

Entrepreneurs Offer Inspiration to Students
By Heather Shelton, The Times-Standard
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HOOPA -- Erick Ammon credits a former Hoopa Valley High School teacher with planting a seed of inspiration that helped him grow what has become a successful heavy civil engineering construction company.

Ammon, who graduated from Hoopa Valley High School in 1977, is the president of Erick Ammon Inc., a multi-million dollar business with its main corporate office in Salyer, just across the Trinity County line; a division office in Groveland -- near Yosemite National Park; and an engineering office in Silverdale, Wash.

"Last year, we were a \$2 million a year company and we've jumped to \$10 to \$12 (million). We're really headed to \$15 million. Things are pretty good ... The way the economy is looking, it's kind of scary, but we're positioned very well right now," Ammon said.

In conjunction with National Entrepreneurship Week, Ammon and three other Hoopa Valley High School alumni-turned- business-owners returned last Monday to their alma mater to take part in an Entrepreneur's Forum at the rural high school. The forum -- which was one of eight being held at high schools in Humboldt County -- was sponsored by Economic Fuel and the Humboldt County Office of Educations' Rising Stars Foundation.

"We're celebrating the successes of entrepreneurs who attended our local schools who started businesses in our community. They created jobs for themselves. They created jobs for others and we all benefit," said Kathy Miller, team coordinator for Economic Fuel: the Humboldt County Student Business Challenge.

Economic Fuel, she said, is an annual written business plan competition for students from College of the Redwoods and Humboldt State University, as well as recent college graduates, who reside in Humboldt County and are interested in receiving cash awards to help start businesses (www.economicfuel.org).

The other Entrepreneur's Forum participants included Marc Rowley who, along with his wife, Londa, owns Bigfoot Rafting Co., Coho Cottages and Mud Puppy Jeep Tours in Willow Creek; Josh McKnight, owner of Trinity Valley Consulting Engineers and Bigfoot Contractor's

Supply; and Toni Burchard, owner of The Whole Enchilada, a restaurant in Salyer.

"My father taught me that wherever you're at is the center of the world and you can go anywhere you want from there. So, be encouraged that being in Hoopa is the center and you can reach anywhere from where you're at right here in Hoopa," Burchard said to the cafeteria full of Hoopa Valley High students during the forum.

Each of the entrepreneurs grew up in the Willow Creek, Hoopa and Salyer area and consider the valley their home.

"This community is hugely important to me, and not just for my family, but for every child here," said Ammon, a father of six.

Ammon, who says he wasn't a good student when he was younger, remembers the very day that his world changed. A teacher from Hoopa Valley High School came to Trinity Valley Elementary School in Willow Creek, where Ammon was an eighth-grader, to talk about what to expect in high school. The teacher -- a Mr. Patton, Ammon said -- mentioned Hoopa Valley High School's new welding class. Ammon took note, and when he started at Hoopa Valley High, he enrolled in that same welding class.

"When I graduated I could barely read or write and I understood my handicap," Ammon said. "Because of this, I worked twice as hard and paid close attention so not to be embarrassed of my reading and writing skills. I built my whole career off of the skills and confidence I learned in welding class."

After high school, Ammon went to work for Stimpel-Wiebelhaus, a construction company in Redding. At 18, he joined the laborers union and headed to the Sierra Nevada foothills.

"This began my traveling with a construction company," Ammon recalled. "All I started out with was a sleeping bag and a tarp in an old El Camino. After being rained on and everything getting wet, I was so thrilled that I could afford a tent. By the end of the summer, I was able to purchase an old 15-foot travel trailer. I didn't think life could get any better than that."

Ammon worked for Stimpel-Wiebelhaus for 18 years. He started as laborer, eventually becoming an oilier, a welder and then a mechanic.

He founded Erick Ammon Inc. in 1988.

"I worked hard and saved my money so I could buy equipment," Ammon said. "I gained knowledge and responsibility through working hard. I positioned myself to be ready when opportunity presented itself."

Through the years, the company -- which employs 30 or so people -- has worked on projects for many agencies and organizations, including the Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Caltrans and the Hoopa Valley Tribe. He's just finished a job for the Federal Highway Administration along Panther Creek Road in Jackson.

"It was just across the street from where I started 30 years ago," Ammon said. "It was a couple million dollars project."