

Suggested Headline – Frodo Lives

Often strange things are associated with Christmas. For instance, in England, it is not uncommon for folks to watch James Bond movies during the holidays. The vast majority of the 26 Bond movies were released at Christmas time and people there make 007 a part of their celebrations.

For me, this time of year makes me think of JRR Tolkien's Hobbit and Lord of the Rings. Those six films were released around Christmas too and I saw them all. What's more, once the movies came out on home video, during Christmas break, Jen and I would put the kids to bed and watch the Director's Cut of Lord of the Rings over the various nights of break. It has been watched over several nights, as it is over 11 hours long!

For those of you who have never read the books or seen the movies, the Lord of the Rings is about an evil force trying to take over the land. While the good people of Middle Earth attempt to hold off the army of darkness, a small hobbit named Frodo tries to sneak into the stronghold of the enemy. There Frodo attempts to destroy The One Ring that will end the power of the Dark Lord and save the world.

It's a wonderful rich adventure story full of kings, dwarves, elves, wizards, goblins, and orcs. The movies are told, as most movies are, in chronological order. The scenes switch back and forth from Gandalf and Strider fighting off the orcs, to Frodo and his servant Sam moving the ring closer to Mount Doom and salvation through the ring's destruction.

However, the books are written differently. They are written in separate stories. The reader first reads of the attempted takeover of the land by the bad guys from beginning until near the end, then Tolkien takes us back in time and tells us what Frodo and Sam were doing. We as readers are just like Gandalf and Strider. We don't know if Frodo is alive or dead, if all this effort to hold back the tide of evil is in vain or not.

At one point in the book, many have given up hope and that all is lost as an overwhelming force is attacking. Surely Frodo is dead and we are just delaying the inevitable. But Gandalf, the wizard, tells the others that we must believe that Frodo lives. That hope is alive and that one day we will defeat evil.

In the 1960s and 1970s the phrase, "Frodo Lives!" was a bit of a motto for young people who believed they would overcome the system of past eventually. They had to keep working towards a better future and, most importantly, have faith that in the end good would prevail. "Frodo Lives" was scrolled over subways in New York. T-shirts and buttons proclaimed it as well.

So what, if anything, does this have to do with Neosho County Community College?

Every day we help students get an education, gain workplace skills and become better citizens and potential employees. The employees of the College truly care for our students, many of whom are in a battle with generational poverty. We work tirelessly against ignorance and poverty in the midst of sometimes frustrating state and federal bureaucracy, budget cuts, and other setbacks.

We help thousands of students every year, but we lose some along the way. Some struggle with college classes or their own personal life gets in the way with their studies. Looming over many of them, like the Eye of Sauron, is test anxiety, or math phobia, or family responsibilities, or generational poverty or a host of other enemies.

Despite our best efforts, I am not blind to the truth. I see the census data and the labor department statistics. For 80 years the six past presidents of NCCC and I have worked with our respective employees and partners to eliminate poverty.

Yet the poverty rate does not seem to budge much, it improves but then gets worse again. Nearly 21% of Neosho and 13% of Franklin County are currently under the poverty level according to the US Census Bureau.

We launch new workforce programs and set records in the state for completion rates and success indexes. NCCC scores in the 97th percentile IN THE NATION for completers who successfully transfer on to university. We were tops in the state in first year salary for our graduates.

But high unemployment in parts of our service area lingers.

It's enough for one to start thinking that Frodo is dead. Our effort to hold back the tide is just not having an impact and it is hopeless.

And then hope is restored.

I recently attended GED graduation at the Ottawa campus. You may not know that NCCC runs one of the biggest GED programs in the State where folks can earn their State of Kansas high school diploma by studying for and passing the GED test. It's a rather informal ceremony but similar to other cap and gown events I attend.

GED students seem to have a greater number of personal struggles to overcome than most students. They sometimes battle poverty, or math phobia, or legal issues, or crisis while preparing for the test. They may not have succeeded in traditional high school, but with us they got a second chance and they took it.

At graduation one student broke into tears as she crossed the auditorium to take her diploma from our Board of Trustees Chair David Peter. Another asked to speak to the crowd and told of how he struggled but that our staff helped along the way so that he was able to graduate. Still others were double graduates, getting their GED and earning certificates in welding and certified nursing assistant at the same time. To me these few students represented the hundreds that graduate each year that have personally defeated poverty and ignorance. As far as these graduates go we were winning the war. NCCC was making a difference one student at a time.

It is in our strategic plan to combat poverty in our service area. It's something that is tied to everything we do, including my contract as President. I report to the Board every year on our plan and how the war

goes. I see the difference we are making in students' lives and in our community. I know our work is not an exercise in futility, it is providing hope for those who are willing to work for it.

Will we completely end poverty and ignorance in our service area? I have to believe that one day we will. The war is worth fighting and in the end, for the graduates of Neosho County Community College, we did win. Each semester when new students arrive it is our chance to strike a blow for our community and our students. The war against poverty rages on.

Frodo lives.