A visit with Garth Wilson

by Scott Boyle

Forty years since its beginning, USU Eastern–Blanding is a crown jewel for higher education in San Juan County.

It is a modern story of vision, determination, hard work and perseverance. Many have been involved, including Cleal Bradford, Kay Shumway, Harold Lyman, Lynn Lee, Bob McPherson, Bill Todachennie, George Jones, Gloria Barfuss, Gail Glover, Don Larsen, Joann Crittenden and many more, too numerous to mention.

They all shared in the effort, mirroring the vision of a Blanding founding father, Walter C. Lyman, who way back in 1897, felt that Blanding would someday be a “center of education” for all, especially for Native Americans.

Add another name to that list, Garth Wilson, who gives us a little perspective on the college.

In 1980, Wilson came to San Juan County to work for the San Juan Center, as it was called then, after graduating from BYU, becoming the coordinator of educational programs in Montezuma Creek.

Wilson spent time on the Navajo Reservation as a missionary for the LDS Church and was drawn to the area. He has been here for 37 years now.

In those early years, he says, “We struggled to get official recognition from the state of Utah,” and even “got cease and desist orders not to be operating.” But relying on the vision of Lyman, the hardy college pioneers persisted, and worked through these and other problems throughout the years.

“Our Mother institutions (BYU, CEU, Weber State, USU) would have budgetary problems, which they hoped to solve by shutting us down. It even came before
the Board of Regents one time, but we are still here.” The center survived many times on grants written by those mentioned.

The turning point for the college was getting recognized by the State of Utah in the 1980s as part of CEU, with line item budgetary funds to secure them financially.

In 2010, the state mandated a merger with Utah State University, and the San Juan Center finally reached the “big leagues”, as Wilson puts it. “We had to step it up, as USU is a Carnegie One Research Institution (one of just 115 in the USA). Our academics had to be on par with what USU does.”

Indeed, the faculty had, and still has, to answer to the academic rigor of departments in Logan. “The bottom line now,” he continues, “is our student’s transcripts say ‘Utah State University.’ There is no asterisk that says ‘Blanding’. The diploma says Utah State University, period. That has increased our credibility.”

Proof of success is in the pudding. In 2013, College Measures studied 786 community colleges in the United States. The study found USU Eastern has the third highest success rate of all 786 colleges.

You won’t believe USU Eastern’s graduation rate. College executives maintain that 41 percent is an acceptable graduation rate. USU Eastern’s rate is more than double that, a remarkable 84 percent.

“The key,” says Wilson, “is offering quality programs, a quality education and good customer service. We take kids from where they are to where they want to go.”

College officials work tirelessly to do just that. Students come from many places and some are a little less prepared for higher education. The local campus helps them get up to par and then to succeed. Part of that effort is a partnership with San Juan School District to contract for Adult Education.

“We help those who didn’t finish high school and get them moving in the right direction. Many of them continue on to college,” Wilson explains. “And they graduate with skills ready for advanced studies or the workforce.”

Indeed, about 25 percent of the workforce at Utah Navajo Health Systems, Blue Mountain Hospital, and San Juan Health Services received all or part of their
training at USU Eastern in Blanding.

Jimmie Johnson, CFO of Blue Mountain Hospital, reports, “We currently have 19 graduates of USU Eastern who are employed by BMH, about 25 percent of our workforce. Also, we have seven employees who are currently attending but yet to graduate.”

Laurie Schafer, at San Juan Hospital, reports at least 20 employees were educated at USU Eastern in radiology, coding, nursing, lab and other fields. Two nurses currently work at the hospital while studying at USU Eastern.

There are many more over the years, some receiving degrees in the 1970s and 80s. Nearly 50 students who studied at USU Eastern in Blanding went on to medical school.

Wilson still wears many hats: director of student services, student life, daycare, recruitment. He also often teaches classes as well, in Navajo, and helps students succeed in college. He has seen the growth and success of thousands of students from nearly the beginning.

“There have been 4,000 graduates in 40 years,” he cheers. “If you say those 4,000 make an average income of $30,000, that’s $120 million brought into communities.”

Wilson knows personally the benefits of higher education at USU. His wife is a graduate of the nursing program and has been working for 30 years.

Coming out of high school, Wilson says his kids weren’t quite ready for college. “They had ACT scores ranging from 14-19.” An ACT of at least 18-20 is necessary for entry into most higher institutions of learning.

Wilson’s kids started college at USU Eastern, using it as a springboard to further studies. Dentists, orthodontists, and dermatologists now dot the family tree. Wilson maintains that USU took them from where they were and helped them get to where they wanted to go. “An ACT score isn’t an indicator of what kids can accomplish,” he explains.

For Wilson, the college is nothing short of a miracle. “From those early days in old waterlogged trailers from the Teton Dam Disaster to now a beautiful campus, it is providential,” he remarks. “We feel we are part of the quality of life the county has for people. People will succeed here. It is a good safe place, known
as the ‘success factory’ around the region.”

What’s in the future? “I see us doubling our student population,” he foretells. “A thousand students, but of course we would need more infrastructure, at least one more instructor in each department, a new and larger cafeteria and student center, more dorms, more classrooms, larger day care facilities, more support staff.”

Does anyone doubt it will happen? Wilson says that 1,000 students won’t be hard to recruit. “We’ve had to pull back our recruiters a few times, because we were getting more students than we could handle. Parents want their children to come here because they know they will succeed and get a quality education. The infrastructure just has to grow along with the numbers.”

An 84 percent graduation rate, with 75 percent of those graduates Native Americans, and 4,000 graduates in 40 years. Amazing. It has been an inspiring endeavor, but not obtained without vision, industry, doggedness and perseverance, just like Walter C. Lyman foresaw, a center of education. Of that there is no doubt.

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