

# Kentucky's School-Saving Lions

BY JERRY SHIELDS



▲ The townspeople left no doubt as to their sympathies, as this sign in front of the school clearly states.

(Photo by Wanda McKinney)

There's not much in Tollesboro, a small but feisty farming community of about 1,000 in the Appalachian foothills of northeastern Kentucky. There's no city hall, no mayor, no chamber of commerce, not even local police officers. But, thanks to the local Lions club, there is a high school. And that's no small matter in a town where raising crops and raising kids are the lifelines of the community and the high school is its heart.

Located in the far eastern half of Lewis County and just south of the Ohio River, Tollesboro residents have considered themselves to be outsiders of sorts in matters of government and school affairs managed at the county seat in Vanceburg, 17 hilly miles to the west. An intense rivalry developed between the two towns, culminating in mid-1993 when the Lewis County School Board determined not to finance needed repairs for Tollesboro Junior-Senior High school and voted to close the school's doors. They ordered a 1994-1995 school consolidation causing Tollesboro's 350 students to commute one hour each way to Lewiston High School in Vanceburg. Thus was born the "Save-the-School" campaign.

The fact that parents were extremely upset by this scenario only added more urgency to saving the local school, according to Don McCann, past president of the 20-member Tollesboro Lions Club. "So we bought it and now the students can come back to school," he says in his country-style, matter-of-fact way as he sums up and at the same time downplays four years of bitter and highly emotional litigation, an attempt to form a separate school district and other action.

Although the separately located Tollesboro Elementary School was not affected and remained open, closing the higher grades stabbed at the very heart of the community.

Like everyone in town, the Lions club saw the financial impact of having no teenagers to "hang out" in town and buy at the country store or eat at the two small cafes. The video store simply gave up and closed its doors. Property values were said to have declined as 24 homes suddenly went up for sale.

Worse, however, they all experienced the emptiness, the loss of the sights and sounds of these young people. "They were gone," one woman neighboring the school was quoted as saying. "It was like they were just sucked into some kind of hole." One of the 22 senior students of what would have been Tollesboro's 1995 graduating class observed, "We were cheated out of our senior year."

But it wasn't over; the Tollesboro Lions Club had a surprise. The club agreed to pay the "surplus property" price of \$95,000 to the school district for the two large school buildings, a separate cafeteria and several maintenance and storage shops located on the six acres in the center of town.

"When we first discussed buying it, we hoped it would remain a school. One of our concerns was that we didn't want it to become an undesirable site, like a junkyard or anything," said Charlie Hughes, who was club president at the time of the school's purchase.

Hughes was the charter president of the Tollesboro Lions Club, established in 1954, and has served as president "three or four times," he says. He also graduated from Tollesboro High, was the agriculture teacher there and served as principal of both the high school and the elementary school.

Lion McCann, who was born and raised in Tollesboro, worked for 18 years as branch manager of the local bank before illness forced an early retirement. He says a community meeting of about 500 residents at the school gymnasium voted "unanimously" to keep the property as a school. "They fought for it, they voted for it, so they got it," says McCann, thrilled with the vote. He and four other Lions are on the seven-person committee which temporarily runs the school.

Classes for the first enrollment of 13 tuition-paying students began in September 1996 at what is now a private school, according to McCann. The current student body is composed of seventh, eighth and ninth graders, with one grade scheduled to be added in each of the ensuing three years. An additional 50 students were enrolled in the 1997-1998 school year.

There are three paid teachers and a large number of volunteers, including McCann, other Lions, many parents of the school children and others from the surrounding community who do everything from operating the telephone, scrubbing and painting, sweeping and mopping, bringing in lunches for the students, doing repairs and even completing an overhaul of the heating system.

According to McCann, the Lions club will turn over the school's deed to the town if it incorporates, which many of the people would like to see happen, or to an appropriate school corporation once such a corporation is formed and the mortgage is paid in full.

Most of the \$95,000 debt is already paid off thanks in large part to an interest-free loan from a local individual and because of the many Lions club fundraisers. In that fundraisers are a major part of the social fabric of Tollesboro, the club seeks to pay off the balance of the mortgage in about five years, McCann confidently observes. In addition, the school is seeking funds for a multitude of repairs and supplies.





▲ Three students of Tollesboro Junior-Senior High School raise the flag at the beginning of a new school year. The flag was donated by town resident Helen Dixon, in memory of her late husband Robert Dixon. (Photo by Wanda McKinney)

The Tollesboro Lions Club, however, is no stranger to raising money. Beginning in 1960, it raised the necessary funds to purchase 12 acres of land and build a fairgrounds. This ambitious and challenging project now includes a horse ring, livestock and show barns, a banked go-cart racetrack, an area for tractor pulls and a mud sling. Also, there is a floral hall, ball park, tennis and basketball courts, playground, concession stand and the Lions' own clubhouse and kitchen.

According to Buddy Grant, club treasurer and past district governor, the 12-acre facility, site of the annual fair and other events at the fairgrounds throughout the year, brings in an estimated annual \$20,000-\$25,000. This does not include such things as renting the clubhouse and kitchen to groups and sponsoring other Lions club's fundraisers such as breakfasts and dinners, variety shows, wrestling matches, trap shoots, antique car shows, white elephant shows, livestock auctions and other events.

"It was, in fact, a calf auction that provided the town's first street lights back in 1954," says Grant, "and various benefits have contributed to the fire department, the Kentucky Lions Eye Foundation, scholarships, assistance to local families in need and Christmas toy drives, among many other causes over the years."

"We don't have any town government," observes Lion Hughes, "so it's us and the churches that seem to get things done."

There may not be much in Tollesboro, but there is a junior-senior high school, plenty of good people and one very active Lions club. ■

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▲ The Tollesboro Wildcats practice for another big basketball game in the school gym. (Photo by Jerry Shields)



▲ Planning more fundraisers at the Tollesboro Fairground are (from left) Lions Buddy Grant, past district governor; Charlie Hughes, charter president and president during the purchase of the school property and Past Club President Don McCann. (Photo by Jerry Shields)