

# Wheatland County



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*The Crazy Mountains in the winter, by Mandie Reed.*

**W**heatland County MSU Extension provides non-biased, research-based information to improve the lives of community members. MSU Extension plans and implements programs to meet a wide variety of community needs, providing valuable resources in leadership and community development, 4-H and youth development, family and consumer sciences, and agriculture and natural resources.

Wheatland County is a small, rural county in central Montana. The county has a strong agricultural base and boasts a variety of successful small businesses. The county has a population of 2,059. Harlowton is the largest community, with a population of 1,089. In addition, the county has three other smaller communities: Judith Gap to the north, Two Dot to the East, and Shawmut to the West.

## Big Sky, Big Leadership making ripples in Wheatland County

Wheatland County MSU Extension began offering Big Sky, Big Leadership in Wheatland and Golden Valley counties in 2019. In 2022, we had the opportunity to participate in a

ripple mapping exercise to identify the impacts and the ripples of the difference the program is making in the community.

Big Sky, Big Leadership, is a local program offered by Montana State University Extension. Each county can adapt it to meet local needs. The program has three areas of focus: personal leadership skill development, community process and working collaboratively, and community-based experiences planned to improve participants' knowledge about the community.

Through the ripple mapping process, we learned the value participants place on skills they learned and “use daily” in their personal lives, family businesses, and local leadership roles. Participants felt they were better equipped to engage in difficult conversations at a community level because of practicing in the program. This has resulted in the community finding better solutions to complex problems while maintaining working relationships. The opportunity to build relationships and strengthen community connections was one of the outcomes that participants valued most.

Community members were more willing to volunteer to serve on boards or for projects, or felt they had the skills to move forward on projects. The Harlo Farmers Market and

the Farm Stress Seminar were successful projects initiated by the BSBL class participants.

## The Middle School Retreat

In 2022, the Wheatland County MSU Extension agent partnered with community member and 4-H volunteer Jean Wallace and middle school teacher Tara Berg to create an experience for middle school students. The planning group recognized that students needed time to rest, reflect, and build resilience skills. Together they created 'The Retreat,' a three-day, two-night event.

The students wanted to know more about mental health, brain science, and goal setting. They also wanted to have fun, be with their friends, and relax. The planning team met those goals with interactive, engaging activities. They built in plenty of time so kids didn't feel rushed, and made sure the content was hands-on and applied to what students wanted to learn. At the end of camp, youth shared the most valuable things they learned:

- "I learned a lot about what I can do to achieve my goals and about my strengths from REAL Colors personality training."
- "I am going to be better at not procrastinating."
- "I will not use bad self-talk, like saying I am stupid."

They also built in activities to build community and teach life skills. They created a middle school menu with ramen bowls, street tacos, and omelets in a mug. Students were excited they could make their breakfast in one minute. The youth helped cook each meal and clean up. One ground rule the students added to The Retreat list was that everyone would eat together, continuing to create community. At the end of the program, one youth commented that The Retreat was "kind of a break from my life; it was fun to learn and be with friends."



**Top:** Participants of Big Sky Big Leadership painting at a team building activity, by Mandie Reed; **Bottom:** Youth at The Retreat participating in a REAL Colors personality evaluation, by Mandie Reed

## Wheatland County Staff

Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

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