

## **June 12, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "It Does Indeed Take a Village"**

"It takes a village to raise a child," is a truism even today, though villages have expanded into cities where parents work several jobs, grandparents still engage in the workforce, and children muddle through school as best they can. While Wyoming communities are modest enough in size to maintain social ties, this may not translate into helping raise a child. Still, as individuals (or communal groups) we might support beleaguered parents and/or disillusioned students.

Take the truancy rate in Wyoming's high schools. In 2011-12, one out of every five students did not attain a high school diploma. Earning a living may be foremost on their minds; however, such value judgments may be the result of a student becoming discouraged, or shunned, or caught in the grind of an impossible home life. Sometimes the parents had similar experiences in their youth. They figure: Hey, we're making it; so will our offspring.

This reasoning is fallacious on several counts. First off, low-level jobs are disappearing at alarming rates. Automation ("robo-sourcing") and outsourcing abroad are two critical drivers. The service industry employs far fewer people now than it did twenty years ago. Online banking and ATM machines negotiate tasks formerly handled by bank tellers. Internet sales eliminate departmental attendants.

Drop-outs may think they can make up the deficiencies later, via the GED program. Regrettably, this option is becoming ever less viable—another reason to encourage high-school students to hang in there. Beginning in 2014, the GED program will be run by for-profit organizations. Anyone who has witnessed the abuses in the for-profit management of today's prison system will recognize, the change won't be for the better. Not only are the fees associated with the GED program projected to rise exponentially once it's profit-driven, but also the program will require computer literacy—studies and tests will be executed on computers. Underprepared youngsters in impoverished communities will be doubly disadvantaged.

Sometimes, discouraged youngsters run away to eke out a living on their own, only to find themselves unable to make ends meet. Kids may end up enslaved in the sex industry. Our state, too, has its ugly share of this ignoble enterprise.

Can elders be of support in today's complex villages? Elders' advice and opinions once comprised important components in communal decision-making, since they could bring insight and experience to the discussion. In industrial societies, however, elders are devalued as no longer contributing to the functioning of a country's economics.

Perhaps we can help through storytelling. Many of us have had hard-time experiences that hindered our progress. Sometimes we overcame the adversity, sometimes we succumbed; in either case, it's a story rooted in life.

When I grew up I suffered my share of schoolyard harassment—classroom harassment as well, by the occasional teacher. When my family arrived as latter-day "eastern" refugees in the village of my dad's birth, I found myself beset by students and teachers for the sole reason that my

family was protestant while the entire village subscribed to the catholic faith. I suspect the resentment was toward my “heretic” father who had forsaken the “true faith” by marrying protestant. No one said so to his face; instead, their kids bullied his kids.

At ten I escaped this when we moved to an adjacent town where my parents qualified for government-subsidized housing. (Still, my dad’s sister’s husband had to vouch for my parents making good on the government loan.) An academic institution offered me a scholarship, for I had shown promise in its entrance exam.

In the Realgymnasium, Professor Brunner called me to the front of the class. “Your shoes are dirty! We are an education of higher learning. Show some respect!”

One of my classmates spoke up. “Edith delivers bread from her dad’s bakery before school, on her bike,” she said.

If I was mortified by Dr. Brunner’s remarks, my classmate’s comments intensified my shame. So they knew, these daughters of doctors and lawyers, how poverty-stricken I was!

My schooling came to an abrupt end when Mother developed cancer and my parents decided my younger siblings needed my help. I was fourteen and, in spite of my difficulties at school, never forgave the parental ruling. Childhood events shape great parts of our lives. Only rarely do youngsters have the wherewithal to influence these.

Later in life, though, I managed to keep up what academic skills I’d acquired early on. Still, I was fifty before I earned my undergraduate degree; fifty-nine when I completed doctorate studies. Learning new information is exhilarating; the more we engage in it, the more satisfying it is to be alive.

To develop personal storytelling takes decision-making and rehearsing. It means acquiring the courage and conviction to share stories that seem ordinary to us but may provide reassurance to others. I shared some of my thoughts with a teacher while serving in Cheyenne as Foster Grandparent. Eventually I gave a reading to a group of sixth-grade students. Prior discussions with the principal and teacher ensured it would be done right.

Elders do find ways to influence young people for the better—with a little help from the village. If it keeps one youngster from running away and make the best of a deficient situation, it may be worth it. All we can do is try.