

Invest in one another

I am a father, husband, son, friend, and the superintendent of Marion Center Area School District. I take each of these roles very seriously, and my daily success depends on my efforts to make sincere, emotional investments in the people in my life.

In our daily lives, we face extreme obstacles and hardships. The easiest way to overcome these challenges is by collecting on the investments you have made in the people around you. Make it a priority to be sincere when talking to a colleague or having a discussion with your daughter about homework. People know when you really care or when you're just going through the motions. Each interaction will either build rapport or cause an emotional disconnect, enhancing your success or fueling your failures.

Emotionally investing in people and the situations that surround them can be exhausting, but the rewards can be tremendous. We all seek approval, acceptance and support, and these can't be obtained by offering phony investments spawned by shallow ambitions. People must know you are passionate about them, and that their well-being is at the top of your priority list. Put others first, or at least make them feel as if their problems come first. Never look for a return on your investment, people will simply be there for you when needed.

With the pervasiveness of electronic communication, we are losing the emotional connection and accountability that comes with genuine communication. I am much more likely to call you or just show up at your door for a conversation. I rarely text, I do not use Facebook, I have never tweeted, and I have never seen a need to Snapchat or access Pinterest. I find therapy in talking to people, reading their body language and attaching emotion to the conversation.

As we endure our daily struggles, please treat the people around you with attention and care. Have face-to-face interactions with all of those who are important to you. Recharge your batteries by taking the time to connect with others.

There is nothing more important than those around me, and it's rewarding to surround myself with people who value one another. I continually make the effort to invest in people, and I challenge everyone who reads this to do the same. Over the next week, at least once a day, put down your electronics and communicate with someone in a good, old-fashioned conversation. The outcome will be productive and rewarding.



Clint Weimer
SUPERINTENDENT
MARION CENTER AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT

People must know you are passionate about them, and that their well-being is at the top of your priority list. Put others first, or at least make them feel as if their problems come first.

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ROAD TO RECOVERY



After a few obstacles, an Apollo Ridge teacher finds his calling

BY STEVE METSCH

Jason Wagner is a living example of how people can overcome the worst of times.

Wagner, of Hyde Park, teaches science to fourth- and fifth-graders at Apollo Ridge Elementary School. At 44 years old, he's in his fifth year there and loves it.

"There's not a better school district around," Wagner says. "The administration here is unbelievable. There is no school like Apollo Ridge. It's all about the kids. (That) makes it a nice place to work."

Wagner is new to teaching. At 28, he was working in security when his health

woes began. He flipped a four-wheeler while on a motocross run and snapped his femur. "It sounded like a gun shot," he says.

This was the beginning of a long, bumpy journey.

"We're on the human body now in science class," he says. "I brought the first rod in, the one that wasn't put in my leg correctly, to show the kids. We talked about it."

When he broke his femur, he figured he'd be back to normal in a few months. He was wrong.

After an ambulance ride, he lay on a wooden stretcher for 10 hours waiting for medical attention at a hospital. "I was almost in tears from the pain," he says. "It was a horrible experience."

He broke his leg on a Thursday, and finally had a 4½-hour surgery two days later.

"They did some nerve damage when they pounded the rod in," he says. "I couldn't feel my groin for five months."

He limped through life on a broken leg for about nine months as the healing process was delayed by mistakes made in the operating room, he says.

The pain was excruciating. He went to another hospital, which found the metal rod was too long and had been incorrectly inserted into his leg bone. As a result, the pain never ended and the healing never really started.

"I was in physical therapy for six weeks before I could lift my left leg," he says. "I lost a year of my life. On crutches and a cane for 50 weeks. I lost my job. I had to sell everything I had. By the time I walked again, I was broke."

He eventually found work installing flooring, crawling on hands and knees. He finally found Dr. Craig Bennett who performed the second surgery the right way. He was on the road to recovery.



Jason Wagner with one of his students at Apollo Ridge Elementary School.

Wagner did return to motocross, while still using a cane, and went out in style, winning his last race before he hung it up. He maintained other hobbies, such as hunting, and "killed the biggest buck I ever killed when I was on crutches," he says.

And, of course, he found a love for teaching.

