

The Miracle School Reboots Adventist Education

In perhaps one of the most unlikely places, Adventist education is getting a reboot. A new school dedicated to following the blueprint — the foundational principles of the Adventist church — has sprung up almost overnight in a small southeastern Arizona town, grabbing the attention of everyone in the community.

Cochise Seventh-day Adventist Christian School, known to local residents as “The Miracle School” because of its unprecedented creation and rapid growth, is turning the heads of many in churches throughout the Arizona Conference, and endeavoring to bring Adventist education back to the forefront in the lives of local children.

The effort involved three churches and began with a mere idea. While speaking with Susan Suntag, the head teacher at an Adventist school in Tucson, superintendent of education Gus Martin casually suggested the idea of opening a K-8 school in Sierra Vista, a rural community of less than 45,000 near where she planned to retire in 2015. She mentioned the idea to her husband, Arnie, who was in the process of setting up their new home. A spark was kindled. Neither the Suntags, Martin, nor anyone else in the Arizona Conference could have anticipated the events that would follow.

“We were going to retire after years of ministry efforts,” said Arnie, head elder of the



Today, Cochise SDA Christian School is an example of a faith-based effort that has inspired an entire community.

Bisbee church. “The idea of starting a school in such a small rural community at first seemed implausible. When I was impressed through prayer that it had to be done, my initial reaction was, quite honestly, ‘Please Lord, not that!’ I knew how difficult it would be to undertake such an effort, particularly at a time when many of our schools are closing.”

As he pondered the idea, Suntag encountered Phil and Audine Dieter, members of the Bisbee church. The chemistry was just right for the next step in what would soon become a major undertaking. “We were excited about the prospect of bringing Adventist education to our community,” said

Audine, school board chair. “The idea came at just the right time for us.”

The Dieters suggested using the Bisbee church fellowship hall to get the school started. With space and funding options questionable and the new school year less than three months away, the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Undaunted by the obvious, Suntag began to network with local churches. “Much to my chagrin, the feedback was that they tried to do it before and failed,” said Suntag. “Ironically, the more discouraging the responses, the harder I tried.”

Instead of relying on encouragement, they chose a name for the school and printed enrollment applications.

Suntag and the Dieters then began recruiting students. “It seemed unlikely that anyone would enroll in a school that scarcely existed on paper,” said Suntag. “Surprisingly, within less than three weeks, 20 students had enrolled, including two from a town nearly 70 miles away.”

It quickly became apparent that the school could reach an entire county. Considering the



Bisbee Mayor Ron Oertle cuts the ribbon at the school dedication, accompanied by Phil Dieter, left, and Gus Martin, right.



Students examine the earth-moving equipment during the groundbreaking for their new school.

space constraints at the Bisbee church, they needed a new building. On faith, the Dieters purchased land adjacent to the Bisbee church. “We had no idea at the time as to how large this project would become,” said Audine. “We just followed the path the Lord had carved out, and the doors kept opening.”

With a new building for the school on the horizon, funding became paramount. “That’s when something really amazing happened,” said Suntag. “Scholarship funds from third-party organizations that normally evaporate by that time of year were still available. We were able to acquire full scholarships for most of our students.”

As others began to catch the vision that had taken root, volunteers stepped forward. A school board was formed. Permits were acquired. Planning for the school’s future began. A search for a modular building uncovered an unlikely prospect — a former border patrol detention facility for sale at a low price. They bought it and began moving it to the newly acquired land. Unbeknownst to those involved,

a million-dollar project that would awaken an entire community had begun.

The school board hired Suntag as principal/head teacher. “We were determined to develop a Bible-based curriculum with extensive hands-on activities, such as gardening and food preparation,” she said.

“We wanted to set ourselves apart from all other schools,” she said. “Following the blueprint and reaching the entire community was going to be our primary focus.”

As classes began with pioneer students in the Bisbee church fellowship hall, groundbreaking for the new building began. Everyone watched eagerly as sections of the modular were moved into place. A metamorphosis quickly began as the structure was renovated and expanded to become a modern school building with state-of-the-art classrooms.

The building design was the handiwork of Phil Dieter, who worked alongside the construction crew. The fast-moving project made a striking impression on the local community, where the landscape hardly

ever changes. Immediately catching the eye of passersby, inquiries about the school started and stories began to appear in local newspapers. Cochise SDA Christian School had been born.

