

Keosauqua creates opportunities to grow toward prosperity

Sheila Parson, Dr. Matt and Judy Manning, Dixie Daugherty and Mahlee Johnston grew up and raised families in Keosauqua. All dreamed of changes that could improve lives in their community, but before Horizons they hadn't had productive community conversations to make the dreams reality. After a year of Horizons activities - studying local economic issues, building leadership and a creating a community vision - there is momentum to make changes in this community of 960 people.

"We have had strong involvement at each stage of the Horizons program," said Sheila Parsons of the steering committee. "Each study circle brought a unique perspective of how to address poverty issues to the community visioning session. The most achievable actions became our top priorities."

Communities of less than 5000 residents, with more than 10 percent living at poverty level, are eligible for the Horizons program directed by Iowa State University Extension with funding from Northwest Area Foundation.

Youth mentoring surfaced as the top priority at the Keosauqua community visioning session. For years, Matt and Judy Manning and Dixie Daugherty had conversations about youth mentoring. Now they have momentum to turn talk into action, because of the community-wide awareness of the benefits of youth mentoring.

Working with the school, but not through the school, the youth mentoring committee is providing "whole grade mentoring" – grade appropriate learning opportunities that expand youth experiences. Their first adventure was taking 33 high school students to a Des Moines dinner theatre.



"We raised funds to give the kids the experience of the theatre and a nice meal. Travel time gave them a chance to visit with the mentors about the experience and relate it to their own interests," said Daugherty. The committee is now making plans to take a class to Springfield, Illinois to learn about Abraham Lincoln.

Keosauqua is Van Buren County seat, where 82 percent of adults in the county have a high school diploma and only 11 percent have a Bachelors degree - compared to a state average of 21 percent. Sheila Parsons and other community members of the adult mentoring/entrepreneurship program, the second Horizons priority, are moving forward with support from Extension Director Sandy McLain.

"We are holding adult mentoring sessions with several employee segments in the county," said Parsons. "We set the stage for these employees who are at or near minimum wage to begin thinking of their professional development. We talk about the barriers that keep them from an associate or higher level degree - we talk about it from our personal experience. Indian Hills Community College provides information on how to plan during the second session – what courses to consider, the time frame needed, and sources for financial aid."

Mahlee Johnston and other young mothers relate very closely to a third priority action – bicycle safety for young riders. Expanding their leadership skills and experiences, they have organized a bike safety group that teaches through fun activities the need for helmets and safe riding practices.

"Study circles were helpful," said Johnston. "I heard how other people deal with problems like mine. It made me feel not so alone and helped me realize that there are things I can do to make a difference."

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