



2019 Oregon Rural Health Hero of the Year

Kurt Davis had an idea and a vision 25 years ago that has inspired almost two thousand Central Oregon students to enter health care careers in rural communities.

In 1994, Kurt, a Culver resident and a counselor, teacher and football coach at Redmond High School, approached Central Oregon District Hospital (now St. Charles, Redmond) about a job-shadowing program for Redmond High School students. CEO Jim Diegel supported and encouraged the idea, and when it showed promise in Redmond, Diegel supported the spread of the Health Occupations Program Job Shadowing to all four of the St. Charles Health System hospitals. In the words of current CEO Joe Sluka, "From one high school, one hospital and ten students, this program has grown to four hospitals, ten high schools and two hundred students annually."

Kurt considers it his mission to introduce, encourage and expose rural high school students to career opportunities that are often hidden — especially in the area of health care. The rural communities of Redmond and Culver have undergone dramatic shifts in employment opportunities. The thriving tourist industry of Central Oregon sometimes doesn't provide the living wage jobs that the communities need. Early on, Kurt understood and promoted the value of health care jobs and their powerful place in the fabric of our communities.

The Cascades East AHEC surveys Health Occupations students four years after high school graduation, and estimates that approximately 2500 students have gone through the program and that 75% of them have chosen a health care career. This means that Kurt Davis has inspired almost two thousand central Oregon students to enter a health care career. This means that diverse and under-served students are entering health care careers and returning to their rural roots to practice. As our central Oregon communities become more diverse, the students that Kurt is encouraging, recruiting and mentoring provide the foundation for a diverse health care workforce.

Kurt has seen the fruit of his labor in his own life: in 2014, Kurt, a long time athlete with an athlete's injuries, needed his knee replaced. When he awakened from surgery, both of the RNs and the CNA2 who were tending to him were former students he had guided through the job-shadowing program that he first dreamed up in 1994!