

Winning essayist urges community action

Editor's note: The following essay by Molly Rose Fehringer of Shepherd was the state-wide winner of the Youth to Washington Tour June 12-17 sponsored in Montana by the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association and its member cooperatives. This year, 26 young Montanans went on the tour. The essay topic was "If you could change five things in your community what would they be and why?" Fehringer's essay was submitted through Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative in Huntley.

What is it that makes a community strong? Is it size ... location ... resources ... wealth? I don't think so. I believe the strength of any community lies in its

ability to make powerful, positive connections between those who live there, the challenges they face, and the possibilities that can enrich their lives. The five cooperative projects I propose would help build a stronger sense of connectedness in our community while utilizing the broad range of our community members' talents to achieve mutual goals.

From judging science fair projects, to coaching soccer, to chaperoning field trips, the adults of our community make connections every day that support and enhance opportunities for children. What if we took a step towards instilling in our youth the connection between volunteer service and a strong community? Mandating 40 hours of community service as a requirement for high school graduation would be a concrete step towards that goal. Projects could be as simple as reading to younger children during study halls or as extensive as painting school classrooms over summer break. The opportunities are as endless as our community's needs and the potential rewards, far reaching. This requirement would instill a sense of pride and accomplishment in our young people. Vandalism would likely decrease as ownership

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and responsibility for the community's welfare takes root. Marian Wright Edelman has said, "Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time." Expecting meaningful contributions from every young adult in our community would go a long way towards teaching them this critical component of a well-lived life.

Due to the close proximity of our community to Billings, the town of Shepherd lacks the traditional slow pace and connectedness of a small town. In many areas, narrow roads teeming with commuting traffic prohibit a casual walk or bike ride. What if we found a way to link areas of our community while providing safe recreational opportunities for all? Creating a system of bike paths in our community would do just that. Skateboarders, joggers, bikers, and walkers could enjoy a network of trails connecting places in our community and the people who use them. Young and old, families, kids, sports groups, birders and dog walkers could more fully enjoy and appreciate the delights of our community's rural setting safely.

Most of us who live in rural Montana do so — at least in part — because of the clean, healthy environment we enjoy here. I would like to see our community make more solid connections between the way of life we treasure and the actions that impact upon it daily. Creating awareness and developing an extensive recycling program could make these connections a reality. Not only could recycling bins be set beside pop machines, office copiers, and every printer in the school, it could involve the entire community and many of the classes: Family Consumer Science classes could sew and sell canvas shopping bags and cloth napkins; art classes could focus on creating sculptures out of discarded items; English and computer classes could generate pamphlets highlighting the specific drop off points and simple ways community members might participate; the school Science Fair could focus on new ways to reduce or reuse waste. As well, civic groups like Key Club, the Lions Club and the Kiwanis could become involved-organizing drives, receptacles, pick up areas, or delivering used magazines and books to the school library, church camps, or daycare centers. Every day there are countless ways our

community could reduce the waste it creates. Making this recycling project a cooperative effort would make our community cleaner, healthier and stronger.

In the past two years, our town has seen two teenage deaths due to vehicular collisions. I believe it is critical for our community to make the connection between these tragic losses and our responsibility to make our roads safer. Seatbelt use is a simple, yet effective place to start. Statistics show that buckling up prevents over 50 percent of vehicular deaths of children. Creating a community awareness campaign that targets young children in our community, as well as young drivers, on the critical importance of wearing seatbelts could make a real difference. As well, shop classes could design and create signs raising safety awareness on our community's roadways. Slogans such as "School Bus Route-Give Our Kids a Brake," "Entering the Shepherd Community-Buckle Up, Slow Down, Drive Safe," or simply, "Seatbelts Save Lives" could remind area drivers that a conscientious attention to safety is a priority in our community.



Molly Rose Fehringer

While there are residents of all ages in the Shepherd community, too often the capabilities or needs of many can be overlooked. It is amazing to think how much an elderly couple may have to offer an adolescent and vice versa, and yet, how rarely this gleaming opportunity is discovered or explored. I believe we could see great rewards in our community from a program designed to match untapped resources with unmet needs. For instance, say "Billy" still needed to complete his community service and found himself especially skillful in yard work, yet, he was struggling with academics. On the other hand, "Ilene," an elderly lady, badly in need of someone to help keep her yard, felt that she could offer effective academic assistance to struggling students. By creating an inclusive network that identifies and matches these individuals, and others like them, our community could tap into such a wealth of skills and interests while addressing a broad range of needs. This system of mutual exchange would enliven our community with hope and purpose as members recognize the talents and challenges each of us possess and the untold connections that can enrich and empower us all.

In planning or enacting any of these projects, we must not only look at the end result, but at the ever-important process-building connections-and realize it is that which makes a community vibrant, healthy and strong.