As for the leg, it hurts sometimes, but he can walk on it. He guesses he's about 80 percent of what he was before the break.

"When something bad happens, you think there's a life lesson to get out of it, but I still don't know what it was," Wagner says. "One thing, it does make you more sensitive to other people. I'm not going to lie to you. Some friends helped me a lot. You dig deep, you see what you're made of. I'm not a quitter. I'm stubborn. That stubbornness goes a long way."



The rod that was originally in Jason Wagner's leg is now mounted on his wall.

We're on the human body now in science class. I brought the first rod in, the one that wasn't put in my leg correctly, to show the kids.

JASON WAGNER, SCIENCE TEACHER

A Friend in Need



Is offering someone one of your organs the ultimate sign of friendship?

BY STEVE METSCH

When Cindy Scott was told she was “too healthy” to receive a kidney transplant, she was resigned to wait until her health takes a turn for the worse.

When Scott, 46 and in relatively fine health now, does need a kidney, the donor will likely be a co-worker at Homer-Center High School: biology teacher and longtime friend Lisa Adams.

Well-versed in Scott's plight, Adams never hesitated to offer one of her healthy kidneys if and when Scott needs one.

“I figure God gave me two kidneys, and I only need one,” says Adams, the 40-year-old mother of two girls, ages 12 and 9. “If I have a spare and it works, why not? We're very much alike. I think my kidney will be at home in her body.”

Scott, a learning support teacher at the school, says she was impressed and humbled that Adams would be willing to undergo surgery for her.

“I'm appreciative that she even considered it,” Scott says. “I'm very independent, not the type of person to ask for help.”

She and Adams have known each other for 11 years.

Adams says she's known of others who've needed organ donations and she's always been open to the idea.

Scott's story began 26 years ago when she learned of the scar tissue on her kidneys. About seven years ago, her kidney function had dropped, she says. By May 2015, her doctor suggested she get on the transplant list.

“The average wait is three years,” Scott says. “I'm not on dialysis, but they wanted me on the list, thinking in three years I will be on dialysis or needing a transplant. In June, I spent a whole day of testing at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh.”

Test results earned her a place on the list in September.

“Lisa and I have been teaching a biology class together for four years,” Scott says. “We spend lots of time together, and Lisa said she was interested in being tested as a live donor for me.”

While that eases her concern, Scott went through an emotional wringer in December when she was told a 54-year-old woman in New Jersey would be a good match.

“That was on a Monday,” Scott says. “That Thursday I went back for pre-op tests, and surgery was set for the next Thursday. The surgeon told me it was a very good match.”

However, the surgeon then said he had concerns about how the post-operation drugs she'd need to take would effect her body. “He said ‘you're a very

healthy person,’ and the transplant would take that away from me,” Scott says.

“The thought of being sick and miserable just didn't appeal to me,” she says. “It was my decision. Teachers are data-driven. I said, ‘I'll see ya later.’ I went through more emotions in four days than I have in my entire life.” Adams, who faces some more tests to determine she's a strong match, jokes she will, “Try to not get run over by a bus between now and then.”

Both laughed when asked if this means a grateful Scott will forever work overtime and weekend hours for Adams.

“We're teachers, that's what we do,” Scott says.





Uphill Battle

After three transplants, Bob Shoup learned a lesson in endurance

BY STEVE METSCH

When Bob Shoup was a young man, his health took a surprising turn for the worse. But he kept up a positive attitude on what became a long and tumultuous road.

Thirty-one years later, Shoup, 58, is a survivor. He's had two heart transplants, a kidney transplant, several related illnesses and nearly needed a liver transplant.

"As I like to say, some parts are older, some parts are younger," he says.

He was a robust, young factory worker with a wife of five years, a 4-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter when his life changed dramatically.

"I wasn't feeling good," he says. "I was

dragging. My doctor thought it was bronchitis. Then I had a stroke. I'm a hunter. Carrying a deer to my neighbor's, I felt my right arm go numb."

A hospital visit determined he had experienced a TIA. The next month he returned to the doctor and learned he had congestive heart failure.

Shoup, of Indiana, was just 27 when he learned in January 1986 he needed a heart transplant after he, "caught a virus out of the blue that led to heart problems."

