

E-fair speakers emphasize the 'come-home' options

By Mary Holle

Val Reiss of Weskan, co-owner of Western Kansas Seed and Supply, pointed out to a gymnasium full of students and a few adults that he wasn't a skilled speaker and was probably going to be boring. But the former farmer, who founded a niche business in order to be able to stay "home," had most of his audience laughing and nodding their heads in agreement with some of his descriptions of small town life.

He was one of two speakers at the Rawlins County HTC fourth annual Youth Entrepreneur Fair Friday at Rawlins County High School.

"You have to make some major decisions soon," Reiss said. "You need to know the answer to this question: 'Will you live where you work or will you work where you live?'"

Other words of advice for the students included "You must make enough money to live where you want to live."

"You must not be afraid of failing," he said. "You can't be scared to death of anything that could go wrong."

"You must train and learn to do a job," he continued. "You must be creative and innovative...you can't do the same thing that everybody



Val Reiss

else is doing."

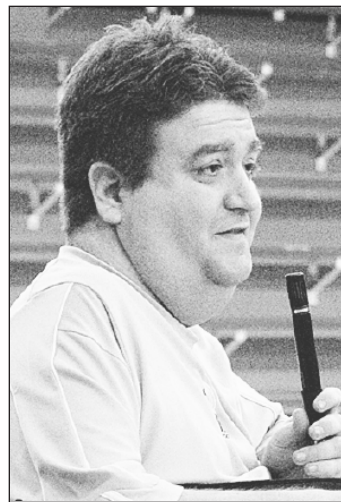
Reiss said those individuals wanting to come home "must accept help from others in the community. I found out I was lucky. I wasn't alone. I had family helping."

He gave several examples of young people who left their homes for jobs, then returned home to perform those jobs here.

The entrepreneur is a walking example of how one can make their dream of returning a reality.

When he couldn't make a living farming anymore and was contemplating leaving Weskan, Reiss said, two partners helped to back him in creating his seed and supply business in 2001.

"The first year, we had



Chris Sramek

\$880,000 in sales and one employee — me," he said. "In 2008, we had sales of \$2.5 million and three full-time employees...and we just hired a banker and a new employee."

Chris Sramek spoke about the E-Dream concept developed by Simone Cahoj, 2007 RCHS graduate and intern for Ogallala Commons, as part of her internship.

"We are using Facebook as a tool to communicate back and forth with youth," he said. "We are tying adults, economic development groups and youth together."

The E-Dream project suggests that youth "start at home, look around and see what jobs are needed and what services they can provide,"

Sramek explained. "Start with what you have, where you are and who you are. Start now by getting involved with the youth fair, summer internship or join a community economic task force."

Sramek asked the students, "Is your hometown a good option for a future career choice?"

About half of the student body answered "Yes." He asked all students to stand. Then he asked students to sit down if they wouldn't return to Atwood without adequate recreational facilities like the pool. About half sat down. When he asked those standing if they would return if there was not adequate health care and law enforcement, most of the students sat. When he asked if they would return if there was no adequate school system, all of the students sat.

Sramek said the county is reversing a trend line of decline. He noted progressive leaders are inspired by the youth of the community to grow. Sramek predicted renewable energy projects will bring new jobs to the area in the next 11 years and said the High Plains Food Co-op is currently providing diverse options to small farm operations and adding much-needed income.