by Jazz Clark

West Virginia University President Gordon Gee had a busy day on Wednesday, April 30. He exercised at the WVU recreation center, talked to lawyers in Morgantown, visited Potomac State University, saw the newly affiliated Potomac Valley hospital in Keyser, and ended his day by greeting Morgan County locals at Capecorn State Park.

“I want to spend time in every part of this fine state,” Gee remarked, already a few minutes into his 55-county tour. His tour is closely linked to the WVU Extension Service, which has satellite sites in every West Virginia county.

He said this won’t be a repeat of his tour to milk a cow in every county of Ohio. That lasted for exactly one county.

In addressing the crowd gathered Wednesday evening to honor WVU Extension Service, Gee said extension employees are making the lives of 1.8 million West Virginians better.

“We have the opportunity to attract people here and create a sense of community,” said Gee. “We have both a national responsibility and a local calling to help people come together.”

Steve Bonanno, Extension Service Director, said his favorite thing about extension is how much of a difference they make every day.

“The university is trying to provide solutions for communities, and really chart the course for a core of talented people,” said Bonanno. “For some people it’s a passion, and for some it’s a way of life.”

WVU was established by a land grant and receives federal dollars each year for the teaching of agriculture and the mechanical arts. The extension service began outreach in 1914 for educational offices across the state, resulting in the WVU Extension Service serving each county today.

One-on-one

President Gee has a wide smile, a quick style of speech, and a surprisingly genuine interest in people’s lives. To that point, talking one-on-one with the man felt like being interviewed.

Gee is a former 4-H leader who grew up in Utah. It’s no surprise Gee has an interest in the agricultural arts.

“My project was an ant colony, but the ants died. Maybe I wasn’t a very good leader,” he joked.

When asked about higher education, however, Gee proved serious on college life.

“I think it is absolutely imperative that young people go to college, and not necessarily WVU. Education is the backbone of our country,” he said. “Going away to college gives you opportunities you would never have had otherwise, and gives cultural exposure many West Virginia youth don’t have.”

He knows there are many college hopefuls living in rural communities much like Berkeley Springs. WVU and other schools designed to acclimate students to life in bigger places, as well as less intimidating campuses for new students.

President Gee has presided over WVU as acting President since the beginning of 2014, and also headed the University from 1981-1985. He was officially chosen to lead WVU in March.

Joy Lewis, left, Governor Earl Ray Tomblin’s Representative (left) shares a moment with WVU President Gordon Gee (middle) and Eric Lewis.

President Gordon Gee meets with WVU Extension Agent Denis Scott (right) and Morgan County Commission President Brad Close (left) at an April 30 reception. Scott worked in Morgan County until December 2013, before transferring to Morgantown.