"I had 5 percent heart function," he says. "I couldn't cross the room without being totally out of breath."

Eventually, a new heart was found for him. "I wasn't weirded out," he says. "It was that or I die. I did really well. The only problem was the medicines that keep you alive, damage other organs. That's why I (eventually) needed a kidney."

The kidney came from his brother, Jeff, whom Shoup jokes, "Owed me from when we were kids."

Then, 15 years after his first heart transplant, he needed a second.

"It's working fine," he says. "I don't know what the warranty was on it."

It turns out that Shoup had contracted Hepatitis C with his first heart transplant. And in 2015, tests showed problems with his liver.

His wife, Lauri, a math specialist at Homer-Center Elementary School, feared the worst.

"At first, we thought, 'This is just one more thing,'" she says. "But after a while,



Bob and Lauri Shoup with their four grandchildren.

You have to be your own advocate. You know your body best. You know how you should be feeling.

BOB SHOUP, TRANSPLANT SURVIVOR

it did become apparent how fragile his life had become. I sat in the summer of 2015, looking at my husband and I thought, 'after all he's been through, this is how he dies.'"

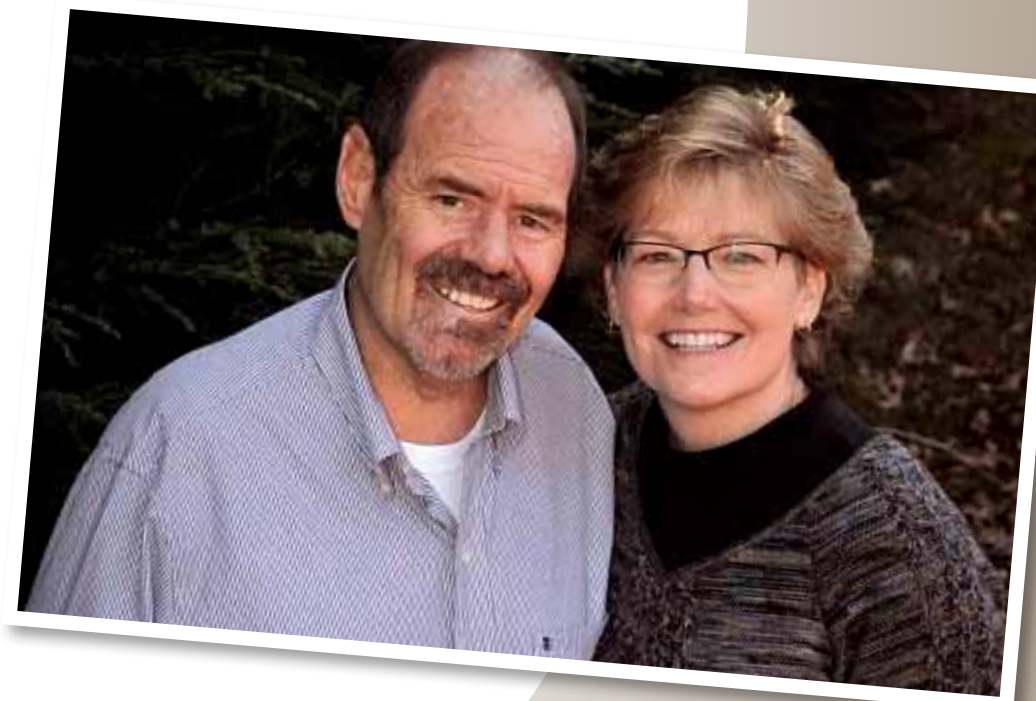
Thankfully, Bob responded well to the then-new drug Harvoni, and in a few weeks began to feel better. In three months, the Hepatitis C was gone, he says.

When asked how he's endured his health woes, Shoup says, matter-of-factly, "You've just got to do it."

"I've been a transplant patient longer I've not been one," he says. "It's been our life for 31 years. The bottom line is the dishes and laundry still need to be done. Nobody is going to cut my grass, or shovel my driveway. I went back to work after each transplant." Shoup is now retired from Fisher Scientific where he "did a bit of everything."

He gives Lauri a lot of the credit. "We just went on living," he says.