It did not take long to realize that transportation for students posed a challenge in a county that covers more than 6,200 square miles. The Suntags had been using their own van to transport students until volunteers stepped in. But with the prospect of further expansion, they needed busses. The group prayed for an answer to the dilemma.

Within days, a local non-profit organization that had closed due to cuts in state funding donated shuttle buses and a van to the school. The vehicles were in excellent condition — one with only about 26,000 miles on the odometer.

“The Lord once again answered prayers and opened another door,” said Audine Dieter. “We were amazed at how quickly the problem was solved.”

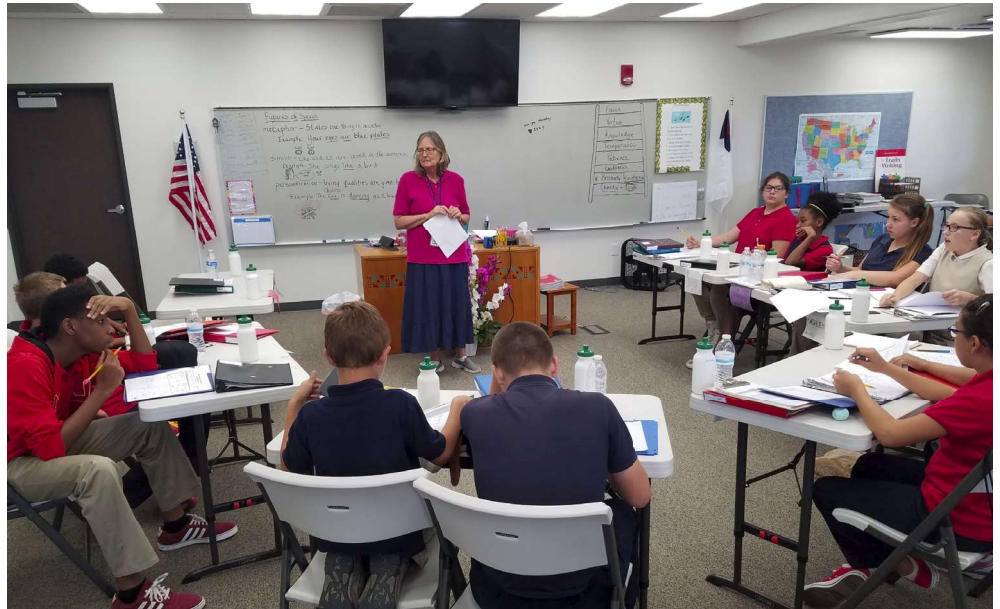
In May 2016, just a year after the school’s inception, three students graduated from

eighth grade. It was standing room only at the graduation ceremony in the Bisbee church that evening — the first time a crowd of that size occupied the church. The camaraderie of the families and staff was readily apparent to all attending, as the new school made its first major impression on a community that had watched it evolve in record time. The personal growth of each graduate was a testimony to the whirlwind effort that put this school on the map.

The new classroom building was completed in July 2016, just in time for the new school year. A dedication and ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on July 31, with guest speakers that included a county supervisor, the county sheriff, a representative for the congressional district and the mayor of Bisbee, who cut the ribbon. Arizona Conference Treasurer Reggie Leach and Gus Martin also addressed the large crowd.

“It was refreshing to see government leadership support our efforts and offer such earnest commentary about bringing back education the way it used to be,” said Arnie Suntag. “It was a rare event and perhaps the best opportunity we’ve ever had to let an entire community know who we are and that we are here to help.”

Cochise SDA Christian School began the 2016-17 school year with 22 students. The school does not plan to accept additional students until next year, when the new infrastructure is fully



Class begins in the Bisbee church fellowship hall.

deployed. The campus includes a multipurpose building to help support vocational programs such as woodworking and automotive, as well as a greenhouse, gardens, a field track, and a fully-equipped playground. The school also plans to have a television ministry.

What has happened in the little town of Bisbee in just over a year’s time may well represent a rebirth of Adventist education. The school’s founders believe the effort will be replicated throughout the conference. Calls are already coming in from other churches.

“We truly hope and pray the story of Cochise SDA Christian School will inspire others to do the same thing,” said Arnie Suntag. “There is not much time left to reach our children and to make a difference in our communities. We need Adventist education, and efforts like this one can only happen if people are willing to step out in faith.”

For more information about Cochise SDA Christian School, visit www.cochisesda.org.

Phil Draper



After a brief enrollment period, 12 students were registered, becoming the pioneers of the new school.