

Leaders on a mission

Mountain Mission School students learn from business community

By Scott Robertson

It's one thing for a business leader to write a check to a worthy school. To volunteer to speak to the students can be a greater commitment, considering how busy those in position to write checks are. To volunteer to speak to the students at Mountain Mission School is yet another thing entirely.

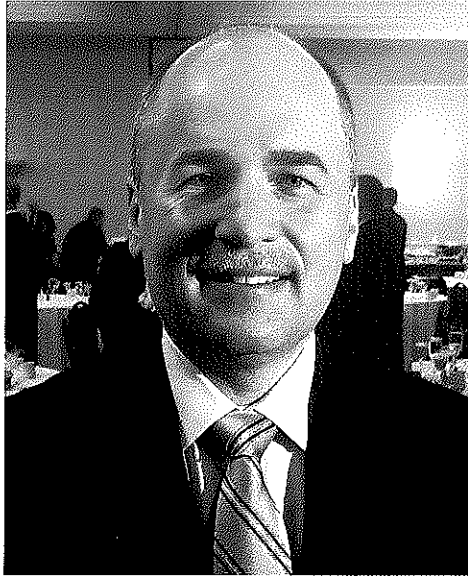
The school is located in Grundy, Va., and if you haven't been there, you're not alone. One has to want to go to Mountain Mission School to get there.

Googlemaps says it's four miles closer from *The Business Journal's* north Johnson City office to Neyland Stadium than it is from the same office to Mountain Mission, and when one takes the winding mountain roads into account, it's about five total hours driving time to and from Mountain Mission.

Yet each week, another leader makes the trip from his or her office to Grundy, just to share with an auditorium of eager students what he or she has learned in life and business. What draws them there is the school's Leadership Series, an initiative now in its second year. Among those who have spoken so far are Mitch Walters of the Friendship family of auto dealerships, Greg Neal of Bristol Regional Medical Center, Aundrea Wilcox of the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce, Joe Street of West River Conveyors and Virginia Delegate Israel O'Quinn.

Part of what interests many of the region's business leaders in Mountain Mission School is the school's unique approach. The unabashedly Christian institution, which serves around 200 at-risk students from 60 nations, neither receives nor solicits government funding, which generally comes with strings attached. Therefore it is dependent on donations from the business community to maintain operations, but it is free of bureaucratic red tape which might impede its overriding moral mission.

In February, *The Business Journal* sat in as the sixth through 12th graders at Mountain Mission heard from Mark Cox, senior vice president and chief manufacturing and engineering officer for Eastman Chemical Company.



Mark Cox, Eastman senior vice president and chief manufacturing and engineering officer spoke at Mountain Mission School.

"What motivates me personally to do this is my desire to follow Christ's teaching and his actions in that he reached out to those in need," Cox said before taking the stage. "I do a lot of talks on leadership at big universities, but in those environments I don't share my faith. This is an opportunity not only to talk about that, but to call attention to the great work being done by the leaders here."

Cox used a bridge created on a 3D printer at Eastman as a prop, inviting students to consider their lives as bridges under construction. The choices they make, he said, will determine where their bridges lead. Cox also encouraged students to find and cultivate mentors, to stretch their own ideas of who they are by trying many different things while they are young, and to invest time and effort in improving their writing skills.

Finally, Cox told the students to make the most of each day, because all too soon, their days will be done. He quoted from James 4:14, noting that life is but a vapor that appears for but a little while before vanishing away.

The students then peppered Cox with questions, mostly about what they would need to do to get the best possible starts to their

careers after school, and how to best meet the challenges they would face.

Others who have spoken as part of the Leadership Program have said the question and answer periods at the end of each speaker's prepared presentation can yield as much good information for the students as the presentations themselves. "The students are bold in the questions they ask," said Barry Elswick, president and CEO of TruPoint Bank. "At the end I felt like I got more out of it than the students did."

"I was honored to be part of the program because it makes a difference in the lives of our young people," Elswick said, adding, "One thing that made a difference for me was how eager the students were to learn from what I had to say." Elswick said he didn't feel that he was just doing a favor for the administration by speaking, but that he was really reaching young people who truly cared about what he was telling them. "They were so attentive and engaged," he said. "They are truly appreciative of the time you spend with them."

Jim McGlothlin, a Buchanan County native who became a founding partner of United Coal Company in 1970, first became involved with Mountain Mission in 1964 when he graduated law school and began practicing in Grundy. He helped with the school's basketball program, beginning as a referee and coach, and has been a part of the school's support structure ever since, including more than two decades of service on the board.

"The Leadership Series is a great way to introduce the kids to leaders they wouldn't otherwise get to learn from, and to get the leaders to meet them," McGlothlin said. "It's a two-way street. The students obviously learn a lot from them, but the businesspeople find the kids to be so curious and like a sponge for information that it invigorates them as well. So it's pretty easy to get one leader to recommend to another that they do this."

The Leadership Program was the brainchild of Jayne Duehring, the school's director of advancement. She can be reached at jduehring@mmskids.org. ■