



Wyoming's Living Legacy

State politicians should step up for kids

By Marc Homer

The other day I read that 125,000 gorillas were discovered living in a swamp in the Congo. Wow! How do you hide that many gorillas in this day and age? When I told my eight year old about the amazing gorilla discovery, he said, "Really? That's fantastic! Now the gorillas won't go extinct, will they? If gorillas went extinct I would cry for two days."

Incidentally, there are roughly 125,000 children living across Wyoming, and in large part their circumstances are hidden and their needs go unaddressed by most of the candidates running for public office. This lack of interest in children's issues was starkly apparent in the recent primary debates broadcast on Wyoming Public Radio and Wyoming PBS.

This election year, Wyoming's candidates are deeply engaged in a discussion about drilling in the Pinedale Anticline, immigration, snowmobiles in Yellowstone Park, the Gray Wolf, and the Sage Grouse.

We see the usual posturing and positioning as candidates don their cowboy boots and hats to talk about what's happening on the ranch and their passion for the Wyoming way of life. All of this adds color to an election season and lets the voter know that the process is distinctly about Wyoming's identity and Wyoming's future. And yet, many important issues — including those that impact children — are either left off the agenda or receive scant consideration from the candidates.

Certainly the discussion about wise energy development and the protection of our environment is critical to the people living in the Equality State. Yet I'm concerned that some of the more symbolic points such as those mentioned above, become the primary focus of debate, crowding out issues that directly impact Wyoming citizens.

We hear little about issues that directly affect huge segments of the population:

- access to health care
- educational success from infancy through adulthood.
- reducing risk factors for mothers, children, and teens.
- reforming the juvenile justice system.

- And fostering an economic climate that puts the American Dream within reach for Wyoming children and families.

While we are at the height of an oil and gas boom in Wyoming, and our unemployment rate is lower than that of most other regions in the country, strikingly, we are towards the back of the pack in terms of human development and the well-being of our children.

According to the American Human Development Report 2008-09, the commonly used measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fails to adequately measure the true purpose of development—to improve people’s lives. This report combines key human-centered indicators from three categories, longevity, knowledge, and income into a single figure to measure well-being. Based on this measure, Wyoming’s lone congressional district encompassing all of Wyoming is ranked 289th out of the 436 districts in the United States. Additionally, the 2008 KIDS COUNT report ranked Wyoming 26th out of all 50 states based on an index of 10 child well-being indicators.

Last spring while cross-country skiing on Casper Mountain I encountered neither wolf nor bear, not even a coyote. But what I did most fortuitously encounter was the Wyoming Centennial Forest. At the entrance to the forest is a sign that states, “These seedlings were planted in 1990 and will grow to become a healthy mature forest for our bi-centennial in 2090,” followed by this injunction, “Manage our forest to ensure its future as our living legacy.”

One can only hope that today’s candidates, public officials, and those in the business community will seize the opportunity to help ensure that children are a part of a living legacy of which we in Wyoming can all can be proud. Candidates should step up for kids and talk about their plans for our children and families during this campaign season.

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