

# WIC Foundation continues support of graduates

By Allyce Westphal

IRON RIVER—The Foundation for Educational Opportunities at West Iron County School District has been providing assistance to its graduating high school students since 1994.

With both the growing need for higher education and the growing costs of pursuing that educational opportunity, the foundation is reaching out to more of its graduates, thanks to a growing awareness and participation by individuals and organizations.

“If we keep managing it, and we get further donations, at some point, our hope is that all students graduating from West Iron will have an opportunity to either receive a scholarship or some type of technical grant,” said Jonny Waara, president of the Foundation Board, in an interview last week with WIC Superintendent Chris Thomson.

“We try to keep the scholarships, when new people come to us, to keep the scholarships as broad as possible,” said Waara, “that we don’t pigeonhole scholarships to certain things, but you do have donors that like or want to support certain fields. We have a nursing scholarship, we have a forestry scholarship.”

According to Thomson, there are also scholarships in the fields of business, math and technology.

“So, that’s pretty broad,” said Thomson.

The school has seen some 50 graduates per year going on to some sort of higher education.

Last year, Thomson said, 24 students went on to a four-year school and 11 to two-year schools, “with 35 of the 50-or-so attempting some sort of postgraduate (studies), which is pretty good, in all honesty.”

There are also scholarships through the foundation for those interested in technical school, said Thomson.

“It’s a wide range,” said Thomson, noting that the foundation’s management of its funds means there are at least 10 four-year scholarships and a few for two-year schools.

“We have six four-year (through) Chmielewski (\$6,000 per student for four years) that are being given out,” said Waara. “Then we have two for the Ross (\$5,000 for four years) ... so that’s 32 scholarships being given out over a four-year period of time.”

Waara added that the foundation has about 17 scholarships, only a couple of which are specific to a major such as nursing or forestry.

“We are this foundation,” said Waara, “and we do want to keep continuing to grow, but we also want people to know this is an avenue that if they’re looking to help out students in the future for educational issues, or they can also help out in different ways, not just the graduating seniors, like Mr. Dittman (the Margaret Dittman grant) and say, ‘We want to design this for people who are already in college...’

“If they want to donate to the foundation, we’re available to them to do so, and it will be going towards a worthy cause for these students.”

“It’s a little bit of an urban legend that kids don’t apply,” said Thomson. “We had a lot of applications last year. Some of these are need-based, so I think what happens is some parents get their forms back and say, ‘Oh, we’re not going to get anything from the federal government, so we’re not need-based.’

“We’ve had multiple debates at foundation meetings on ‘what does need-based mean?’ If you have three kids in college, there’s a need; low income, there’s a need... We’ve had some parents say, ‘We didn’t apply because they’re need-based.’ Well, still apply, because you never know,” Thomson said.

“We want people to know that this is what we’ve done,” said Waara. “The amounts of money that we’re giving out now, I think people need to know that this is what we’ve done; this is how many people we’re impacting, and we’re there if people are interested in wanting to further the educational opportunities for other students of the West Iron County School District, not only the graduating seniors but also it can be set up in such a way that it can be used to benefit current college students, current technical students, anybody involved in higher education, not just college.”

Or even current WIC students, said Thomson.

“We’ve had people give us money to help with technology or help with field trips, etc.”

One of the great things about the foundation, Thomson said, was its investment oversight.

“I met with a prospective donor last week, and he absolutely loved the fact of our investment oversight. He thought that the way we invest and the way we oversee the investments so that the money makes money. That was a

real plus for him because of the oversight that we do and the time we take to make sure that every dollar given us is maximized to create more,” Thomson said.

“We want to let people know we’re there,” said Waara. “To let people know that we’re a nonprofit, that we’re working hard to benefit the kids, and we’re obviously available to discuss any types of financial gifts.”

That includes not only the traditional scholarships to four-year universities, but also for two-year community schools, technical and trade schools as well.

Contributions to the foundation fund isn’t only a question of a tax exemption, they noted, but it’s also a way to perhaps honor a family member that’s going to help others, said Waara.

“You get to benefit others, plus you also get the honor of helping out kids at the same time,” he noted.

“I don’t think people realize that \$100,000 a year from just this group,” said Thomson. “That’s not the Kiwanis and all the other hard-working groups that are out there raising money. Just within the education foundation, we’re able to pass out almost \$100,000 of support a year.”

The Foundation hopes to inform the public of what it does, said Waara, “and what our potential benefits are to the students of West Iron, but it’s also to inform parents and kids that there are opportunities out there with the Foundation.”

“Some parents might see the packet and say, ‘oh, you’re just going to Bay, nothing in there for you.’ There’s a lot in there for them,” said Thomson.

“And it’s not limited to college, four-year colleges, it’s technical college, it’s community college, it’s trade school,” said Waara. “There’s opportunities and we try our best to spread the wealth.”

With all the current national discussions on the increasing costs of higher education, regardless of what type of post-graduate education a student pursues, there’s little discussion regarding costs coming down, making the need for scholarships/grants funding more important than ever.

“We’re there to supplement that whole idea that schools aren’t getting any cheaper,” said Waara. “So, there’s more of a need for what we do and why we want to highlight what we do, and also to encourage people if they’re interested to contact us, to see what options are available.

“Our goal, at some point, hopefully, is to have enough money to positively impact every graduating senior who wants to go forward with technical college, community college or a four-year university.”

“So that when those packets go out, maybe if the kids aren’t looking at it, maybe the parents are going to say, ‘let’s look and see what we can do... if you want to go here next fall, you want to go there, we got this financial aid,’” Thomson added.

Thanks to all its volunteers and board members over the past 20-some years, the Foundation has grown to where it is at this point, said Waara and Thomson. And that’s due to the generosity of those who have found the Foundation a smart investment for the future and to the foresight of graduating high school seniors, and their parents, who have taken advantage of a smart investment for their future as well.