

Congratulations! Now What?

Q & A with Mt. Ellis Academy's Principal Darren Wilkins | BY JARED WRIGHT

In September Mt. Ellis Academy in Bozeman, Montana, won \$500,000 in the Kohl's Cares contest on Facebook. After finally receiving the check, Mt. Ellis Principal Darren Wilkins takes time to talk about the contest and the outlook for Adventist education.

Q: First, big congratulations on coming out on top in the Kohl's Cares competition. Can you briefly take us through the experience of the competition and Mt. Ellis' victory from your vantage point?

A: It's hard to know how to nutshell an experience that I could talk about for hours. This school has been an audacious faith venture since its founding in 1902. The school's history is one of miracles and commitment from its constituents. When we became aware of the Kohl's grant opportunity, we were just dumb enough to think we might have a chance. We had a huge need that fit well within the parameters of the contest.

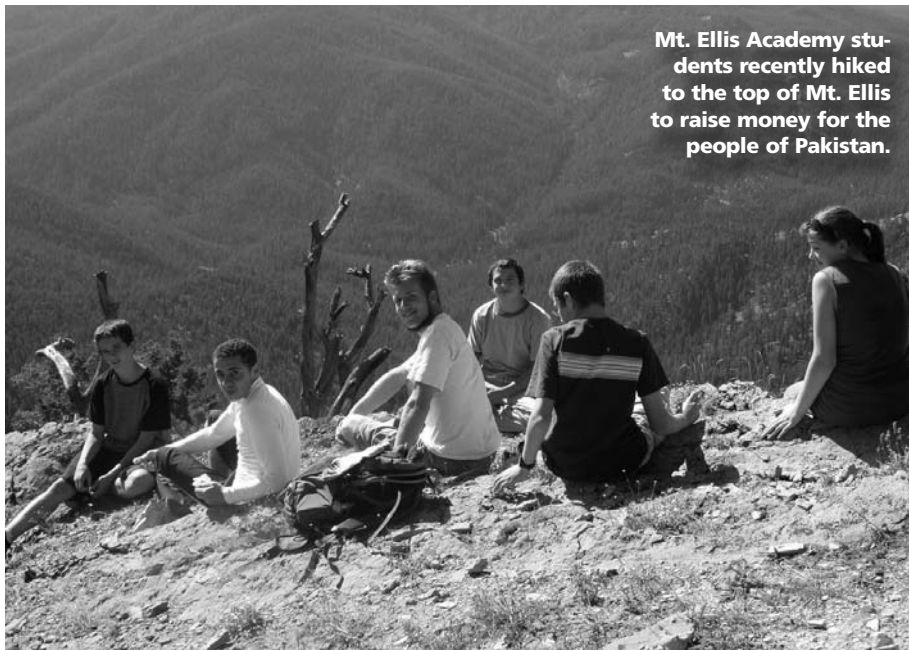
Our summertime staff put everything else aside and focused on getting the word out to our students, parents, and constituents. We asked them to vote and get everyone in their sphere of influence to do likewise. We developed a simple slogan, "SOS—Save our Sewer," that caught on very quickly.

Within three days we broke into the top 100 schools. At that point our local media became interested in the story and provided great coverage the rest of the way. There was a growing sense of excitement as we climbed the leader board. Our local community and public university got on board. Volunteers from all over the country handed out thousands of fliers. Many of our foreign alums worked very hard in their countries to get the word out, resulting in thousands of votes from Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Bahrain, Pakistan, Gaza, and China. Our students produced a 20-episode video series called "Sewage Watch 2010" that became somewhat of a YouTube sensation.

As momentum built there was a strong sense that something miraculous was happening. The whole thing was getting much bigger than we were, which was very humbling. We spent a lot of time praying as a school family. We wanted to focus on the blessings we had already received and not have our gratitude hinge on whether we received the grant or not. Even when we broke into the top 20 schools with two weeks to go, we knew we would need a massive infusion of votes to stay there. We were hoping and praying that the Adventist Church in North America would notice



Mount Ellis Academy staff Kevin Emmerson and Darren Wilkins celebrate the arrival of the \$500,000 Kohl's Cares check.



Mt. Ellis Academy students recently hiked to the top of Mt. Ellis to raise money for the people of Pakistan.

that something very special was happening for its academy in Montana. To win a grant we would need our sister schools, churches, and institutions behind us.

