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Former USD No. 480 Superintendent Dr. Lance Stout visits with well-wishers at his going-away reception May 23. Stout is taking a deputy superintendent job in Independence, Mo., in a school district with 15,000 students. L&T photo/Chris Linenbroker

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Lance Stout is a rarity in Southwest Kansas: a small-town boy who went off to college and came back. And stayed. For 21 years.

As the USD No. 480 superintendent prepares to move to Independence, Mo., he says it won't be easy to say goodbye to the High Plains.

"The decision was very hard," he said. "I didn't go looking for this job, and almost didn't consider it. I love Western Kansas." Having grown up in Sublette from 1968 to 1987, when he graduated high school, Stout only left the area to attend college at the University of Oklahoma. Then he and his wife, Jill — also a Sublette native — headed back to familiar territory.

"My very first job out of school was in Liberal," he said. "Those of us who grew up in the small towns in the area know what this part of the state is like. Some people complain, but we understand how it works, and what the people are like, and we know what's best about it.

"I love the early mornings, and I love the evenings, the way the temperature cools down," he said. "I'll miss those things."

Stout's decision to accept the deputy superintendent job in Independence grew out of his

professional friendship with newly-installed superintendent Dr. Daryl Herl.

“He’s a very good friend of mine, and earlier this year, he was hired for that position, with full latitude to hire a staff. He said, ‘Hey, I’d like you to consider coming in here as my right-hand man,’ and I said, ‘I don’t know. I love Liberal and I love my job.’ He said, ‘Well, just come take a look.’”

The entire family made the trip east, Stout said, “which was a challenge. Our oldest son is 20, the youngest is 15, my wife graciously came along, and we looked at the possibilities. It was intriguing. On the way home, I asked if it was something we should pursue, because it was always a ‘we’ conversation. It was going to be all of us or none of us.”

In the end, the family decided to accept the challenge, a choice Lance said filled him with a complicated mixture of emotions.

“It is scary to make this kind of change,” he said. “I’m intrigued, I’m excited, I’m nervous — all those emotions rolled into one. But I’ve never been one to cower down from a challenge, and with that as a mindset, I kind of look forward to the challenge.”

Stout’s willingness to step into the unknown based on his friend’s offer aligns with his conviction that education relies on one core element: relationships.

“A lot of folks much wiser than me have said this in different ways, and I have come to agree with it,” he said. “The core of education is the importance of relationships. I’ve seen people with teaching degrees, people without teaching degrees and the thing that makes a difference is whether they can interact with children and hold their attention. That’s what makes students hungry for learning. The ability to build relationships is what everything else hinges on.”

Stout’s 21 years in the district have offered ample opportunity to practice and observe relationship-building. Starting as a seventh-grade biology teacher at West Middle School, he recalls, he loved getting to know his students. He coached them in athletics as well. He ran into them around town, and hearing them call out, “Mr. Stout, Mr. Stout,” in order to start a summertime conversation was a highlight of everyday life.

“That’s kind of tapering off now,” he said. “I see my former students now, and they have kids of their own, and I think, ‘My gosh, they look just like their parents did.’”

Stout also served as principal of McKinley Elementary School for two years before heading back to South Middle School as principal. Four years later, he moved to the Central Office to work as deputy for Superintendent Vernon Welch.

“Maybe I’m biased, because I spent 10 years there, but I love South,” Stout said. In recent years, SMS landed on the federal “watch list” for its low test scores, but Stout takes the “at risk” label with a grain of salt.

“With AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) requirements, the government was always setting the

bar higher and higher,” he said. “That didn’t necessarily take into account the growth that was going on in Liberal and the school itself. I think at some point everyone, students, teachers, administrators, felt like ‘No matter how hard we try, the bar keeps moving up. We’re never going to make it.’ And that constant pressure became overbearing.”

Stout’s strategy for SMS and the district as a whole focussed on the notion that “we should work our hardest every day,” he said. The three programs he and his team chose, AVID college preparation, Literacy First reading mastery and Capturing Kids Hearts classroom management and relationship-building, aimed to break what felt overwhelming into smaller, manageable goals.

“We’re starting to see some of those benefits,” he said. “It’s allowed us to refocus.”

Among the promising landmarks: Liberal High School’s inclusion on the prestigious U.S. and World Report list of “Best Public High Schools in Kansas” list, where it earned spot number seven; rising test scores and graduation rates throughout the district; and a renewed sense of optimism among students, teachers and staff that good things are possible.

“Our strategies were research-proven,” Stout said, “but the benefits go deeper than scores. We had to refocus. We had to expect to take our kids beyond where we started. We had to believe that what we experience firsthand, everyday, is helping us turn the corner. And it is.”

When Stout talks about USD 480, it’s difficult to remember that he is scheduled to depart at the end of June. He, too, is aware that his time is drawing to a close.

“I’m optimistic and hopeful that Mr. Larkin and the directors and the board of education will continue what we’ve started,” he said. “At the same time, I know I will probably go to Independence, where they also have programs in place, and I’ll want to say, ‘Hey, I’ve got some really great ideas.’ That’s human nature, and it’s part of growth and change.”

In looking to the future, Stout imagines a day when the USD 480 board will include “at least one, and hopefully, more than one member from the Hispanic community,” he said.

“It’s absolutely critical, with 74 percent of our students Hispanic, that we foster relationships with the Hispanic population and that we have board members from that demographic,” he said, “And we’re not there. That’s something critical that this community can focus on and work toward.”

As a public school district, USD 480’s doors are open to all, a principle worth remembering, Stout said.

“We must educate every child. We as educators must take great pride in the district’s diversity. Some people view it as a challenge, but it’s really an opportunity. We’ve come a long way in our attitude as a district, as a community, and I hope to see it continue. How we handle it has the potential to make a real impact and a difference.”

He, too, looks forward to mastering a new learning curve.

“I don’t think of my new position as ‘moving up the ladder,’ which is a term I have never liked, but the scope of that job is much greater,” he said. “It can be a little intimidating. Here I am, a kid from Sublette, Kansas, where my graduating class was 36 or 37 people, and now I’m headed to a district where the student population is 15,000, three times what we have in Liberal. That’s pretty big.”

When the change begins to feel daunting, Stout recalls hearing Winston Brooks, the former Wichita school superintendent, present a speech about keeping things in perspective.

“He told us that being in Wichita, he always felt like it was a lot to run a district with 47,000 kids,” Stout said. “Then he went to Albuquerque, with a student population of 95,000. He said it’s all about perspective, relationship-building and collaboration.”

In Independence, Stout said, he plans to do exactly what he did in Liberal.

“I’ve relished the camaraderie, the ability to set the tone, the chance to roll up your sleeves together, as a team, and create an environment for students, where they can benefit and learn,” he said. “That’s what I want to do.”

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