

Montana teacher shares passion for agriculture with students

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ADVANCE FOR THE WEEKEND OF AUG. 26-27 AND THEREAFTER - In a Aug. 8, 2017 photo, Justin Heupel poses for a photo at the H.E. Robinson Agriculture Center in Kalispell, Mt. This school year marks his 22nd year teaching and his 14th year with Kalispell Public Schools at the vo-ag center, where he currently teaches seniors and a sophomore class. (Aaric Bryan/The Daily Inter Lake via AP)



KALISPELL — Justin Heupel has stuck with plan A for more than two decades as he's moved from eastern to western Montana teaching agriculture.

"Plan A was to be an ag education teacher," Heupel said during an interview in a classroom at the H.E. Robinson Vocational Agricultural Center. "And if plan A didn't work out, plan B was something in ag industry to be able to utilize my degree."

This school year marks his 22nd year teaching and his 14th year with Kalispell Public Schools at the vo-ag center, where he currently teaches seniors and a sophomore class.

Heupel, 43, started out teaching five students in his first job prior to joining the largest school district in Flathead County.

"I just really felt like I wanted people to understand agriculture. Where their food comes from. How it's produced and why it's produced that way," Heupel said. "And that continues to be a passion today."

Growing up in the small town of Culbertson, Heupel's mother was an elementary teacher and his father managed the town's grain elevator. Together, the family raised horses and pigs.

"So I was surrounded by agriculture," Heupel said, whether it was feeding animals, cleaning pens, hauling hay, fixing fences or working a summer job selling John Deere equipment at a dealership as a high schooler.

When it came to college, Heupel said he knew that by getting a degree in ag education he could comprehensively learn about agriculture from plants and animals to mechanical and business aspects.

"Agriculture doesn't end with farming. That's where it begins. That's one I say a lot," Heupel said with a smile.

"One thing I'm really interested in is the business and economics of agriculture," he said.

Why economics?

"(It) is easy to forget, especially at a time where the service sector of the economy is doing better, or more healthy, and we forget about our basic industries that add value to the economy. We talk about dollars circulating and economic growth — but where does the dollar start in the economy? It's with our basic industries and ag is one of those."

Heupel appears to have a personality attuned to being in the classroom or on the farm — approachable, even-tempered, organized and ready to problem solve or instruct at any moment. His approach to teaching is creating a structured environment that is both interesting, relevant and practical whether in the classroom, the shop, the greenhouse or on the farm.

"Like when we're teaching about fertilizer. You might not ever raise a field of wheat, but you're going to have a lawn and when you go to your hardware store to buy your sack of fertilizer that fertilizer analysis, the three numbers on the bag, is the same," Heupel said.

As one of the ag teachers on a working farm, there is still work to be done over the summer. Each teacher clocks in 20 days over the summer and two high school students are employed to help keep things running smoothly.

"We'll be harvesting barley soon," Heupel said.

Outside, the center is surrounded by a working farm of hay, barley and livestock. It's busy on a daily basis with students tending to their animals or helping out in other ways. The center is in the midst of calving season. In one pasture, cattle grazed and calves hunkered down, hiding behind tall grasses.

Heupel, his wife Vicki, who is a science teacher at Bigfork High School, and two sons live in Kalispell, but not on a farm — similar to most of the ag students.

"This is kind of it," Heupel said about the vo-ag center. "We do have animals. My own kids have animals and they house them here at the ag center."

In a nearby pen, his youngest son Evan who will be a seventh-grader at Kalispell Middle School was training his pig for show by leading it around a pen while it nosed the ground more interested in looking for food. Heupel noted that Evan was a grand champion last year.

His oldest son Luke has a steer.

"This is Luke's first year to have a steer, so it's really fun to work for him," Heupel said, but said he would be remiss if he didn't mention that Luke is also a band student and a "rock-star trumpet player."

When not teaching, Heupel enjoys camping, fishing, hunting and is "a DIYer and home improver."