

SLEEPY EYE, Minn. Jan 2004 – Four years after the introduction of Junior Achievement (JA) in Sleepy Eye, Minn., the program is now in full swing. Dick Nesvold, President of St. Marys Federal Credit Union (SMFCU) in Sleepy Eye, is a member of the JA board in neighboring New Ulm. Seven SMFCU staff members volunteer their time to work with local schools, teaching kids in kindergarten through sixth grade the basics of community, business and economics.

Junior Achievement is a national program involving volunteers from local communities charged with inspiring kids to learn the economics of life through free enterprise education. This program enables business professionals to share their experiences with students to show them what it takes to be successful.

Worldwide, JA reaches out to four million students each year, including local chapters in Bemidji, Brainerd, Crookston, Duluth, Mankato, Rochester, St. Cloud, Thief River Falls, New Ulm and the Twin Cities. Currently 107 classes are being offered in Sleepy Eye and New Ulm, with the assistance of 92 volunteers.

Nesvold spends a majority of his JA volunteer time with sixth grade classes in Sleepy Eye. He primarily focuses on world trade, teaching about transportation, natural resources and currency.

“It’s fun to see the kids and to help build awareness about community businesses and the economic structure of various countries. It’s important for youth to have an understanding of how the economic world works,” Nesvold said. “Plus, it’s a way of getting exposure in the community, so it’s a benefit to the credit union as well.”

Over the past four years, the SMFCU volunteers have taught one-hour lessons throughout the school year on the subjects of ourselves, our families, our community, our city, our region, our nation and our world.

In addition to the credit union, New Ulm and Sleepy Eye’s 92 volunteers come from businesses large and small, including Kraft, 3M and Del Monte, as well as the local insurance company, funeral home and bank.

“Just having a presence in the classroom promotes credit unions a lot, even though we’re not dealing directly with finances or talking about credit unions the whole time,” said Angie Pidde, JA volunteer and Compliance Officer at SMFCU. “It’s really neat when the kids come into the credit unions and they recognize you.

“The teachers appreciate it so much and they really recognize those businesses that get involved and take the time to come into the classroom,” Pidde added. “We really enjoy getting involved in activities that happen within our community that not only involve the credit union.”

As the JA program in Sleepy Eye continues to grow, the Sleepy Eye participants eventually hope to become self-sufficient enough to create their own chapter independent of New Ulm. But until that time, the cities will continue with their collaborative efforts to teach today’s youth about the ways of the world within and beyond their communities in southwest Minnesota.