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Inner city school kids adopt Montana loggers, farmers

By ANGELA WOOLETT, For The Prairie Star

LIBBY, Mont. - Plywood does not just appear at Home Depot and milk does not come from a carton, but there are children in our country who do not realize this. With the majority of the United States growing up in urban cultures far from the people who produce the food they need to survive, there is great disconnect and misunderstanding between consumers and producers.

Provider Pals is an organization that is trying to educate the youth of our nation and hopefully create a future where decisions are based on reality rather than rumor. It is an urban-rural cultural exchange program building a bridge between urban and rural America.

More than a decade ago, Bruce Vincent of Libby, Mont., was talking to a classroom of kids in Seeley Lake, Mont., about the life of a logger and forestry. As he was leaving the room the teacher mentioned the following day a woman with a wolf was going to visit and the kids would "adopt" this wolf.

Vincent knew she was not only bringing a wolf to that class, but politics, as well. She would likely tell the kids that mining, ranching and logging were bad for the wolf, he recalled. "It occurred to me the only thing we had to offer the American public is us," said Vincent. "I asked the teacher, 'Would you like to adopt a logger?'"

The class adopted Vincent and he began to educate them about logging. The teacher then wanted to adopt other providers, such as farmers, ranchers and miners.

The seed for Provider Pals was sown, beginning with a number of Montana classrooms adopting the people who provide the "stuff on the store shelves," said Vincent. Then in 1997, when Vincent was in Washington, D.C., testifying on forestry, following his testimony, he left the capital in frustration, took a walk and ended up at Hine Middle School.

He walked in the school, found the principal and asked if the kids would like to adopt a logger. The principal agreed it is a good concept. "These kids started learning about farming and ranching, logging," said Vincent. "They're hungry for it."

Headquartered in Libby, Provider Pals is now in 20 middle schools with 10,000 students participating nationwide. Today, the program puts more than just loggers in the classrooms. Farmers, ranchers, miners, oil field workers and commercial fisherman also share how they provide the products that everyone is using.

When a class adopts a provider, they spend the entire school year communicating through letters, video, photo albums and the Internet. At the end of the year, the provider travels to that school and meets the kids. "Kids and teachers are starving to meet us," said Vincent. "Wheat farmers get asked for their autographs."

Rick Kuntz, a cattle rancher in Dillon, Mont., has been working with Provider Pals for the last four to five years. He has been adopted by middle schools in Little Rock, Ark., San Diego, Calif., and New York City. He is also currently working with Roosevelt Middle School and Edgewood Middle School in Los Angeles, Calif.

"It's a lot of fun," said Kuntz. "It's a wonderful experience - you get an opportunity to experience new parts of the country and interact with city kids."

He said the kids in New York City were knowledgeable about some of the issues and in awe of cowboys and their lifestyle. "For the most part, you're talking to early teen-agers," he said. "They are not easily impressed, but for the most part, they are very respectful and very attentive; they ask some pretty good questions."

Throughout the school year, Kuntz keeps a diary of the dai-ly life on his ranch. Once a month he writes about what has taken place in the past few weeks and what he has planned for the coming weeks. Then, Kuntz sends his latest entry to Provider Pals where it is up-loaded to the organization's Web site. The students then have access to his latest diary entry. "My understanding is the kids can't wait for the next month's entry," he said.

Kuntz encouraged others to participate because it is also an opportunity to educate the leaders of tomorrow about how what he does in Montana impacts an inner city kid in Harlem, N.Y.

Provider Pals includes a "City Lights Experience," in which some Montana students are selected to spend five days in a city, meeting their peers and learning about city life. During one exchange in Washington, D.C., a sniper shot somebody near the school. The school went "code blue" and all the shades were pulled and the school was locked down - and the kids just kept studying.

"There is shooting outside and you're doing math in here," said Vincent, noting this led to a discussion on gun control. "Montana kids think hunting and Washington, D.C., kids think hunted. Both are valid based on the realities in which they live."

Rural Montana kids have also visited a school in New York City where there is no playground. The kids play on the roof of a 50-story building.

"We don't know each other's reality," said Vincent. "That's what the program is designed to do - to share our realities on this bridge and get to know each other."

For the urban participants in Provider Pals, there is the "Montana Experience." Each summer, 100 students and chaperones from participating urban middle schools can spend a week at historic Raven Natural Resource Learning Center in northwestern Montana, where they are matched up with local, rural students and spend the week learning about ranching, mining, farming, logging and hiking in the wilderness.

This is a life-changing experience for the urban kids, said Vincent. They get off the bus with TVs and cell phones and realize there is no service in a lot of Montana, but by the time they leave they understand a lot about life in Montana.

"The fundamental understanding is we share a love of nature," said Vincent. "We manage nature in order to provide for them. I'm a logger, but I love trees - some of them I whack down."

Vincent's hope is when the kids participating in Provider Pals get old enough to help make policy decisions, they will do so with the knowledge they have gained by adopting a logger, miner or rancher. "The rest of the county wants to meet us," said Vincent. "And we need to meet them. It's a two-way street. They are concerned about the environment - when you look at theirs, you understand why. Their idea of nature is a park surrounded by buildings."

All of this traveling in the Provider Pals program is very expensive, but in Montana "cool things go on," said Vincent, noting Ford Motor Company is a big supporter of the program. Montana Ford Dealers pay for the providers to travel to their adoptive schools.

The Ford Motor Company, Caterpillar and John Deere pay for the urban and rural kids to exchange. Locally, the Lincoln County Commission fixed up the camp for the kids who come to Montana.

"I wish we had started it 30 years ago," said Vincent. "It would be easier to have a discussion with people about how to have a ranch and protect water or farm and protect wildlife."

For additional information or to offer support to Provider Pals, write to 5957 Champion Road, Libby, MT 59923.

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