And he offers this advice: "You have to be your own advocate. You know your body best. You know how you should be feeling."



Bob Shoup credits his wife, Lauri, with helping him remain strong during the darker days of enduring multiple serious health problems.



Because They Care

Employees can make life easier by taking advantage of an assistance program

BY STEVE METSCH

When employees of school districts in Armstrong-Indiana

encounter problems of any sort, they have a place to turn.

The Employee Assistance Program was created for them whether the problem deals with finances, relationships, health, stress or a number of other possible causes.

“Most large companies have these programs,” says Amanda Mosco, director of human resources at ARIN Intermediate School. “Essentially, what they are is confidential consultants of sorts, whether they be therapist or lawyers, whatever the employee needs.”

Anonymity is the key. Employers are not told the identity of the user, just the nature of the case.

“They are able to get free advice, free help or free referrals,” Mosco says. “It can be embarrassing things like addiction issues, domestic violence or financial issues.”

Robert Truscello, a 70-year-old special education supervisor at Intermediate Unit 28, has used the EAP three times. First, when he was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma 16 years ago. They put him in touch with a support group and two psychologists who specialize in counseling those with health problems.

A few years later, he needed counseling when his son, Matthew, was going through some personal problems and using drugs. “They connected me with someone who was very helpful,” Truscello says.

“Unfortunately, my son passed away in October (2016) and I reached out the EAP again in early December because I wanted some grief counseling in our home town of Johnstown,” he says. “The person was quite helpful and I’m still using it.

“It’s been difficult. I’m emotionally challenged, but I read a Scripture verse every day, I work out, I do counseling in other jobs. This is a case where I reached out and I’ve recommended it to employees I supervise who’ve had other challenges.”

Another part of the EAP program kicks in if an employer sees an employee might have a problem, for example, habitually being late for work.

“We can demand they use this program,” Mosco says. “We know you’re struggling but you still have to get to work on time. We want them to see someone to get that problem fixed.”

If employees refuse to use the EAP, then the employer must resort to discipline, Mosco says.

“(It’s) something we don’t want to do

when we know someone is struggling,” she says. “That’s the last resort.”

Every employee is eligible, and each school district has its own EAP. Immediate family members of the employee are also eligible. “So, say your spouse or child are having issues, you can use this program for them, as well,” she says.

“We like and appreciate the program we’re using,” Mosco says. “What we see is by getting employees help, they’re more productive at work, less absenteeism and maybe they’re not spending time at work on personal problems. You can focus.”

Mosco adds that any employee of another school can contact his or her human resources representative to find out whom they can call for help.

We like and appreciate the program we’re using. What we see is by getting employees help, they’re more productive at work, less absenteeism and maybe they’re not spending time at work on personal problems. You can focus.

AMANDA MOSCO, DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES
ARIN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Breakdown:

According to Mosco, these are the numbers for how EAP has been used during the 2016-2017 school year thus far. Each unit represents an hour of service.

25 UNITS – STRESS

18 UNITS – LEGAL ADVICE

3 UNITS – BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

3 UNITS – WORK-LIFE ISSUES

1 UNIT – DEPRESSION



HARSH REALITY

The opiate abuse epidemic does not discriminate

BY STEVE METSCH

The growing problem of opioid abuse hit home for Mariah Syktich when her older brother, Josh Wells, died from a heroin overdose last year.

Despite her pain, she wants to reach out to others and share her story with hope to spare another family such a fate.

Seventeen-year-old Syktich, from Homer, is a junior at Marion Center Junior/Senior High School. Her brother was 27 when he died in May 2016.

"I see how many overdoses happen in the area," Syktich says. "It's crazy." Watching her brother's life spiral downward was extremely difficult for her.

"It takes over your whole life," she says. "He stole things from me — a computer, a camera, Christmas presents, jewelry — that he sold to get money for drugs."

Josh tried to quit several times.

"He died once and they got his heart to work again," Syktich says. "I was about 9 then. I was really scared from that point on. This time, they didn't get (his heart) to work again."

"Drugs ruined our family. My dad told my brothers they had to leave, and they went to live with their dad. My other brother got into drugs, too, but he's doing a lot better now."