Just when it seemed that we had plateaued and were beginning to drop out of contention, our North American Division Leadership sent out communications to every church, school, and university strongly urging them to rally as a family behind our school. To us it was a gift from heaven. It turned the tide at a critical juncture. During the last week we received a deluge of votes. E-mails and phone calls rolled in from around the country and around the world. They were messages of support and excitement. We weren't able to breathe easily until the last hours of voting. In those last hours the votes rolled in by the thousands, and when voting closed Mt. Ellis Academy had 144,006 votes.

After a lengthy process of vote validation it was determined that our school finished ninth out of all the schools in the nation for votes. We have received the check for \$500,000, and we'll begin work on our new sewer system in the spring.

Q: *This contest saw an unprecedented cooperation among Adventists from the North American Division, and indeed, from around the world to propel Mt. Ellis Academy to the win. What does it mean to you and to the academy to be the center of all that?*

A: I can tell you that our whole school community is still pinching itself. We feel so grateful and blessed.

Honestly, in the aftermath of the contest there was very little talk of the grant itself. The only thing on our minds was the unprecedented unity that swept over our church. The fact that this school that we love so much was the object of that unity is almost too much for us to wrap our minds around. When I step back and look at it objectively I think there are big lessons for all of us to learn. Our campus pastor, Barry Curtis, may have said it best. Immediately after voting ended, he posted this simple question on his Facebook page: "What can we agree on next?" In a time when agreement

among believers seems elusive, this seems to me to be a shining example of the power of unity.

Q: *The \$500,000 Mt. Ellis won in the contest will go toward renovating the school's septic system. Now that you have won the money, what's next?*

A: We have a long-range campus master plan to renew a very old campus and make it viable for the future. Three years ago we completed phase one with the construction of a new dining hall. New water/sewer infrastructure is the next phase. We're now blessed to be able to focus our future fund-raising on excellent programming for students, ministries, and above-ground structures. Future construction will include a new church and administration building.

Q: *This contest also highlighted the challenges facing Adventist academies. During this economic downturn, and with enrollment numbers flagging for many schools, paying for infrastructure upgrades and operation costs is becoming tougher. How do Adventist schools remain financially viable under these circumstances?*

A: That is a question that defies easy answers. The bottom line is our schools will be around for as long as we value them. If parents, conference administrators, people in the pew want them, they will be there. We have difficult demographics (a graying church), tough economics, and parent ambivalence working against us. I'm not ready

to throw in the towel, though. I'm a huge believer in our schools, and I think they're worth fighting for. In our particular situation that means doing everything we can to become leaner and more excellent at the same time. For us that has meant upgrading and downsizing our dormitory operation. We've worked hard to increase our day and foreign student numbers. We've also established a niche: this is the place to come if you want a college prep education with an outdoor adventure emphasis. Another important element has been a total commitment to a philanthropy program. We've done our best to set the academic bar very high. Most importantly there is no replacement for the combination of fervent prayer and hard work. We need miracles to operate every year. We pray for them and then watch for open doors.

Q: *With the price tag on Adventist education making it seem cost prohibitive for many families, how does a boarding academy like Mt. Ellis continue to attract students and quality educators?*

A: First of all, boarding school is not cost prohibitive. It does require sacrifice on the part of parents and students. It is not always easy to convince a high school student that it would be better to spend his/her summer earnings on academy tuition than on a car. I can't think of a single case where we haven't worked things out for a kid who was willing to work and a parent who was willing to make sacrifices commensurate with his/her economic situation. Our development program raises over \$100,000 a year in student aid. This is my message to parents: don't be frightened off by the sticker price. Make that phone call to the academy of your choice. You'll be surprised at how doable it is.

As for attracting quality educators, I've been very blessed. I never had a shortage of excellent applicants for teaching positions. Mt. Ellis may be small, but it is located in a spectacular place with tremendous outdoor recreation. The place sells itself and attracts exactly the kind of people we need for our outdoor adventure emphasis. We're currently in our fifth year of zero turnover in our teaching staff.

Q: *The North American Division recently said on Facebook, "The future of our church rests in Adventist education." If that is the case, what does the future of the Church look like? What is your assessment of the church present and future in light of Adventist education?*

A: That is a very good question. What we do know empirically from the *Value Genesis* and *Cognitive Genesis* studies is that students are more likely to excel academically and remain in the church as adults when they attend our schools. Those are both good things. Frankly, the future church will be determined by the people sitting in the pews and that will be determined by both education and generational dynamics. Young people have always changed the church as much as it has changed them. I believe that the role of Adventist schools is first and foremost to introduce kids to Jesus, not to perpetuate an institution. Our school's vision statement is, "To Follow the Lamb Wherever He Goes." That phrase is the primary descriptor of the 144,000 in Revelation and is at the core of Adventist belief. You can't follow something that is standing still. If we can help students to orient their lives around following the Lamb, I really don't need to worry about the future.

