

## Amtrak expresses thanks for emergency response

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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By Jason Frederick

Benkelman Post

Emergency responders, Dundy County Stratton school and Benkelman city Administrators, Amtrak and Burlington Northern Santa Fe train officials filled the high school gym in Benkelman last Tuesday, Nov. 8.

Many of the same people were in the gym at times on Aug. 26, tending to the needs of train passengers following the Amtrak train derailment, west of Benkelman.

Amtrak and Burlington Northern Santa Fe officials returned to Benkelman last week to tell the community thanks for its response to the derailment emergency and coming to the rescue of nearly 200 train passengers and crew members.

To show their gratitude, Amtrak provided lunch and presented the school, the city of Benkelman and local emergency responders with special plaques.

Derrick James, an Amtrak official from Chicago, was in Hastings at the time of the Aug. 26 accident. His company sent him to Benkelman to help shortly after the accident happened.

James was the first Amtrak official to address those in attendance at the luncheon last Tuesday.

“When I got here I was just overwhelmed and so touched by the response and the kindness and the care that you showed us, I wanted to make sure that my organization reached our hands out to thank you for what you did for us that day,” he said.

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James recognized many local residents by name for their efforts.

“Just a few of the names of the folks that really touched us that day and lent their hand and sort of brought the human community together,” said James.

“I am from a very big city and you can kind of get cynical sometimes, so thank you so much for how you lent your hand out to the Amtrak family that day,” he said.

Joy Smith of Chicago, Amtrak’s superintendent of passenger services, said that she had been to many accident sites in her 35 years working with Amtrak, but has never seen a city respond so quickly.

“It was like you were there the moment it happened and went right into action,” said Smith. “That means a whole lot, not only to us that work for Amtrak but also the passengers that were riding the train.

“Our passengers come from all over the country and the world, and they are looking for good places to work, live and raise their children. I can tell you after Aug. 26, Benkelman is high on their list,” she said.

Jim Brzezinski heads up what Amtrak calls its “Go Team,” a response unit that Amtrak sends out to emergency situations.

“I was thinking about how responders are trained for these types of things and what I saw was, you didn’t need training for what I saw, what you saw was something that came from within, it came from the heart,” said Brzezinski.

“We did see you come together, there are probably people in this room that we did not get a chance to thank, we do thank you, we really, really want to thank you for what you did and how this community came together for our crew, our passengers and what you did on that day will

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never be forgotten," he said.

The Amtrak officials presented plaques to the city of Benkelman, the local emergency responders and the Dundy County Stratton School.

Benkelman Mayor Gary Clark, Benkelman Rural Fire Chief Relegene Zimbelman and DCS Superintendant Dallas Watkins accepted the honors for their respective entities.

Chief Zimbelman was one of the first to speak at the ceremony and he recapped how the response unfolded on Aug. 26. Zimbelman said the outpouring of support from the community and the area that day overwhelmed him. He said 21 other communities from Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska came to help.

"The community kind of stood still for a day, and they helped strangers they'd never seen and will never see again, but they all helped," Zimbelman said.

"You hope the people would come to your aid. They did. Out here, we all care about everybody else," he said.

In accepting the plaque on behalf of the city of Benkelman Clark said that he was overwhelmed by the positive words and comments made about Benkelman.

"You can't beat this place," said Mayor Clark. "Thank you Amtrak and thank you guys (Clark recognizing the local emergency responders), this is for you."

"It was a very proud day for our community and the region," said Dr. Dallas Watkins after accepting the plaque for the school.

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“I do want to compliment Amtrak and Burlington Northern for being good people to work with and being very professional and treating us as equals. I feel a lot of pride for the Dundy County area and the Benkelman community. I have been fortunate to be involved with things statewide and I have heard a lot about this and it is very refreshing and overwhelming,” he said.

In closing the ceremony, Dr. Watkins asked James Murphy, an Amtrak crew member, to come up to the microphone.

“That last time I saw you, you were on the stage,” said Dr. Watkins to Murphy. “Whether it was the Amish, the Japanese, the family with the young children, people from across the United States and we have had letters from New York and California both and then the Midwest, thanking us.

“But the one moment I could not believe, and it was so good, was when you played the guitar and one of the passengers sang to us. We have to have an encore.”

Dr. Watkins said that after being in the gym for more than six hours on Aug. 26 the 200 passengers and school employees were singing along with Murphy while he played in the gym.

“We have to have one more round of that,” said Watkins.

The school’s music department provided a guitar. Murphy, with the help of Benkelman EMT Tony Ham and the crowd, closed out last Tuesday’s ceremony by playing and singing “Folsom Prison Blues.”

Emergency responders from Imperial and Chase County were part of the area response teams in Benkelman to help after the derailment.