

ND or Bust:

IS LAS VEGAS ABOUT TO GAMBLE ON NORTH DAKOTA?

By Jason Spiess

Recently, through a series of serendipitous events, I ended up sharing a plate of egg rolls at Archie's Thai in Las Vegas with a young man looking to turn his life around via the Bakken oilfields. The young man is labeled an at-risk young adult and is one of Chad Taylor's protégés who is at a crossroads in life. His latest crossroad is a roommate who may have started using drugs again.

Now, the roommate using again is only the start of the downward spiral. Signs of coming and going at weird hours and sporadic behavioral changes were enough to get the young man's suspicion perked. However, when his money started missing, it was time to reconsider life's path. The roommate's decisions had already started encroaching and disrupting this young man's path to a life of sobriety and a second chance.

RESISTING TEMPTATION

Living in Las Vegas carries its own vein of temptations. Reigning in the impulses is where Chad Taylor and the Mentor

program, run by The Taylor Foundation, come into the picture for Las Vegas' at-risk youth. Taylor started his non-profit several years ago after receiving second and third chances from some of the top business players in Las Vegas, including Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.

"I made some bad, make-quick-money style decisions in my 20s that landed me in jail," says Taylor. "After years of being honest with everyone I work with and being accountable with my past, I was given another shot to create a career and a better life for my family. Now, I am able to couple my second chance with a passion for mentoring young adults who want a future with accountability and drive."

Mentor is an arm of The Taylor Foundation, a Nevada-based non-profit dedicated to working with at-risk youth. Currently Las Vegas has the highest dropout rate in the United States, according to a recent



study conducted by America's Promise Alliance, Alliance for Excellent Education, Civic Enterprises and Everyone Graduates Center. Additionally, CNNMoney ranked Las Vegas as the worst economy among all United States cities since 2007. Now, the city faces the issue of 20,000 high school graduates annually with no jobs available in Clark County.

"There is a major problem in Las Vegas," says Taylor. "There are 20,000 kids graduating high school with no jobs for

them. Then there are college students graduating and no jobs for them, only they now have \$100,000 of debt in America's playground. Odds are certainly not in their favor."

The issue Taylor is referring to is common knowledge to the locals. In fact, many parents and counselors are even suggesting North Dakota over a four year college or the army until the Las Vegas economy rebounds.

"The recent economic data released by the state shows the economy is down 10 percent since 2007," says Taylor. "Virtually every industry went down. There is some new growth starting in certain areas, but we are not even close to replacing what was lost. The best case scenarios forecast late-2016 for a pre-2007 economy."

TAKING A GAMBLE

Swapping the sun and palm trees for snow and wind has become a legitimate conversation at dinner tables for many young adults in Las Vegas. And the question becomes quite simple—whether to go to college, go into the military or go to the Bakken.

"Honestly, the conversations are happening with my at-risks kids, at my wife's hair salon, my daughter's soccer games and just about anywhere else parents gather," says Taylor. "North Dakota is in the news so much that it doesn't take much for someone to throw out North Dakota as an option for a kid's future."

Taylor says that a few years ago, a North Dakota suggestion would have gotten laughs and chuckles. But today it is taken seriously for many reasons. In fact, a few of Taylor's protégés know people currently working in the oil patch and the reviews have been positive.

"Do you want to go to college for four years, rack up \$50-100,000 in debt and spend a year or two looking for a job?" Taylor asks. "Or do you want to go out to the oilfields for a couple years, learn a trade, make some cash and, more importantly, save some cash. Instead of being \$50,000 in debt, jobless, with a college degree, you can have an education and the cash to start a business."

PLAYING YOUR CARDS

Andy Peterson, president and CEO of the Greater North Dakota Chamber can see why the 39th state is part of the kitchen table conversations for today's graduates.

"The Bakken is a ripe ground for that kind of activity," Peterson says. "So if you're in Las Vegas and you're graduating



Sean Hannity at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference in Bismarck, ND, this May. Photos by Paul Flessland/Crude Life Photography.

A LiUNA worker mans the grill at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference.





The LiUNA Semi Truck on-location at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference.

from high school or tech school or you have a trade behind you, maybe you don't have a four year degree," says Peterson. "North Dakota is the place to be, because you can come here and make \$100,000 easily, \$125,000 is not out of the question."

Peterson says housing is something that needs to be addressed. However, solutions are more readily available now than ever in the Bakken. According to Peterson, working with the agencies and departments set up to assist with housing can speed up any move to the Bakken and make a transition into the Bakken a reality.

"I think North Dakota is the best place for those kids in Las Vegas right now," says Peterson. "North Dakota is the land of milk and honey and we can make it rain for those folks."

Brian Lash, CEO and founder of Target Logistics, also understands why people in Las Vegas are having these conversations about their youth.

"I think parents are recommending their kids go to the oil patch not so much for the regiment, but the economic gain," says Lash. "I have friends and friends' children who have come out here [to the Bakken] to work. Some, for my company; some, for others."

...economically speaking, what happens in Las Vegas apparently happens elsewhere, too.

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Lash continues his discussion on impromptu parenting with an anecdotal scenario that symbolizes the bottom line in just about every parent facing this jobless future.

“Imagine you’re 18 years old and you come here with a five year plan,” Lash says. “After five years you are going to have a quarter of a million dollars in the bank and you are going to go home and buy a Subway franchise and now you have the American dream. You are your own businessman at age 23 with no debt.”

Lash continued saying the army and regimen angle is a valid one too, and anyone who is clean and looking to stay clean has a real shot at turning their life around.

