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USD No. 480 board member Cheryl Louderback is photographed inside her office at Original Town of Liberal Revitalization. Following the end of her board involvement in June, Louderback says she will remain very busy with O.T.L.R. as the organization begins building new homes in Liberal. L&T photo/Keeley Moree

Serving 20 years on board changes Louderback's life

By KEELEY MOREE • Leader & Times USD No. 480 school board member Cheryl Louderback explains that her 20 years of service to the district all started after receiving a nudge in the right direction. “Mr. Ray Atteberry was on the board when I ran in 1993, and he encouraged me to run. I always had him on a pedestal – he was a wonderful board member,” Louderback said. “He was once principal at Lincoln where my children attended school, and one of my fondest memories was when he would send them out across the street to go home. He would be out in the middle of the street making sure there was no traffic coming, would get down on his knees and make sure they were all bundled up to send them on home. He did that with all of the children because he cared so much about those kids.”

Inspired by his leadership, and with campaign help from Sharon and Richard Dent, Louderback filed for the board in hopes of making an impact.

"Much of the reason I ran in the first place was because I wanted to give something back to the community. I know people say that all the time, but that really was my reason. I had a lot of encouragement from different people," she explained. "I prayed about it and considered it for a while before I decided to do it."

The lifetime Liberal resident explains her entire world has changed since winning her first election.

"When I think back on when I was first elected, everything was so new, and there was so much to learn. That seems like an eternity ago – it's made a whole different person out of me," Louderback said. "I'm a different person today because of serving on the school board and learning how to listen to what others want and how to spend their money and be conscientious of their needs."

Twenty years, six superintendents and five general elections later, Louderback says her commitment to do right by everyone in the community holds true.

"I have always been concerned about seniors who have already raised their families and are living on limited incomes. It's not fair to them to have to continue to pay, but it's everyone's concern," she said. "These children are important. God created all these children, and their education is important. As a board member, that is what's most important to me. It's about giving them the best education we can in the best way possible."

With three grown children and seven grandchildren growing up outside of Liberal, Louderback says she has been able to serve on the board without any perceived agenda and has loved each and every year of her service.

"I've enjoyed learning about the many facets of being a school board member and have served on several committees, such as the Area Technical School site council and the ATS Foundation, as well as district calendar committees, the task force committee for grades 7 to 12 and curriculum committees," Louderback said. "The school board requires a lot of homework. You research the issues, talk to people and visit to see how other people feel. I think it's very important to understand and listen to what other people say. It's not about what one board member wants, it's about how to best spend the money while keeping the kids, teachers and taxpayers in mind. All these things have to come into place."

In addition to working directly with fellow school board members, Louderback has also participated in the evolving interaction between other boards and government groups in the area.

"I believe the different government bodies in Liberal are realizing the importance of working together," she explained. "About five years ago, the Council of Governments was created and

monthly meetings with members of each government body – Seward County, USD 480 and 483, the City of Liberal and Kismet, SCCC/ATS, Chamber of Commerce and Southwest Medical Center – are held at the college. This has helped to make us a stronger, more united community, while each is helping the other with ideas and solutions to issues.”

When it comes to her place on the school board over the years, Louderback explains she hasn't been afraid to stand by her own ideas.

“I've never felt I'm a leader, but that doesn't make me a follower,” she said. “I definitely think for myself and believe it's important to make a decision you can live with. When I was on the board the first few years, I always said that I wanted to be a part of a 4-3 vote. It always seemed that I was on the underside of a vote. I used to kiddingly say that I wanted to be on the larger side of the vote. We have seven board members and seven views. It's most important to stay true to yourself and true to your constituents. You have to do what you feel is best for the district.

“Sometimes, a person doesn't see the whole picture but when it plays out, you realize it was a good thing,” Louderback said about some votes. “It's always important even if you're not on the majority to go with the board's decision. You can't dwell on it. You put it away and work on the next issue.”

Louderback explained that boards over the years have been able to get more done through cooperation.

“We've built two new schools, Cottonwood and Sunflower. They have made a huge difference,” she said. “Today, we are overcrowded in our classrooms but those two schools made such a big difference. I also think that it's made a positive difference to separate the ages. For ages 5 through 8, that's a very special time, and I think it's good to have those kids separate from children that are preparing to go into middle school.”

“We've also implemented programs such as Capturing Kids' Hearts and AVID,” she added. “We have more AP classes which is wonderful, we have more students taking them, too.”

In addition to taking care of kids, Louderback is thankful to have had the opportunity to take care of educators as well.

“Something that has always been important to the different boards is the pay scale for teachers. We are in the top 10 percent in the state of Kansas, and we're proud of that,” she said. “We know that we've got some of the best of the best and we show that in our pay.”

