

Michael Kuhn – Admire

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"I'll have a burger, fries, and a website on the side." Hmm, is this some sort of urban Internet café? No, although it is a café. This is a place where a rural community can find both lunch and links – the Internet kind. Here we find pride and community spirit. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Michael Kuhn is owner of the Last Chance Café and a volunteer with the PRIDE program in Admire, Kansas. Michael grew up here at Admire. He went to Northern Heights High School and Emporia State where he met his wife. She taught at Admire and now teaches in the nearby rural community of Americus, population 931 people. Now, that's rural.

Michael worked at a lumberyard in Emporia and then took a teaching position at Northern Heights. In 1986, he bought one of the main buildings in downtown Admire.

The historic building was constructed in 1904 as a general mercantile store, with lockers, hardware, grocery and dry goods. When visiting railroad workers needed food, the ladies in the store started making sandwiches. That led to the first floor of the building becoming a restaurant which continued after Michael bought the building.

During the next few years, several restaurant managers tried to make it go. In 1990, Michael Kuhn's parents took it on. "My dad retired from a full-time job in Emporia so my folks took it over," Michael said. They knew that different managers had struggled with it through the years.

"My dad said it was the last chance for making a restaurant work here, so we named it the Last Chance Café," Michael said. His parents started offering big home-cooked meals and buffets and developed a good customer base. They ran the café for years before retiring.

Michael expanded the kitchen when he took over. His pizza supplier wanted him to have a big station where customers could watch the pizza being prepared, but there was no room. He got them to agree to let him build an expansion with windows to see the pizza, and he lined it with classic barn wood. Michael now offers quick, convenient food for his customers at the Last Chance Café -- but that is not all he offers there.

In 2005, the community of Admire joined the PRIDE program. PRIDE is a community betterment program coordinated by K-State Research and Extension and the Kansas Department of Commerce. Through PRIDE, a group of local volunteers was organized in Admire.

One of the PRIDE group's first steps was to assess community needs, including a survey of local residents. The survey showed that citizens would be interested in a newsletter of local events and a computer lab to access the Internet.

"I agreed to become newsletter editor on an interim basis, and I'm still the editor," Michael said. I guess "interim" can be a long time.

Another expressed need was a desire for a computer lab or a place where people could get on the Internet. "At that time a lot of our older citizens did not have computers in their homes," Michael said. "They needed a place to check emails from grandkids and things like that."

The PRIDE group procured some computers and set them up inside the Last Chance Café. Now a person can go to the café and check email, get lunch, and pick up a PRIDE newsletter featuring news, birthdays, and community activities.

The PRIDE group is very active, sponsoring festivals and other community events. Admire PRIDE got a grant through the Healthy Ecosystems-Healthy Communities program which supported a public input process for natural resource protection planning. This led to construction of a detention pond near the Admire Community Center for water quality.

“We try to involve the community,” Michael said. For more information, see www.admireks.com.

It’s time to leave our burger, fries, and a website on the side. We commend Michael Kuhn and Admire PRIDE for making a difference with community spirit and commitment. Here in Admire, one can find a menu on the computer as well as on the countertop.

And there’s more. Michael’s brother is also active in Admire. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.