

GENE RUSSEL

It's impossible to be in the same room with Gene Russel and not be aware of his presence. His "can do" attitude and incredibly positive demeanor make him stand out in a crowd. Gene and his family came to Sidney Public School District in 2013. He said he had a lot of Gering ties that spoke very highly of Sidney and he was excited to jump on a great opportunity to be a young administrator so he and his family headed to Sidney.

Gene grew up in Gering, Nebraska and was an incredible athlete for GPS. He played football, basketball, baseball, and ran track. He said "I was probably better at football but basketball was certainly fun!" He did tell me he thinks he still holds the record for the most interceptions in a career at Gering High. Gene went on to graduate from the University of Wyoming in 2010 with a degree in K-12 Physical Education. His first job was in Minatare where he was a PE teacher for grades 7-12 and the head boys basketball coach, head football coach, and head junior high track coach.

Gene went into college thinking he wanted to be in pharmacy but figured out he didn't want to have a job where he was stuck in one place all day. He said "I was sitting one day talking with Caroline about things I am good at and enjoy doing. It all kept coming back to me enjoying working with people and having fun with kids." He had worked on the "Big Brother" program (this was before TeamMates) and he had coached youth sports in Laramie so he knew he was able to build relationships with people, especially children, and that's when he turned his focus to being an educator.

I asked Gene what advice would he give anyone wanting to have a career in education? He said "I would say education is a lot like sports, you are always striving for a certain goal but with education it's more about the journey than the end goal and the journey is all about the people and the relationships you get to build along the way. If someone is looking for a job that is more about the journey than the destination, then being an educator would be a great fit!"

When Gene came to Sidney Public Schools he was an assistant principal of North and South Elementaries alongside Belinda Westfall. After 2 years of doing that, he was the principal of South Elementary for one year. Two years ago he became the principal of West Elementary. He told me his favorite part of his job is "just being able to be a goofball with the kids!" He said "I am a natural kid at heart and I find that I have a similar sense of humor as they do, so it works!" One of my favorite things he has done during his time at West Elementary was come to school as a student for a day. He had his wife drop him off and spent the entire day living the life of a student. He attended all the classes, did all the work, ate lunch with them, and even went to recess. He had a whole new respect for students and said it helped him understand when they are hungry, or tired, and how it feels to be engaged and not engaged during the course of the day. It was a very powerful experience and has helped him be a much more effective educator. Gene said "you have to put yourself in other people's shoes to understand

what they are truly going through. It helps build credibility when you're willing to lead from the front and not the back."

Gene is a very positive person and will usually embrace life with a glass that is "half full" and I asked him how he does that and he laughed and said "being positive is a choice, it's a very intentional thing and it has a great trickle down effect on those around you." He just hopes he is able to lead by example and be a great role model to those that he spends his days with.

Gene told me FAMILY is everything at West. First and foremost, family comes first for him and the West staff. He wants people to feel like they can take care of their family issues first and not worry about school; put it second. Then at West, he wants people there to feel like family. He said "I want anyone who walks into the building to know there is a place at the table for them!" I could tell he was thinking about his words as they really meant something to him and he turned to me and said "people have to feel welcome in order to reach and teach kids!! People must feel like a family first!"

Speaking of family, Gene and his wife Caroline have a super cute family! Gene and Caroline met in high school; he was from Gering and Caroline from Scottsbluff. They both attended the University of Wyoming and later married in July of 2010. They have 3 children - Gene who is 6 years old and will be in the 1st grade in the fall and twins, Allie and Kennedy who are 4 years old. Pretty sure the three children are the biggest Sidney Raider fans in the community. You see their family at most Raider events cheering with all their hearts. Gene said "we are big supporters of the Sidney Raiders and love to be outside and into all the fun activities the Sidney community has to offer! This is a great place to call home!"