Meeting Notes – Nov. 29, 2022

The LaFayette Rotary Club met on Tuesday, November 29, 2022, in the Fellowship Hall of LaFayette First Baptist Church. We were pleased to have two guests with us today, newly elected Sheriff Jeff Nelson and retired educator Donna Howard. Dori Harmon was responsible for the program today and had invited Dr. Tyler Nelson to be our speaker.

Dr. Nelson is principal of Inspire Academy and the Chambers County Career Technical Director. He is a Chambers County native, growing up in the Fairfax community and attending Fairfax Elementary, WF Burns Middle School and Valley High. After high school he enrolled in and spent eight years in the military. Upon his return to civilian life, he realized he wanted to be an educator and began pursuing his education degrees. He ultimately completed his doctoral degree in 2021. He began his teaching career in 2012, teaching English at Beulah. He has taught at LaFayette High, and for three years at Southern Union State Community College, before arriving back in career technical education here in Chambers County.

Inspire Academy was originally the vocational school, constructed in 1977. The term "vocational" began to have a negative connotation and was renamed the Career Technical Center. Eventually, even that name had a somewhat negative connotation and did not capture the entirety of what the school had become and was renamed once again, this time as Inspire Academy. The programs offered at Inspire Academy are a direct reaction to industry demand. Most manufacturing jobs once filled by assembly line workers are now completed by robots and other automation. The demand now is for people who are able to program the computers that run those assembly lines and complete those jobs.

The goal of Inspire Academy is to make every Chambers County School System student college and career ready. Another goal is for students to remain in our community after graduation, which is currently not happening at the level we want it to. While Chambers County and the surrounding areas have many manufacturing jobs available, most are filled by persons from outside our community. A student can earn industry certification in every program offered at Inspire Academy. This prepares students to enter the workforce upon high school graduation or to enter a two- or four-year college. The industry jobs are well-paying jobs with incomes that often exceed that of entry-level jobs of four-year college graduates. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of all Chambers County 9th-12th grade students attend Inspire Academy or participate in career-technical (CT) courses on their high school campuses. Although students cannot officially enroll in a CT program until 9th grade, every 8th grade student in Chambers County Schools comes onto the Inspire Academy campus to be introduced to the offerings.

Dr. Nelson meets with an Advisory Council, which gives input on what industry needs from the school and from its future employees. Soft skills are even more important than the technical skills. Future Goals of Inspire Academy include creating more opportunities for industry involvement, which in turn builds relevance for the students. A second goal is to increase the number of work-based learning opportunities and experiences for students When students see first-hand the relevance of what they are learning whether in their traditional classes or the CT programs, they become inspired and motivated. Dr. Nelson gave examples of students who struggled with or failed to see the importance of certain traditional subjects, such as math, until they came to Inspire Academy and saw the practical application of that knowledge and those skills. The third goal is to spread awareness of the programs offered and benefits of career-technical education.

Some of the programs offered by Inspire Academy include JROTC, Health Sciences, Graphic Arts, Automotive Service, Agri-Science, Modern Manufacturing including megatronics (preventative maintenance on machines), Construction, Pre-engineering, Finance and Business, Cosmetology, and Hospitality and Tourism.

Diane Sherriff