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

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 as the Kansas lead for the

Half of state's

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

The agency's February crop

weather report comes in the wake of initial elation over the welcomed

moisture in drought-plagued Kan-

sas. But that optimism has been re-

placed by a growing fear that the crop may suffocate under a stub-

born 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, Ex-

tension wheat specialist at Kansas

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

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 excel-

lent condition and 50 percent in

good condition. Thirty-one percent

got a fair rating, while 7 percent was

The agency said 91 percent of the

Kansas crop showed no wind dam-

age, and 83 percent had no freeze

Farmers will not know how ex-

tensive the freeze damage has been

until the crop starts greening up in

"Only time will tell," he said.

replenish topsoil moisture levels.

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All the snow last month helped

the spring, Shroyer said.

in poor to very poor condition.

damage.

dormancy before the ice came.

State University.

wheat in

Service said Monday.

cess isn't usually found on the tech- tiative. Home Town Competitivenical side, it's through the people ness is an approach to rural commu-

So Leon took the well-honed term 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 HomeTown Competitiveness in 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 Glen Elder, population 428. Now, organizational development work. that's rural. 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.

had a shift in priorities as did our family." For the Atwells, those priorities involved their roots back in Kansas. Leon says, "Our families merged his technical skills with and hearts were here in rural Kan- people skills to help communities sas. Each year we would come and organizations succeed. We sahome 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 National Institute for Rural Develwhere the work was anyway. While opment is to enhance rural developin Houston he had commuted ment by helping rural people help weekly to L.A. for many months to themselves. The Kansas Profile rawork 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

organizations in the Midwest grow Institute, interested persons can and improve, he also works with the visit http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/ Center for Rural Entrepreneurship huckboyd/.

says, "The secret to business suc- HomeTown Competitiveness ininity building that provides for longrural community sustainability. This program originated in Nebraska, where it has had excellent results. Leon is involved with assisting communities with 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

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

There are electrical engineers, Leon says, "After 9-11, the nation chemical engineers, mechanical engineers, and several other types of engineers, but now we've met an "organizational engineer." He has lute 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

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From field to home



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

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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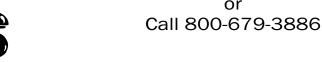
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