Q: *If there are changes that need to be made in Adventist education at the academy level, what near-term or long-term changes might you call for?*

A: Well, every school has a different set of circumstances, so I hesitate to generalize. I will say this. We could fill every desk in every SDA school in North America with children of immigrant families who can't afford to pay for private school. If we really want our schools to have an impact on the next generation and on the future of the church, we need to figure out how to get those kids in our schools.

Q: *Concerning your personal involvement in education, where do you find your Zen—your impetus—to do what you do?*

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North view of Mt. Ellis Academy campus

A: I find it where I am. I am often asked why I've stayed nine years at such a small school. I just love the place. I love the quality of relationships in a small faculty team that works together to do a whole lot with very little. I love watching kids snorkel in high mountain streams to observe trout habitat. I love having students in my living room studying for a test. I love being a place where everyone is crazy. Crazy enough to try things like Kohl's Cares [contest] and do it heart and soul. Most of all I love being in a place I know God called me to.

Q: *Looking forward, what do you see as the continuing role of Adventist Christian education? How is Mt. Ellis taking part?*

A: Adventist schools are part of the ministry of the church, and, as such, their primary role is to build the kingdom in the lives of young people. This is not about recruiting foot soldiers for the kingdom, but rather helping the kingdom find a home in individual hearts. The other primary function of Adventist schools, in my view, is the equipping of future leaders of the church. I believe this is happening in fantastic ways. When I compare the students in our schools right now with my generation that passed through in the 1980s, I feel strongly that we've come a long way in terms of discipling students and equipping leaders. I'm very optimistic about the future based on the students I see. I am often disappointed by the apathy in the North American church toward our schools just at the time when I believe they are doing their best work.

I also hope that our Kohl's Cares effort and the vast support it received awakened new energy and commitment to all of our sister schools around the country.

Finally, I want to say, "Thank you, thank you," to everyone who worked so passionately for our school during the Kohl's Cares Campaign. The journey was better than the destination. It bonded the school to its local community, Adventist constituency, and alumni. It energized our faculty and students. I hope that it also provided some inspiration for people to work passionately for their own local schools. If our school could pack a little snowball and start an avalanche, so can yours. You can make your school great. ■

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What became clear in listening to him is that 'Umayri, a relatively small site without the grandeur of the Roman city of Jarash or of the great temple in Petra, nevertheless is significant to Jordan because of the domestic architecture—the best preserved four-room house in the whole of the Levant—and because of what it reveals of the Bronze and Iron Ages in Jordan, eras that are not as well represented as the later Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. What is revealed at 'Umayri, especially during the late thirteenth century BC, becomes an important chapter in the narrative of ancient life in Jordan.

Canty Wang, recent La Sierra graduate, put what we do this way: "We are the garbage cleaners of ancient history. The pieces one finds connect people of today with people of the past. This process of connection broadens our human understanding. Today most of us are focused on the present and the future—our jobs and what we will do or accomplish. It becomes important then to understand ourselves backwards through time" (Fig. 13: *Canty Wang at her sift*, page 41).

The time spent on the dig becomes an experience like no other—rising at 4:15 am, the living conditions, the constant digging, the short showers, the routine day after day—it's exhausting, but, yes, a big part of the experience is finding things. Excitement comes after a lot of hard work, when a door to a small shrine, a seal, or even the Mother of all Grinding Stones emerges from the dirt (Fig. 14: *Large Grinding stone in House*, page 40). Indeed, the thrill of holding a seal impression with a finger print of some person alive here thousands of years ago, or to find a hearth inside a home—the ashes still there of a distant fire where someone, a mother say in 1200 BC, bent over a fire to make food for her family—is hard to quantify (Fig. 15: *Fireplace in house*, page 39). In archaeology we seek such moments again and again. That which is lost is found and made real again. It's why we dig dirt.

We'll be back next season on the tell, *insha 'allab!* ■

References

1. Arabic for, "Hopefully, if God wills."

John McDowell is the Director of the Honors Program and Professor of English at Pacific Union College. He has wide ranging interests—from art to archaeology. At 'Umayri he was the dig photographer. His art can be viewed at jmcowellart.com.