

Event focuses on rural women's issues

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By Kimberly Kolden, The Daily Republic

The fourth annual Women in Blue Jeans conference kicked off Thursday evening at the Holiday Inn in Mitchell, giving about 300 rural women an opportunity to learn, network and eat a little chocolate.

"Our goal is to re-energize women," said conference committee member Diana Goldammer, of Mitchell. "One of the most common phrases I heard last year is 'this is my last escape before calving season.'"

The conference continues through Saturday and focuses on issues affecting women in rural America. Multiple days are necessary, Goldammer said, because arranging childcare for a one-hour clinic often isn't worth the trouble.

"We gear this toward women of rural America - you don't have to buy a new wardrobe to attend this event," Goldammer said. "We started to give women the opportunity to update themselves on grain marketing and crop insurance in an all-girl setting. What we found is that women wanted more basic information, but were afraid to ask. This is a forum just for women. We also added fun things that address other areas of women's lives."

The more light-hearted side of the event will feature comedians Judy Carter, as the keynote speaker, and Scott Novotny, as the closing speaker. The event began with a "Sweet South Dakota Expo," touted by Goldammer as "a great way for women to have fun, eat chocolate, mix and mingle, and visit home-based business, S.D. Tourism and non-profit organization booths."

"We've always promoted the fact that we have a lot of fun and chocolate at our events," Goldammer said.

According to Goldammer, attendance at the annual event continues to grow each year. The event usually draws a "strong 200," she said, but this year the event is expected to draw at least 287, plus additional walk-ins.

"We don't include in that our committee members and sponsors, so we're looking at another 40 people," she said. "We had over 50 hotel rooms reserved for Friday night alone."

The filled hotel rooms are welcome this time of year, according to Pam Van Dover, director of the Corn Palace Convention and Visitors Bureau and a Women In Blue Jeans committee member.

"In January, February and March - this first quarter - is tough for Mitchell," Van Dover said. "Without a large enough event center, having something of this caliber really helps."

The event began in 2002, is non-profit and supports itself mostly through sponsorships in an attempt to keep costs for attendees down, Goldammer said.