

Rural Kansas entrepreneur engineers his way to success

By Ron Wilson

Director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Electrical engineering, chemical engineering, mechanical engineering, nuclear engineering, and more. There are several types of engineering professions.

Today we'll meet an engineer of a different sort: He is an entrepreneurial young man who could be described as an "organizational engineer." You probably won't find that in the engineering curriculum, but it is a good term to describe his work in helping communities and organizations build a better future for themselves.

Leon Atwell is a young man from rural Kansas who studied engineering and then found that his career took a different turn. Here is the story of this engineer who is using his skills in special ways. First of all, what exactly is an engineer? According to my dictionary, it is "one who operates an engine." Well, thanks a lot.

But another definition says, "One who manages an enterprise in a skillful way." And in verb form, it says, "To plan, manage and accomplish by skillful acts." Those definitions are very appropriate to describe this rural "engineer."

Leon grew up at the northwest Kansas town of Norton, population 2,943 people. That's rural - but stay tuned.

Leon went on to K-State where he studied engineering. He then immersed himself in the technical things that engineers do so well...designing, building things and managing projects. He also found time to marry a Kansas farm girl along the way. After college he went into the corporate world in Texas, but after several years in the engineering profession he came to a life-changing conclusion. Leon

says, "The secret to business success isn't usually found on the technical side, it's through the people side."

So Leon took the well-honed technical skills that had been developed through his engineering work and sought to build on them to apply them to the people side of businesses and organizations. At Sam Houston State, he earned a master's degree with an emphasis on psychology, education, and organizational development.

Near Houston, Texas he helped grow and improve a number of organizations doing leadership and organizational development work. He then worked internally for a very large global engineering company, helping with large organizational change projects, and then in 2000, went out on his own.

Leon says, "After 9-11, the nation had a shift in priorities as did our family." For the Atwells, those priorities involved their roots back in Kansas. Leon says, "Our families and hearts were here in rural Kansas. Each year we would come home to Kansas for vacation and wheat harvest." He and his family truly care for rural Kansas and rural communities. In 2002, they made the move to north central Kansas. Leon continues to help organizations and his wife is a personal trainer with a wellness center. But for years, Leon traveled to where the work was anyway. While in Houston he had commuted weekly to L.A. for many months to work on a project.

After coming back to Kansas, he facilitated a three-day session for executives of an international technical services company in New Jersey to align their global business priorities.

While continuing to help rural organizations in the Midwest grow and improve, he also works with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship as the Kansas lead for the

HomeTown Competitiveness initiative. HomeTown Competitiveness is an approach to rural community building that provides for long-term rural community sustainability. This program originated in Nebraska, where it has had excellent results. Leon is involved with assisting communities with HomeTown Competitiveness in Kansas. For more information, go to www.htcnebraska.org.

This rural Kansas advocate makes his office near the north central town of Beloit, population 3,925 people and actually lives in Glen Elder, population 428. Now, that's rural.

How exciting it is to find this young "organizational engineer" benefiting rural Kansas communities and organizations.

There are electrical engineers, chemical engineers, mechanical engineers, and several other types of engineers, but now we've met an "organizational engineer." He has merged his technical skills with people skills to help communities and organizations succeed. We salute Leon Atwell for making a difference with this unique mix of technical expertise and caring for rural communities. I believe he has the skills to engineer his way through anything.

The mission of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development is to enhance rural development by helping rural people help themselves. The Kansas Profile radio series and columns are produced with assistance from the K-State Research and Extension Department of Communications News Unit. Audio and text files of Kansas Profiles are available at <http://www.kansasprofile.com>. For more information about the Huck Boyd Institute, interested persons can visit <http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/huckboyl>.

Half of state's wheat in good condition

WICHITA (AP) — With much of the state's winter wheat crop still encased under ice and snow, it's difficult to judge the condition of the crop, Kansas Agricultural Statistics Service said Monday.

The agency's February crop weather report comes in the wake of initial elation over the welcomed moisture in drought-plagued Kansas. But that optimism has been replaced by a growing fear that the crop may suffocate under a stubborn sheet of ice that has yet to melt.

"The snow is good; the ice that was before it is starting to concern me a little," said Jim Shroyer, Extension wheat specialist at Kansas State University.

Even in dormancy, wheat needs to respire, he said. Another concern is that before the cold front came through last month, temperatures in the state were fairly warm and the wheat may not have gone into fully dormancy before the ice came.

But the Agricultural Statistics Service did issue an upbeat update on conditions of the wheat crop where it could assess it. It rated 12 percent of the wheat crop in excellent condition and 50 percent in good condition. Thirty-one percent got a fair rating, while 7 percent was in poor to very poor condition.

The agency said 91 percent of the Kansas crop showed no wind damage, and 83 percent had no freeze damage.

Farmers will not know how extensive the freeze damage has been until the crop starts greening up in the spring, Shroyer said.

"Only time will tell," he said. All the snow last month helped replenish topsoil moisture levels.

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Abbie Kummer, left, took a free loaf of bread from Sue Draper, right, at Dillons Thursday. Draper, representing the Farm Bureau Association, handed out 100 free loaves of bread to customers as part of Food Check-Out Week. It takes only five weeks for most Americans to earn enough money to pay for their food for the year. The group also handed out bread at J&B Meat Market.

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