Community Development
Wheatland on One Page

We wanted to get everyone in the community on one page, hearing the great news about our community and connected to what was going on in Wheatland County.

In 2008, Harlowton participated in the Horizons Program and great things started to happen in the community. The program created positive momentum and got the ball rolling. The community participated in a series of Town Hall meetings to identify issues in the community and form action groups that wanted to address those issues. Wheatland Memorial Healthcare was successful in receiving an outreach grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration in 2009, which helped some of the identified action items become reality, along with addressing many other issues. In addition to the many community service projects being implemented, the community also has a thriving small businesses community. Despite all this good news, it seemed like many people in the community just didn’t realize how much was happening or how many great things we had in. So it was ironic when pulling together a group to work on a project or issue we would hear, “all we ever do is talk, we never get anything done,” when in fact, we hadn’t been talking enough because there was not a broad knowledge about what was getting done.

Wheatland County Extension worked in partnership with Wheatland Memorial Healthcare to host a series of community meetings to discuss communication in our community and find ways we could easily connect our. We talked to over 10 percent of the population and held meetings at the school, with law enforcement, the volunteer fire department and EMS personnel, with the Harlowton Area Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture, and several meetings open to the public. Through the dialogue at the meetings, it was identified that the community needed one, centralized location to post events and find out what was going on, and also a way to share the good news. The groups also felt that we needed to utilize all available media in the community to allow access by all users.

After one of the meetings, one of the attendees set up Wheatland County Connections, a closed Facebook page where community members can buy, sell, trade, borrow or gather information. The site has been very successful for sharing information, connecting resources and providing a method for people to connect. The focus group also started a web site called Wheatland on One Page. The page has a single calendar that is shared by all community groups and organizations and a forum to share good news stories in our community. The stories are also published in the local newspaper to reach a broad community base. One of the unexpected outcomes from the ongoing discussion groups is that once people began talking about communication and the good stories in the community, people started to share the successes from around the community more readily, helping everyone get on one page.
In December 2010, high school youth from Wheatland and Musselshell counties began planning for Teen Leadership Camp (TLC), which wouldn’t happen until June 2012. They knew it was their responsibility to plan the leadership camp for area middle school students, and they were excited to get started.

TLC is the result of a community partnership between Wheatland Memorial Healthcare, MSU Wheatland County Extension, Wheatland County Sheriff’s Office and the US Army National Guard. This diverse team of camp directors agrees on one thing, TLC is a one of a kind experience for the campers and counselors. The counselors are in charge of choosing the theme for the camp, helping develop and teach the workshops, and have a voice in every aspect of the camp. We are providing the opportunity for young leaders to continue to develop and practice their leadership skills and become more comfortable with their leadership style.

One of the sessions that the counselors developed for camp was called the Real Life Fair. The camp counselors realized that when students get into seventh grade, there is a whole new world of opportunities available to them and it is easy for them to become overwhelmed. They developed a game where the students would get to select activities that were important to them and then make them fit into their schedule. To add a little twist, community adults were the people handing out the activity cards and applying pressure to the campers to participate. “I realized that I am going to have to make tough choices with my time,” commented one camper during the debriefing session. Campers quickly realized that there were too many activities and not nearly enough hours in their day to make it all fit.

Allowing youth to participate in service learning projects is a great way for them to develop their leadership skills and become involved in their community. The camp directors and counselors wanted to help the campers learn how to plan and implement a service project, as well as participate in one. So, we preplanned a service project at Wheatland Memorial Nursing Home. The campers went through the planning process, and then had the opportunity to transform the flower beds at the facility into something beautiful. The residents were so excited to interact with the kids and about the flowers. The campers also planted a wheelchair accessible garden table that the residents can use to garden. The campers focused on understanding and developing their personal leadership skills through activities, challenges, and games.

We want each of the campers to know that they have value and skills they can offer and to feel confident to participate. One of the parents noted that “my teen shows more confidence. He really is not as worried about what others think, and wants to be himself.” Our goal as camp directors is for campers to begin to understand what is important to them and make decisions based on that understanding, and to have fun doing it.
Parents of Wheatland County 4-H’ers participated in the 4-Health research study in 2011-2012. The program consisted of 10 sessions held over a nine month period and was taught locally by county Extension agent Mandie Reed. The 4-Health program provides valuable information to parents about nutrition, physical activity, positive body image, and parenting skills, all to improve the health of pre-teen youth. The program is designed especially to fit rural families and their active and busy lifestyles. Each of the 10 sessions are short enough that busy parents can find time to fit them into their schedule and include lots of time for parents to share ideas and experiences. Many parents really valued the information exchange that the 4-Health sessions facilitated.

The preliminary research results indicated that there were positive impacts on both the youth and the parents who participated in the 4-Health program. The youth whose parents participated in 4-Health had slightly increased body esteem than the youth who participated in the control group. The idea of helping pre-teens develop a positive body image was a new idea for many of the parents, especially for the younger youth. Prior to the class, many parents tended to think about body image as something that teenage girls deal with, not younger pre-teens and were surprised about the information they received. “It is an open discussion with my girls and me. This class has made me more aware of the importance of positive body image. “Because of this class I believe I have more tools to better parent them,” said one parent regarding what they had learned about pre-teens and positive body image.

Parents also reported that they consciously decreased the availability of sweetened drinks for their children and had increased the daily vegetable consumption by their children as a result of the 4-Health program. Parents were more willing to try new healthy foods and experiment with new recipes for their family. The parents also shared tips that they used to encourage youth to eat healthy snacks instead of fatty or sugary snacks. One parent shared that “The kids ask me, “is this healthy?” They are getting more aware. I am making better grocery choices and packing healthier lunches."

Being physically active can be a challenge for rural Montana families in the winter months. Our group brainstormed activities and shared the ways they are active with their youth, even when it is cold. “You just have to bundle up and get out there and do it,” commented one mom with a smile. Other parents found that they were more aware of being active with their children and choosing active family activities they could enjoy together.

Participants in the 4-Health program gained awareness of the importance of healthy behaviors for their families. They improved in being able to help their pre-teen develop a positive body image, in being physically active, in developing the skills to engage in active parenting and to become more aware of the foods that were available for their pre-teen. Throughout the class, many of the parents made changes in their lives to improve these areas.
The second Annual Central Montana Sheep Seminar was a great opportunity for area producers to visit with speakers from MSU Extension and the Department of Animal and Range Sciences and discuss current industry issues. Some of the topics presented included: Lamb Survival, Identifying and Managing Mastitis in Ewes, Maintaining Wool Quality and Nutrition as well as sheep and wool production stations with hands on activities for producers.

Producer surveys indicated that the information presented about the wool and lamb markets would improve the profitability of their operation, and that over 80 percent of the producers who attended the seminar indicated that they intend to make changes in their operation based on information they gained. Producers also commented specifically that the information on culling strategies and the management of parasites and worming was very helpful. This was a “wonderful and informative program,” shared one producer about the seminar.

A flock of sheep waiting to be fed this winter with the Crazy Mountains in the background.