Within the past year, Louderback said a special “Good Things” portion of each school board meeting has given the board an encouraging look into how their work benefits students. Some students are recognized before the board for their academic or athletic achievements, while younger students share new skills or technological tools with the board.

“That's such a fun part of board meetings. Kids will come around and each of those kids will pair up with a board member and share their new way of working a math problem. It's amazing,” she

stated. "The joy on those kids' faces when they come to share with us is just wonderful. You know that they've looked forward to it all day long because they've learned something that's special to them and get to share it with adults. They get very excited, and the whole room lights up."

Interacting with students and presenting diplomas to thousands of students over the years have served as her favorite moments on the board. Of course, other moments have been more of a challenge.

"I go back to the 2009 bond issue when you talk about a tough decision," Louderback said. "I was not in favor of the bond issue and it's not that I wasn't in favor of a bond – I knew that we needed more buildings and classrooms. I felt that we were asking for too much from taxpayers, that we were asking for unnecessary things. I didn't believe that we needed a new football field or track."

"I believe the area in which a child learns is very important," she added. "I wanted those things for our kids, but I didn't want a \$62 million dollar bond, and I felt that it was unfair to ask the public to pay for something like that. I didn't feel like it should have all been in one bond issue."

While she believed in her heart that the 2009 bond issue was asking too much, she's hopeful to see the next board work with the community to design a solution for overcrowded schools.

"We have a cap on how many students should be in a classroom, and I think we definitely need to keep that. When I was in school, we were 30 kids to a classroom, but I do believe children learn better if the ratio is smaller," she said. "I would like to see some new buildings and for all of the portables to be gone. I don't feel that they're a safe environment for our children at all – it's scary to me, and I don't think they're fair for students or teachers to be separated from the rest of the building. It will take a lot of dollars to make that happen, but I would like to see the portables gone."

Louderback has also watched the news as many mass shootings have unfolded on school grounds in America. She hopes the new board will take more steps to reinforce student safety in the learning environment.

"We are fortunate to have some school resource officers, but we definitely need more. It's sad that we do, but that's what it's come to," she explained. "I would like to see more security, not only officers but other measures taken."

Louderback cites A.V.I.D. (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and the Capturing Kids' Hearts program as projects she's most proud to have helped bring to schools.

"I think the Capturing Kids' Hearts program has blossomed through all of the schools. It has made such a difference in attitudes and how people treat each other. That's been a wonderful thing in our district, and I think it's one of our best accomplishments as a district besides building schools," she said. "Those are two of our best programs in this district, and I'm glad to have been a part of boards who have put those together with a lot of help from teachers and

volunteers.”

While Louderback will serve on the school board through the end of June, she plans to remain involved on the Whirlwind Counseling and Career Services and N.E.L.L. (Northeast Liberal Leadership) boards. She also works as executive director of Original Town of Liberal Revitalization.

“I’ve been with O.T.L.R. since October 2008, and I love my job.” Louderback said. “I want so much to make things work for tenants so they can make a better life for themselves and their families. I believe O.T.L.R. helps people to make a better life while living in our homes.”

While 20 homes operated by O.T.L.R. currently serve as low-income housing, Louderback is excited to say the group is gearing up for growth.

“We’ve recently purchased some land and are going to build again. We haven’t built for about six years and are going to be a positive force in Liberal once again,” she said. “We’re ready to build and very excited, poised and ready to make a positive difference in this community again.”

Louderback added that she has no plans to ever move away, but looks forward to visiting her sister, children and grandchildren more often.

“All of my children – Tim, Scott and Jamie Sue – have been very supportive since the first time I ran,” she said. “They call and encourage me, they get excited when they read about something good the board has done and they’ve always been supporters, along with my sister, Sue.”

“I have seven grandchildren and the oldest is 16. She will be graduating in two years, and since I won’t be on the school board, it will free up some time as far as being able to travel when I would normally be at the Liberal High School graduation ceremony. Now, I will have the opportunity to travel to see all of my grandchildren graduate,” she said with a big smile. “That’s a big thing for me, and I’m really excited.”

Of course, she explained it’s likely her interest in Liberal’s school board decisions will not die out anytime soon.

“Two Monday evenings a month for the last 20 years have been a very important part of my life,” she said. “It will not be surprising if sometimes I find myself at the ESC building just to sit and watch a meeting.”

Louderback, who has been following the current school board candidate campaigns, says she encourages each and every person to cast a vote in the general election on April 2.

“As most anyone knows, in the past four years we have seen an election decided by the toss of a coin and another decided by a difference of seven votes,” Louderback concluded, “Your vote counts!”

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