

# A sneak peek at a brighter future

What were you doing when you were 15?

Ponder that question while I start telling this story, and then we'll come back to it later.

As I arrive at the Taprock Event Center on Tuesday evening, I'm greeted by Jacob Pendleton. The senior at Hidden Valley High School looks snappy in a dark three-piece suit, an aqua-blue shirt and pale yellow tie. Jacob shows me to my assigned seat at table 8 and we chat for a while. I learn that after he graduates from Hidden Valley later this spring, he plans to go to college in Hawaii. Once in the Aloha State, he'll hit the ground as a sophomore because of classes he's been taking at Rogue Community College in his "spare time."

Soon, other people drift into the large banquet room. County Commissioners Simon Hare and Keith Heck. Three Rivers Medical Center CEO Win Howard. Ron Fox, executive director of Southern Oregon Regional Economic Development Inc. Grants Pass Mayor Darin Fowler. Cave Junction Mayor Carl Jacobson. And many others, but you get the idea.

Welcome to the 2014 Convening hosted by the Josephine County Foundation, a philanthropic organization run by students from the four public high schools in Josephine County and from New Hope Christian School. On this evening, the students from JCF have brought together civic leaders to talk about community problems the foundation would like to address — and they're not talking about raising a few bucks with a bake sale or a car wash.

Since the foundation was established three years ago, originally as a project by the Future Business Leaders of America club at Hidden Valley, it has raised about \$160,000. The money has been used to fund \$62,000 in scholarships, stage a vision clinic for low-income residents, put on a "care



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fair" in Wolf Creek that offered medical and dental checkups to students at the Sunny Wolf Charter School, and other projects.

These kids ain't messin' around.

The foundation does have a board of directors populated by adults. But make no mistake, the organization is driven by students. Frank Ault, chairman of the board, told the group of about 100 people that students are learning the impact they can have in the community. "You are preparing for a lifetime of giving back to your community," he told the students.

Following a buffet dinner — there was even a no-host bar — students outlined the many problems they see in our community: high unemployment, far too many children living in poverty, homelessness, too many students who drop out of school, and others. Tuesday's event was staged not to discuss these problems, but to discuss *solutions* to these problems.

After introductory presentations by students, who clearly laid out the challenges, we broke into smaller groups of six to eight people. A student moderator led each group. At the end of these small working-group sessions, the moderators reported to the group-at-large which problems had been identified and what solutions were proposed. The goal was to identify projects on a scale that

could be tackled by the Josephine County Foundation.

Our small group gravitated toward the problem of students who fall behind in their schoolwork and then eventually drop out because of poor attendance. The proposed solution was to set up a program in which high school students would work as mentors and tutors with at-risk students at elementary and middle schools. Not only would they be a big brother or big sister to these students, they would also help the younger students get caught up on classwork before they get frustrated and simply give up.

Other ideas that surfaced (this is NOT a complete list):

- Round up students to volunteer at the annual Paint Your Heart Out event, at which the homes of elderly and low-income residents get a fresh coat of paint.

- Activities in support of Josephine Community Libraries.

- "Flash help" projects. These would be like "flash mobs," but instead of spontaneously dancing, students would empty off a bus, clean a park or perform some other community service, then disappear back onto the bus as quickly and mysteriously as they arrived.

- Stage additional care fairs, building on the model that was so successful at Sunny Wolf Charter School.

- Job fairs for high school students who do not plan to attend college.

At the end of the evening, Chris Pendleton, the adviser for the Hidden Valley Future Business Leaders of America and a JCF board member, pointed to Sylvia Marr as the driving force behind the 2014 Convening.

Sylvia is a 15-year-old freshman at Hidden Valley High School.

So, once again, I ask: What were you doing when you were 15?