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FEATURED

Cam-plex executive director brings ag, arts backgrounds to the table

By JONATHAN GALLARDO * News Record Writer jgallardo@gillette newsrecord.net
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Aaron Lyles, pictured Wednesday at the Heritage Center Theater, is the new executive director of Cam-plex in Gillette.
News Record Photo/Ed Glazar

The way Aaron Lyles sees it, Cam-plex was a perfect fit.

The new executive director of Cam-plex, Lyles grew up in a ranching family in Montana about four and a half hours from Gillette. He was the sixth of 11 children, and horses and rodeo were a big part of his life.

But at 4-foot-11 and 97 pounds his senior year, competing in rodeo was never in the cards for Lyles. Instead, his passion was in the arts, particularly music. Instead of roping or riding, Lyles was singing in the state choir and national FFA choir.

As executive director of Cam-plex, Lyles gets to combine those two areas of his life.

“I’m certainly in the honeymoon phase and everything feels like a perfect fit,” he said.

Lyles has been on the job for a few months now. He comes to Cam-plex at an important juncture. The events center’s governing board, the Campbell County Public Land Board, is going through a master planning process to shape the future of the facility.

“Any time you take a job of this magnitude, you’d be a fool not to question it at times, in terms of ‘what am I getting myself into?’” he said.

He said being part of this process has been valuable because he’s learning about the history of Cam-plex while also getting to be part of its future.

He recognizes there are a lot of challenges ahead of Cam-plex, but he sees it as a chance to do something great.

“You’re not just walking in and inheriting all the headaches,” he said.

“You’re walking into an opportunity where you get to collaborate with the community and talk about what the community wants to see in Cam-plex.”

When he first touched down in Gillette, “it felt like home,” he said.

“I grew up in a small town off I-90. Here I am in a much bigger small town off of I-90,” he said. “And seeing the investments the community has made into the quality of life here is really striking.”

Lyles attended Belmont University, where he got the chance to work in recording studios with artists ranging from Yo-Yo Ma to George Strait. He had aspirations to work in the music industry. But he learned quickly that there isn't a lot of money to be had in the industry unless you're a producer.

“My wife and I had a conversation one day that we wanted to get a house. That meant I had to get a real job,” he said.

He ended up getting “a real job” with the Boy Scouts of America. It was here that he learned how to sit in board meetings and ask people for money.

He moved back to Montana, where the Boy Scouts weren't as active as they were in Tennessee. After working with nonprofit boards around the state, an opportunity came up at the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Most recently, he was the general manager for a construction firm in Colorado. That's when he saw an opening for a unique position in Gillette, Wyoming that would allow him to use his background in the Western way of life, as well as his passion for the arts.

“It was just really this beautiful dovetail,” he said. “Where else is there going to be an opportunity where I can satisfy my passion for the arts and also still be able to wear my Stetson on a day to day basis?”

“I'm shocked every day at what our staff gets accomplished,” he said. “The frontline level, the custodians and event techs, they're making amazing contributions.”

He's asked employees to engage the community and ask residents what type of events they want to see. Cam-plex's survey system is also being redesigned to get more feedback on past events and input on future events.

“Transparency and communication are going to take us a really long way,” he said.

Finding stability

Lyles is aware of the “revolving door” situation that the position’s been in for the last several years. He is the fifth person to head up Cam-plex in the last 11 years. Dan Barks was the Cam-plex GM for 21 years before retiring in 2012. Barks was followed by three other GMs, all of whom lasted no more than a few years.

In total, the land board has spent about two years out of the last 10 searching for a general manager or executive director.

“There hasn’t been a lot of consistent leadership out here, simply by nature that there wasn’t anyone in the job for 20% of the time,” Lyles said.

He said Gillette and Cam-plex are not another stepping stone in his career path, but “a destination for our family.”

“So long as the land board will have me, my hope is to retire here,” he said.

Politics is a reality and just something that has to be worked around, Lyles said. With the city, county and the joint powers board, there are three groups that he has to work with. And that doesn’t include the fourth and largest group — the taxpayers of Campbell County — that has a stake in the events center.

It’s impossible to please everyone. Every decision Cam-plex makes will have its naysayers.

“My goal is to do it through a lens of respect and do it transparently so all sides understand how we came to a conclusion,” he said.

Some of Cam-plex's facilities have been neglected over the years, causing it to lose out on some events, Lyles said. The facility is "a gear in a very sophisticated network of economic drivers," and there must be a balance between serving the community and bringing in money.

He said it's important to continue to allow schools, nonprofit organizations and residents to use Cam-plex while finding "creative ways to find events that help our bottom line."

There's no answer to this yet, and that's part of what the master plan will address. But even when solutions are presented, it won't be an easy fix.

"There isn't some light switch I get to flip that says all of a sudden Cam-plex is paying for itself," he said.

It's very easy to get distracted by politics and lose sight of one's goals, he added.

"These GM jobs are, either you fall into them and work really hard to communicate and collaborate and efficiently organize outcomes, or you can get caught up in the political distractions and you fail to execute," he said.

There is a big need for improved communication, Lyles said. That includes information coming into Cam-plex, but also the information that Cam-plex is putting out there.

For example, the International Pathfinders Camporee is coming to Gillette in a year and a half. Many questions have been raised by elected officials and the public about this event, which will bring in 55,000 people to town for a week. It's natural for people to be concerned, Lyles said.

"We in the public generally tend to assume the worst when we don't have all the answers," he said. "In the event business, that's a problematic reality. Sometimes it takes time to secure the answers," he said. "And when you don't have those answers, people start to question the sanity of the decision."

With an event of this size, issues will come up, and it's Cam-plex's job to prepare for those, Lyles said. But whether it's the Camporee, a kids' rodeo or a nonprofit fundraiser, it's important to approach each event with the same state of mind.

“Simply having consistency in leadership, being respectful to others and understanding we're using public dollars, keeping all that in front of us is going to go a long way,” he said.

Jonathan Gallardo