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Johnson Entrepreneur Named Kansas Small Business Person of the Year

WICHITA - A teacher turned contractor turned retail small business owner has been named the Kansas Small Business Person of the Year for 2008 by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Gary Adams, President of Stanton County True Value Hardware, LLC in Johnson, Kansas will be honored at a reception to be held on Thursday, April 10, 2008, at 6:00 p.m. in the City Room of the Johnson Chamber of Commerce. The reception is free of charge and open to the public.

One of the biggest challenges facing small, rural communities in Kansas is how to promote economic development to stay alive. Stanton County True Value Hardware, LLC is the story of one southwestern Kansas community's success - and the success of one individual in particular - in not only keeping a long-time business up and running, but spurring its growth to exceed all expectations.

In 2003, the town of Johnson found itself facing the loss of one of its most needed and well established small businesses. The combination hardware store, lumberyard, and farm implement dealership that had been a fixture in the community for years was closing. As locals discussed possible ways to keep the business alive, an individual named Gary Adams came to the forefront.

Adams had spent the majority of his life in Stanton County, growing up in Manter - a town of only 200 people - southwest of Johnson. He left the area to attend college in Oklahoma, graduating with a degree in Elementary Education in 1969. Upon returning to southwest Kansas to teach, he began tagging along with his father and uncle on construction jobs hoping to learn how to do his own home repair and remodeling projects to save money. Eventually, he began doing work for others and soon his construction income was not only supplementing his teaching salary, but surpassing it. "I learned by watching other people - I still do," said Adams. "I don't mind copying from other people if they're successful."

When initially approached by others in his community to reopen the Johnson hardware store and lumberyard, Adams was reluctant. He had been a partner in a family-owned hardware store for several years in the mid 1970's and really didn't want to get involved in another retail operation. However, as he met with others willing to invest in the store under his management, he began to change his mind. Adams became convinced he could not only save the business, but grow it by meeting a variety of needs of his customers - people that sometimes drove over 80 miles one way for goods and services.

Referred by the local Chamber of Commerce, Adams worked closely with the Small Business Development Center at Garden City Community College to put together a business plan and financial projections. "If I'd had to do all that myself, you and I probably wouldn't be talking today," said Adams. "It's so much different than when I was in the business previously. It's a real eye-opening experience."

In mid 2003, twelve local investors formed Stanton County True Value Hardware, LLC with Gary Adams as the majority owner and the only working partner. After extensive renovation of the retail space, the business opened selling hardware, house wares, cleaning supplies, tools, building supplies, electrical and plumbing supplies and paint. Over the years, the business expanded to include appliance repair, a heating, ventilation and air conditioning department, and a ditching and trenching service. It serves both retail and wholesale customers in southwest Kansas and eastern Colorado, and has grown from seven to thirteen employees since its inception.

More impressively, the business has surpassed its projections each and every year, actually hitting its projected **third** year's sales volume in its **first** full year of operation.....this in a county of only 2,400 people.

Adams and Stanton County True Value Hardware are active supporters of the community, sponsoring school activities and sports programs, purchasing animals from 4-H members, donating to local conservation efforts, and contributing to the Sherriff's Association and Kansas Missing Children's Fund. On a more personal note, with the help of community donations the business has installed new furnaces for needy citizens, and also employs a special needs student from the local high school as a part-time trainee.

Gary Adams has experienced uncommon success by identifying and meeting a multitude of needs for his customers living in a very remote and rural area. Pat Veasart, Regional Director of the Garden City Community College Small Business Development Center, nominated Adams for this award stating, "He is an excellent businessman who has grown his business by listening to his customers. Stanton County True Value Hardware is not only a good business itself,.....it supports the ability of other local businesses to provide cost effective service to their customers. This networking of business builds a stronger community."

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