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## Bright Futures aims to connect community, schools

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

It's been less than a year since Bright Futures began in Liberal, yet the community-driven, non-profit organization has already helped provide clothing, bicycles and school supplies to students in need. But the group isn't just about material goods and donation dollars.

"Bright Futures is about building relationships," said organizer Lisa Hatcher. "We want to get that back in the community, encourage partnerships between individuals and students, businesses and schools. There is so much we can do with our resources — and our resources might be time, they might be money, they might be extra belongings."

Hatcher just returned from the Bright Futures conference in Joplin, Mo., where she and other local representatives — including USD 480 board member Chris Jewell — exchanged ideas with other Bright Futures affiliates.

“It was fabulous,” said Hatcher. “I drove home thinking about everything I want to do next. My mind is still going about 150 miles per hour.”

By Wednesday afternoon, Hatcher had already visited three elementary schools to share what she’d learned.

The first big lesson?

“I realized we need to operate in Liberal by engaging more people,” said Hatcher. Rather than trying to put a perfect program in place, then persuade businesses to chip in funding, Bright Futures hopes to encourage connections.

“We’re going to be looking for natural partners in the community, for each school. Maybe it’s a parent, or someone who lives in the neighborhood. Maybe it’s a church or business nearby,” she said. Eventually, Bright Futures hopes to secure at least one business partner and one faith-based partner for each school in Liberal.

What might those partners do? Hatcher said she encountered so many great ideas at the conference, “I don’t even know where to begin.”

One simple project was the “Birthday Snack Cabinet.” Since public school children may no longer bring home-baked treats to share with classmates on their birthdays, many children have been “priced out” of the grade-school tradition.

“There are kids who come to school who can’t bring birthday treats, and the teacher might give that child a pencil, only to hear the other kids say, ‘Aw, don’t we get treats?’ and the answer is, ‘No,’” Hatcher said. “It makes those kids stand out, and not in a good way.” A school snack cabinet stocked with Oreo cookies and other treats would alleviate the awkward social moment, Hatcher said, and transform the day for a young child.

“If that’s not an issue for your family, you don’t think about that being so important,” said Hatcher. “But we do need to celebrate every kid in the classroom, they need to feel important. As a parent, I’d be willing to bring extra to put into the closet, and I think most churches or civic groups would feel the same.”

It’s just a matter of presenting the need to those who could make a difference, she said.

People in Liberal are generous, Hatcher said, but “they don’t always know what’s happening. When they do, they’re more than willing to help.”

Looking back over the last year, and Bright Future’s rocky start, Hatcher said it would be easy to get discouraged. She’d rather focus on the positive. Though USD 480’s board of education was initially reluctant to embrace the community-driven group, Bright Futures eventually won approval. Operating as an independent entity, with no tax-based or board-distributed funding, Bright Futures collected so many donations of school supplies, winter clothes and other items that it had to seek out more storage space. From Hatcher’s point of view, that’s only the beginning.

“We can have a tremendous impact on the children of this community,” she said, “and in turn, that’s going to change the entire community. The children who attend school here are the future of Liberal.” That’s why, she pointed out, the group is called Bright Futures.

To learn more about Bright Futures and current projects and needs, visit the group’s Facebook page, “Bright Futures Liberal.”

## **BRIGHT FUTURES DESCRIPTION**

Bright Futures Liberal works within the Unified School District #480 to connect student needs with existing community resources. The Bright Futures model brings together businesses, human service agencies, faith-based organizations, and parent groups and partners them with schools in a way that helps them to quickly and efficiently meet students' basic needs – often within 24 hours. This enables students and teachers to focus on education and achieving success. Bright Futures Liberal works to create an environment where education is valued and responsibility for student success is shared. Bright Futures operates under the belief that when a community invests its time, talent, and treasure into its schools, students are more likely to stay in school through graduation, have a higher degree of self-worth and confidence, and set and reach goals for the future. In turn, these students grow up to be better neighbors, quality employees, and impactful leaders in their communities.

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