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Brian Harmon

The 'Brain Gain'

By Andrea McCann

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MONTGOMERY — Homegrown teachers are a vital part of many school systems, according to Barr-Reeve Community Schools Superintendent Brian Harmon, and Barr-Reeve is no exception. It and other local schools profit from the “brain gain” those teachers bring back to their communities after college.

“I think any school district, us as well, searches for the highest quality teachers they can bring to the district,” he said. “One avenue is young people who went to school here and come back. We have a number of people like this on staff. They’re familiar with the community and school. They typically have a passion for the school and the kids in the district. They typically know some parents in the district, so it gives them a step up in building relationships, which is important to the development of the school.”

Harmon said some individuals feel more comfortable not going back to their home school, because maybe they want to make their own mark. Others feel driven to be part of providing a good education like they feel they got.

“Passion for the area is extremely valuable,” he emphasized, adding that Barr-Reeve also has very strong teachers who didn’t go to school there but still have a passion for the district. “It’s not typical for people to come great distances to teach in southern Indiana. Most of our teachers are from the surrounding area — Washington, Loogootee, Jasper, Paoli ...”

Being local gives teachers a head start on enhancing parent communication, Harmon said, but any good teacher will work through that.

“Research clearly shows that parent involvement is critical,” he continued.

Harmon added compassion, work ethic, fluid teaching style, and ability to effortlessly impart information and engage students to the list of key teacher traits.

“We want teachers to be passionate,” he continued. “We want them to be proficient in their academic area, whether it’s art, music, calculus or physics. It’s difficult to describe in words what combination of skill sets makes a great teacher.”

One of Barr-Reeve's star teachers is Aaron Ash, who teaches high school physics and upper-level math. Ash grew up in Montgomery, the son of Pat and Sue Ash, and graduated from Barr-Reeve High School in 2000.

"Aaron was a very good student," Harmon said. "He's fantastic in math. He could've done anything he wanted to do ..."

But the superintendent is happy Ash decided to come home to teach.

"It's hard to get teachers in (upper level math)," Harmon explained. "They're very difficult to find."

Ash actually studied engineering for a year and a half before switching to an education major. He attended the University of Evansville, graduating with a bachelor's degree in math education and a physics minor in 2004. He earned a master's degree in education from Olivet Nazarene University. He also has a drivers ed endorsement.

"In the back of my mind, I always wanted to teach," Ash said. "I had an internship at Crane one summer, and I just didn't really enjoy the job that much, and that pretty much pushed me. Ever since I made that decision, I've been very happy. I have no regrets. I knew that's what I was supposed to be doing.

"I enjoy going to work. I enjoy my job. I really like the kids. I get a lot of interaction with kids, and that's very enjoyable."

He said his teaching style involves working a lot of problems and doing a lot of direct instruction.

"I'm at the board most of the time working on problems," Ash said. "I think that's the best way for kids to learn. I expect the kids to watch, copy it down and do a lot of practice. There's some cooperative learning."

In cooperative learning, the students work together in groups on assignments and projects.

"The majority of kids I have are going on to college, and that's what they're going to see the most of, especially in math and science classes," Ash continued. "I encourage cooperation in and out of class."

Besides teaching high school math and physics and summer drivers ed, Ash also coaches varsity boys tennis and junior varsity basketball and is a baseball assistant.

Being a Barr-Reeve graduate himself, Ash said, might be an advantage for both him and his

students since he's walked in their shoes.

"It gives me a better perspective," he said. "I think I can understand better what they go through."

From the students' perspective, he said, they don't seem to look at him any differently than a teacher who didn't grow up in the area and attend Barr-Reeve.

Ash said there can be challenges knowing the families of his students. Both Ash and Harmon said teachers and coaches can walk a fine line working with the children of their friends, relatives and co-workers. They said they can't show favoritism, and they can't be too hard on them, either, just to prove a point.

"Coaching and teaching relatives' or friends' kids can be hard," Ash said. "You don't always necessarily see eye to eye, but you do the best you can and make the decision for the student, team or classroom. You have to separate the personal from work. Without a doubt, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages."

Ash is married to the former Mandy Ball, daughter of Marty and Patty Ball of Washington, and a 2002 Washington High School graduate. They have two children, 3-year-old Emily and 7-month-old Eli. Mandy is now the school nurse at Barr-Reeve. Although Aaron admits his children, at some point, might not like having their parents working at their school, he's looking forward to them becoming Barr-Reeve students.

"We'll be right there if they need anything, and we'll have the same schedule as them," he pointed out. "With the relationship we have with our children now and the relationship we hope to continue to develop, I don't think working at the same school they attend will be an issue."

But also, he's just enamored with Barr-Reeve Community Schools and wants his children to enjoy school and have good role models like he did.

"Being a good role model is one of most important things for teachers," Ash said, adding that he takes that role seriously.

"Many of the teachers that still work here taught me, and I have a great respect for them. I obviously respect the school. I have a passion for the school.

"I always knew I wanted to live in southern Indiana, I but didn't know if the opportunity to move back to Daviess County would present itself. When the opportunity presented itself, it wasn't even a decision. We knew. It's something we always wanted to do. We really like the community and the county."

He said he did his student teaching at Pike Central High School, where he didn't know anyone. While the teaching was the same, he said it was just a different experience. Ash also did internships in Evansville.

"I really like the small-school setting," he said. "You don't have as many discipline problems. Most of the time I can walk into the classroom and don't have to worry about that. I can just teach.

"We plan to stay here. We definitely would love the kids to grow up in this community and go to Barr-Reeve. I think this is a great place to live. It doesn't have as much to do as Indy and Evansville, but I'm very content here."