

Good things come in small packages. That's one of my wife's favorite sayings this time of year. I'll admit that I sometimes struggle to find something she will like for Christmas, so I have a go-to present – "something sparkly" as she calls it – jewelry. It's hard to go wrong there. It usually fits, it's personal, and she loves it. The girls' presents, on the other hand, are getting quite complicated.

I remember one year in particular. My Alayna was seven then and wanted a special stuffed animal. So I asked her, "How big do you want, like two or three feet?" She replied, "Can it be bigger?" "Four feet?" I asked. "Can it be bigger?" "Five feet?" "Can it be bigger!?!"

So I set out to find a big stuffed animal. I'll bet Santa uses EBay as well for hard to find items because it was there I located a six-foot teddy bear at a reasonable price. I had it shipped (it was made in that magical toy factory known as China) and thanks to package tracking I watched the elves move it through customs and then to Kansas.

When it finally arrived I was expecting a huge box of some kind. Instead, I received what looked like a plastic yellow rolled up sleeping bag. What a rip-off! Christmas is days away and my teddy bear was only about two-feet tall if this bag was any indication. Then I opened the bag.

Perhaps it would have been nice to put "Contents under pressure" in English on the outside because when I cut open the yellow bag the bear EXPLODED out! Ever see one of those emergency rafts open up? It was like that only white and fluffier. And after it finished expanding it was as advertised, a six-foot teddy bear.

Alayna was thrilled on Christmas morning! She dubbed him Giant and slept on him like a mattress that night. He is still in her room and occasionally wears some of my clothes on special occasions. I have to admit, he looks better in them than I do. Of course, he has more hair and less stuffing than I do.

This is the time of year that is not only a time of giving the perfect gift to your love ones, but also a time when many folks share their good fortunes with others. They give to causes near to their hearts because they want to make a difference in people's lives and make the world just a little better place. They give to treat and cure specific diseases, combat crime, assist people in poverty, help folks get a job, and to political causes to improve the country.

What if I told you that there was a single cause that can help with all of those items. There is - educational attainment.

Did you know that those with a completed college education live on the average six years longer than those without college? Did you know of those incarcerated right now, only 13% have ever attended any college classes at all? And that those with a degree make almost twice what those with just a high school education make? Would it surprise you to learn that the unemployment rate for those with a bachelor's degree is about half what it is for those with just a high school diploma?

The research on the positive societal and personal effects of educational attainment is overwhelming. Educated people live longer. They are much less likely to go to prison. Those with a degree are more

likely to find and keep a good paying job their whole lives. The children of educated people are much more likely to go to college, often breaking the cycle of generational poverty.

And, quite frankly, if a democracy is to be effective, it demands an educated electorate – voters who can think for themselves and see past political spin and propaganda to make their own decisions.

You give to education every year through your taxes. It pays off in so many ways, both through a better society and personally for those who receive the education. Speaking as one representative from one institution – Thank you. Thank you so much for what you give to make the world a better place through education.

But there are those who take this a step further and give to our scholarship funds. College is expensive to the individual. A few hundred dollars can really make a difference in the life of a student. Thanks to scholarships and grants, this semester 54% of our fulltime students who lived off campus paid nothing out of pocket to go to NCCC. Of those off-campus students who did have to pay some amount out of pocket, the average bill for the semester was \$1,062. Wow! That's pretty cheap to go to college. NCCC's low tuition combined with grants and your generous donations make that possible.

Our communities have been VERY generous supporting these students and making sure they can afford quality education. Many Neosho County residents have been very generous throughout the year giving to our various scholarship funds. And recently we had a record year at our Ottawa Campus Scholarship Gala – Thank you all so much! You are making a difference!

Scholarships are like Alayna's Giant. They come in small packages, but boy do they pay off big.

If you have any comments or questions please feel free to contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.