Syktich remembers her brothers once went to jail for robbing some one for drug money.

"It's difficult seeing your brothers there and trying to kiss them through a glass wall," she says.

Josh started using marijuana in high school. He moved on to pills and, ultimately, heroin.

"After what I've seen in my life, I don't

think I could ever touch a drug," she says. "Many people have different opinions on addiction, but aren't educated on what it does to families."

Syktich finds it irritating when peers at drug education classes make light of abuse.

"It's so hard for kids my age to listen," she says. "I'd love to speak to kids my age to tell them what's going on, but it seems like most people my age don't want to listen and don't want to hear the consequences."

A close relative unknowingly drove Josh to the house where he bought the heroin that killed him, and blames herself for that, Syktich says.

"It's hard," she says. "It doesn't just kill the person who overdoses, it kills the whole family."

She worries about her other brother, because Josh was his best friend. She and her family never stopped loving Josh, even when things went south.

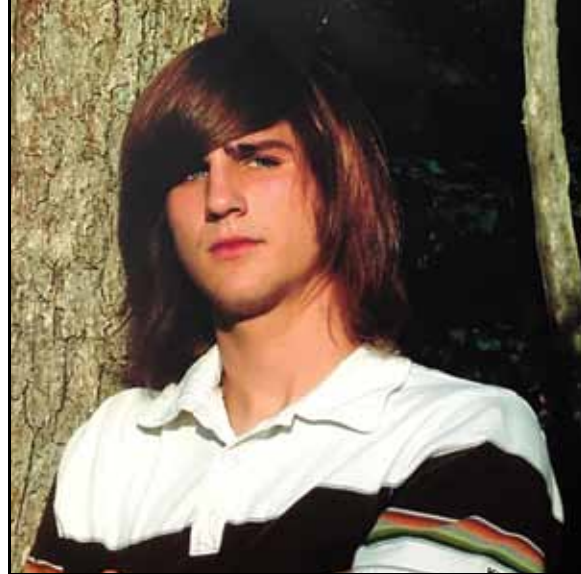
"It's hard to explain," she says. "I don't know how people can't forgive, because it's so hard to see someone go through that."

Shelly Pearce, a counselor at Marion Center, says drug education is provided to students in health classes and at school assemblies.

"Just like Mariah said, our kids think it won't happen to them," Pearce says. "Kids think they are invincible and they just don't understand the severity. Nobody ever intends to be an addict."

Pearce knew Josh as "charming ... A nice, helpful kid," she says. "He was involved in our ag program, which is big here, and was just a fun-loving kid."

"Addiction," Pearce adds, "does not discriminate."



Seeking Support

If a Marion Center Junior/Senior High School student is going through a personal tragedy, counselors are on hand to talk to him or her and, perhaps more importantly, listen.

Shelly Pearce deals with a wide range of issues as a counselor at the school.

"When our kids suffer any kind of loss, of a sibling, a parent, we let our kids know that we are there," Pearce says. "We talk to them, but we try to not overwhelm them. It's a fine line."

"We don't treat drug and alcohol casualties differently than any other kind of death. We're from a small school, so it's easier for us to know all our kids better. As a school district, we all try to be very supportive of our kids."

Teachers are the first line of assistance.

"One of the biggest things I told our teachers at our (recent) faculty meeting was 'If you see something, if you hear something, say something,'" Pearce says. "(We want to) make sure we are aware of what's going on so we can take care of our kids."

Counseling services, such as grief support, are readily available to students at any time through the guidance office.

"We want them to know to not be afraid to ask," Pearce says. But on occasion, students are reluctant to share their feelings.

Pearce recalls one such instance when a 17-year-old boy's father died. A year later, the boy was still reluctant to discuss his loss or share his feelings. Sensing his pain, Pearce told him, "You have to decide if you want to continue to feel like this. When you've decided to not feel like this, let me know and we'll get the ball rolling."

"That was on a Friday," she says. "The next Monday, he came in and said, 'Okay, what do we need to do?'"



I'd love to speak to kids my age to tell them what's going on, but it seems like most people my age don't want to listen and don't want to hear the consequences.

MARIAH SYKTICH