“If you try to come into our facility after you’ve been drinking, you get locked down,” Lash says. “You make noise after 10 p.m., you get thrown out. If you try

to bring drugs or alcohol into our facility, we notify your employer and you will lose your job and your bed. It’s strict, but it works. Are we stricter than the army? I don’t think so, but in a lot of ways we are similar.”

For Lash, noticing the army comparison within his own company, Target Logistics, is quite easy since one in every four employees are ex-military. Lash added that the brotherhood developed in the oilfields and the military is something that is real and embraced by the workers. Naomi and Ronnie Thomas of Capital Lodge see the brotherhood within the walls of their facilities and note the average roughnecks aren’t who they used to be.

“The reputation of the oil workers has changed dramatically, and this is a new age,” Ronnie Thomas says. “The people who are coming up here are skilled or are good people not getting into trouble. Those analogies are old and from the past, this is a new age of oil field workers. These guys work hard, 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They put in the time and effort to support their families and that’s why they are here.”

The days of slinging chains and drinking until they sleep or pass out has been

replaced by curfews, chef-prepared meals, high-tech gadgets and sober workers.

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS, HAPPENS ELSEWHERE

Las Vegas is not the only community at an economic crossroads, according to Cory Bryson, business representative for Labors 563 of LiUNA. Bryson oversees LiUNA North Dakota and, economically speaking, what happens in Las Vegas apparently happens elsewhere, too.

“We’ve got quite a few from Las Vegas already,” Bryson says. “We have people from all over, all 50 states I believe. We’ve even got some from different countries.”

LiUNA North Dakota knows about diversity of workers and trades. As a provider of skilled construction laborers on pipelines, power plants, highway projects and other construction projects in the Bakken oilfields, Bryson is constantly looking for welders, plumbers and other technical trades people.

“We have 118 contractors we work with in North Dakota,” Bryson says. “It’s an earn-while-you-learn process. Some of the largest and most complex projects ever undertaken in North Dakota were completed with the help of LiUNA members. We work hard every day so construction

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When asked about drug testing and substance abuse policies at LiUNA, Bryson was quick to answer.

“We drug test, as do 99 percent of the employers,” Bryson says. “That is an area we take very serious as it falls in personal and public safety.”

Almost acting like a funnel for young adults looking to work in the Bakken, LiUNA North Dakota can become a turn-key solution for many Bakken hopefuls by providing “workforce solutions, housing, health and retirement benefit programs and a world-class, state of the art, 44,000 square foot skills and safety training facility.” Bryson adds that with future projects like the Keystone XL, Sandpiper and new LNG export terminals, they anticipate staying busy in the Bakken.

“It’s really the best for everyone,” Bryson says. “If they like North Dakota they can stay and plant roots. If they move home after a couple years they take that trade with them and their local community will benefit. They have options, opportunity and income.”

GETTING BACK TO WORK

National media personality and Fox News talk show host Sean Hannity recently spoke at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference in Bismarck, ND about “getting America back to work.” After his presentation, Hannity was asked about the Las Vegas trend and his view on kids considering bucking the tradition of a four year degree or the military.

“I wouldn’t be the person I am if I didn’t spend years washing dishes, cooking, waiting tables, busing tables, tending bar, painting homes, hanging wallpaper, laying tiles, framing houses, roofing and doing reconstruction,” says Hannity. “You know what, I know what it is like to have \$200 in the bank, for years; this is decades of my life. People think, ‘Oh, Hannity, you’re a radio and TV guy—you must be rich.’ Well, whatever money I have, it came later in life and the best thing I ever did was get my hands dirty and go to work. It leaves such an impression on you. If my son wants to go to work and get his hands dirty, I’m all for it.”

Hannity was also quick to point out that living your dream and making money do not always happen simultaneously, so you have to be patient and continue to work hard until it clicks.

“My first job in radio paid me \$19,000 a year and I moved to Huntsville, Alabama,” says Hannity. “That’s the other thing: I worked my way up in media. Right from the bottom. For free to \$19,000 a year, \$40,000 a year. I moved to states where I didn’t know a single soul. And then I was very blessed and lucky. I would like to say it is talent, but it’s not.”

FINDING OPPORTUNITY

Reading between the lines, Hannity basically says you must go where the opportunities are. At one time, people came to Ellis Island to find opportunity. For this generation of young Americans, opportunity is in the oilfields of North Dakota. Hannity’s climb to his personal American Dream is just one example of the many who have overcome societal pressures, financial strains and plain old loneliness.

Hearing stories of people overcoming the odds in order to present a path of perseverance in their life is a direction Taylor can get behind. The most difficult part of Taylor’s work with Mentor is getting the kids to believe in themselves so others will have the chance, too.

“We have a saying at Mentor,” Taylor says. “It is not our job to lead anyone in any one direction, but to show them what the world has to offer and let them make the decisions for themselves.”

Taylor’s advice couldn’t come at a better time as high school graduates across the country are starting to realize more and more that the promise of a better future isn’t tomorrow, but rather right now. In North Dakota. 

GET TO KNOW OUR EXPERTS

Jason Spiess is an award-winning journalist, talk show host, publisher and executive producer. Spiess has worked in the radio and print industry for over 25 years. For all but three years of his professional experience, Spiess was involved in the overall operations of the business as a principal partner. Spiess is a North Dakota native, Fargo North alumni and graduate of North Dakota State University.

Spiess began covering the Bakken full-time in March 2012 by living and operating his business in a 1976 Winnebago. Currently, *Building the Bakken* Radio is carried by 12 radio stations across four states and is available on iTunes. *Building the Bakken* articles and columns are regularly featured in newspapers, magazines, industry periodicals and online news sites. For more information on Spiess, email jason@buildingthebakken.com or visit www.buildingthebakken.com.