tapped MCCR to help open a business location in Howard where workers retrofit used wind turbines to be sold across the county. MCCR has also played a role in bringing wind turbines to Carthage and Canova; museums to Carthage and Howard; new businesses, as well as business expansions, to all parts of the county; and better housing options to the area's elderly population.

Groups from across the state and country have asked for MCCR's advice, which led to MCCR's role in creating the Rural Learning Center. The RLC campus will be built in a rural setting where people from rural communities will be able to gather for learning and re-energizing. Former Dakota Wesleyan University president and South Dakota gubernatorial candidate Jim Beddow is executive director of RLC. He is leading the effort to fund the RLC campus and is consulting with several communities around the state on housing and other projects.

The collective success of MCCR's projects is impressive, but Parry said the true sign of success is the changing attitudes of people in the county.

"Not all communities are going to be viable," Parry said, but those that feel they can be should never be discouraged into thinking they can't make a change. If you have an idea, along with the heart and the will and the power of people to support you, then change can take place."

It doesn't hurt to have a leader like Parry, who is someone people can learn from, relate to and trust because of his three decades in the community. He is forever teaching and his students never get tired of learning. Many of Parry's former Howard

students come back to chat with him, or even to discuss new business ideas.

In guiding MCCR, Parry said he tries to live by a philosophy that is etched into a wall at the Library of Congress.

"It says, 'The foundation of our country is the education of our youth,'" Parry said. "The only thing I would change is to say that the foundation of our country is the education of everyone."