

One in a *Ver* Million

Meet Will Kennedy

By David Lias

david.lias@plaintalk.net

"The only thing typical about any of the weeks is that they are all different."

That's how Will Kennedy describes his role serving 4-H youth as program advisor in Clay, Bon Homme and Yankton counties.

He served as the Clay County 4-H/youth development educator before Extension underwent restructuring across South Dakota last October.

"My position itself is very, very similar to what it was before. I just serve three counties now," Will said.

He initially attempted to schedule his workload so that he would be in each of the three offices on a fairly consistent basis – with plans to be in the Bon Homme County office Mondays and Tuesdays, the Yankton office on Wednesdays, and the Clay County office in Vermillion on Thursdays and Fridays.

"But with youth development, you have to be available when your volunteers and your youth are, and that makes it difficult to keep a set schedule," Will said. "So, I spend two days in Clay County, two days in Bon Homme and one day in Yankton."

South Dakotans have come to expect that people involved with Extension are graduates of South Dakota State University with a degree associated with agriculture. Will is from Vermillion, and attended the University of South Dakota.

His background is proving to work quite well with the evolving role of Extension that now includes 4-H youth development.

"I went to USD for education, and right at the end of that, I decided that I

didn't want to be a classroom teacher," he said, "so this job has worked out very well for me. I ended up with a history degree, and an awful lot of education credits. So, this job as an informal educator has been a really good fit."

4-H remains an important factor in communities throughout South Dakota despite population trends in the last three decades that have reduced both the number of farms and the number of rural youth in the state.

"We are working on getting the word out that we aren't just 'cows and plows.' We have an outstanding tradition, and we're true to that tradition," Will said. "We're still based on ag and things like that, but I would say that in the 4-H program management, my biggest things are working with volunteers and another thing I'm really big on is the science, technology, engineering and mathematics push called STEM."

"We do outreach in the schools, after school, through parks and rec, and that's something 4-H offers now because we are an outreach arm of a land-grant university," he said. "It's where we need to realize that American youth do need to catch up in these STEM areas. We have outstanding teachers in all three of these counties, but they are in the same boat we all are. They have to do more with less, and we can do things like offer some hands-on science activities."

Will and youth from the Vermillion area were occupied in just such an activity last week at the Vermillion Public Library.

"We have an outstanding partnership with their youth librarian, Joyce Moore, and we did a group of science activities," he said. "We learned a lot, we got real messy and it

just kind of showed the youth that science is something more than what we learn in a book.

"Our priority is not just making sure 4-H is something other than what we see traditionally – we're true to those traditions because they are very important and we still believe in those – but also that we're keeping up with the times,"

Will said. "We get involved in things like science, and we have an awful lot of fun doing that and we supplement the classroom teachers."

One of the highlights of his job will come later this year with the 4-H Achievement Days that coincide with the fairs in Bon Homme, Yankton and Clay counties.

"I believe with those three counties I will be on a two-week run, where we will be either setting up, tearing down, or having the Achievement Days along Highway 50 here," Will said. "With a full-time 4-H person – that's not something that each county has had in the past – but they've had between two and three agents in each of those offices that have helped with those things."

"The people have all been really good about realizing that if I'm in town only two days a week, that volunteers need to help out. People have been really good about stepping up – it's no fun but it's what we need to do. They realize it's what they need to do, and they've done it," he said.

Will notes that Extension in South Dakota – and his job – was restructured last year because budgets were tight in the state. But, he said, local county commission have been great in stepping in to provide monetary support that helps 4-H remain a viable youth



WILL KENNEDY

program in the three counties.

Each of the three counties has kept on a full-time administrative assistant in their Extension offices whose help is invaluable, Will said. Colleen Speakman serves in the Clay County office in Vermillion. Margaret Hamilton and Danielle McFarland staff the Bon Homme and Yankton offices, respectively. "They are part of the program that we need to keep this going," Will said, "now more than ever. I'm thankful for them all of the time. Sometimes I'm away from one of the offices for a week, and when I get back they have things lined up for me that I need."

"Our local leaders and elected officials realize this is a program that is worth going forward," he said. "Those glory days of the big county fairs and beef barns of cattle are unfortunately a thing of the past due to the demographics. Times have changed, but really, the job hasn't changed. We're still preparing youth to go out into the world."

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