

Heather Morgan – Project 17 - 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

T, W, and S are three letters which are sometimes used to precede the title of a project in southeast Kansas. What does TWS stand for? The Weather System? Toward West and South? Some company? No, in this case, it stands for "Together We Succeed," which is an apt description of the mindset which drives Project 17 in southeast Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Project 17, which uses Together We Succeed as an unofficial motto. Heather Morgan is the executive director. She grew up in Pratt, did undergraduate work at Kansas Wesleyan and then got her master's in public administration at K-State while working with the women's basketball team and K-State Athletics.

After graduation, Heather worked in the Governor's budget office in Topeka. She joined the state Juvenile Justice Authority where she became assistant commissioner and also served for a time as a county manager.

In 2011, four senators went to the Governor and to K-State's Advanced Manufacturing Institute, or AMI, to express their concerns about the seventeen-county region of southeast Kansas which they represented in the legislature. AMI became the backbone organization to organize the project, gather lots of grassroots input, and seek grant support to make things happen.

The initiative became known as Project 17. Heather Morgan became executive director of Project 17 in 2013.

Directing this project was a daunting task. "I spent the first year in communication, education and outreach," Heather said. That groundwork would provide invaluable in the long run.

"We wanted to strategically identify opportunities," Heather said. Eventually, people coalesced around the following key issues: Health, economic development, leadership, education and workforce. The Kansas Leadership Center came through with an in-kind training grant valued at a million dollars.

"We did thirteen one-day leadership workshops throughout the region and trained more than a thousand leaders," Heather said. "They were then plugged into work teams to work on local issues."

Broadband access was one key issue identified by businesses in the region. Project 17 worked to encourage KsFiberNet to place a multimillion dollar internet trunk line through the region and is continuing to work on improving access to high speed Internet.

Economic development was another key topic. Such development can take different forms. On one hand it meant creating jobs, but it also meant combating the issues of low income and multi-generational poverty which are major challenges in southeast Kansas.

"We wanted to do something about poverty," Heather said. Along with other partners, Project 17 adopted a national model of an anti-poverty program, worked with a private foundation, and rebranded it to work in southeast Kansas. The program consists of a twelve-week curriculum of work force reengagement where participants are paired

with experienced supporters. Meals and child care are provided. Participants learn essential life and work skills.

The program had major success. “One mom hadn’t worked in three years, and after going through the program, she now has three jobs,” Heather said. “The program in Ottawa went from just a few employed, to a celebration one night where everyone in the group had found employment.” The program has benefited people in the larger cities as well as rural towns like Wellsville, population 1,607, and Princetown, population 315 people. Now, that’s rural.

The results were so positive that Project 17 was awarded the 2016 Excellence in Engagement award from K-State’s Center for Engagement and Community Development.

For Heather Morgan, the greatest rewards come not from the honors, but the opportunity to make Kansas a better place and in helping local people discover their talents and the hidden treasures that lie within the region. Her dedication and sincere connection with local people ultimately helped Project 17 gain acceptance and provide real benefit at the grassroots level.

“The breakthrough happened when people could see that people were being helped by Project 17,” Heather said.

For more information, see www.twsproject17.org.

T, W, and S. Those initials stand for Together We Succeed, which symbolizes the cooperation which is at the heart of Project 17. We commend Heather Morgan and all those involved with Project 17 for making a difference by working together – because together, we succeed.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.