HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Summer 2021 | VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

Feature Story

EXACTLY WHAT BUDDY WANTED

Estate gift benefits two communities

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GROWING TECHNOLOGY

Technology is transforming agriculture

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Minneapolis dentist brings new business to downtown

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ON THE COVER: With lots of volunteers and annual funds from a special estate gift, residents of tiny Simpson – population 100 or so – are working hard to improve their community, including installing new park equipment. Left to right, front row: Nick Jensen and Tim Bell; second row: Johnnie and Debbie Reed; third row: Jolene and Stan Deneke; top row: Chris and Amy Bell.

Northwest Kansas Today is a publication of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation
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OUR MISSION:
The Dane G. Hansen Foundation is committed to providing opportunities for the people of Northwest Kansas to enjoy the highest possible quality of life.

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Northwest Kansas Today is designed to share stories for and about the people and communities in the 26 most northwest counties in Kansas. If you have a story idea, please contact us at: NWKansasToday@danehansenfoundation.org.

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Northwest Kansas Today is distributed at no cost to all verified post office addresses in the Hansen Foundation's 26-county service area. In order to efficiently provide the magazine to all residents, we are unable to remove an address from our mailing list. If you do not wish to enjoy the magazine, please share it with someone who might.

After enjoying *Northwest Kansas Today*, please help us preserve beautiful Northwest Kansas and recycle your copy.

Learn more about the Hansen Foundation at: www.danehansenfoundation.org.

CORRECTION
Due to incorrect information provided to *Northwest Kansas Today*, the story Our Trudy in the Spring 2021 issue stated that Drew Furney died following his return from the war in Vietnam. Mr. Furney was not a veteran.

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Welcome

For the past 55 years the Hansen Foundation has made grants to serve the communities in the 26 counties of Northwest Kansas. That work continues today. Every month, the Hansen Trustees carefully read and discuss requests from Kansas organizations and communities. Then we award grants that help the Hansen Foundation fulfill its mission of improving the quality of life and creating opportunities for the communities and people we serve.

About 5 years ago, the Trustees began working in a different way – not changing our work as grant makers – but adding to it. We introduced some strategic initiatives – regional efforts that address concerns that affect all our counties. Several of these strategic initiatives can be found in stories in this issue of *Northwest Kansas Today*.

You can read about our NWKansas LEARNS initiative, where we are helping teachers bring enrichment programs to their classrooms. Featured in this issue is the Kansas Learning Center for Health.

We are halfway through a 10-year initiative to grow and strengthen countywide community foundations in our area through an annual matching campaign. In this issue, we congratulate the participating foundations and their donors for stepping up in a tough year. The future looks bright!

And we are pleased to share a story that is both heartwarming and economically beneficial about how making an estate gift to your community can forever change lives. Our NWKansas GIVES initiative is working to educate people on the importance of having an estate plan, and the value of considering first their families, but then also their hometowns in that plan.

Giving back is not happening only through estates. Read about a dentist investing in her town to build community there, and about how committed individuals worked together to open a new tourist attraction in their hometown. Learn about amazing businesses from bees to precision agriculture. There's more of course – people, places and possibilities – Northwest Kansas is full of them!

And finally, on the back cover you can help the Foundation in our efforts to gather information on housing issues in our Northwest Kansas communities. Take the survey and be a part of the effort to address this significant need for more and better quality housing.

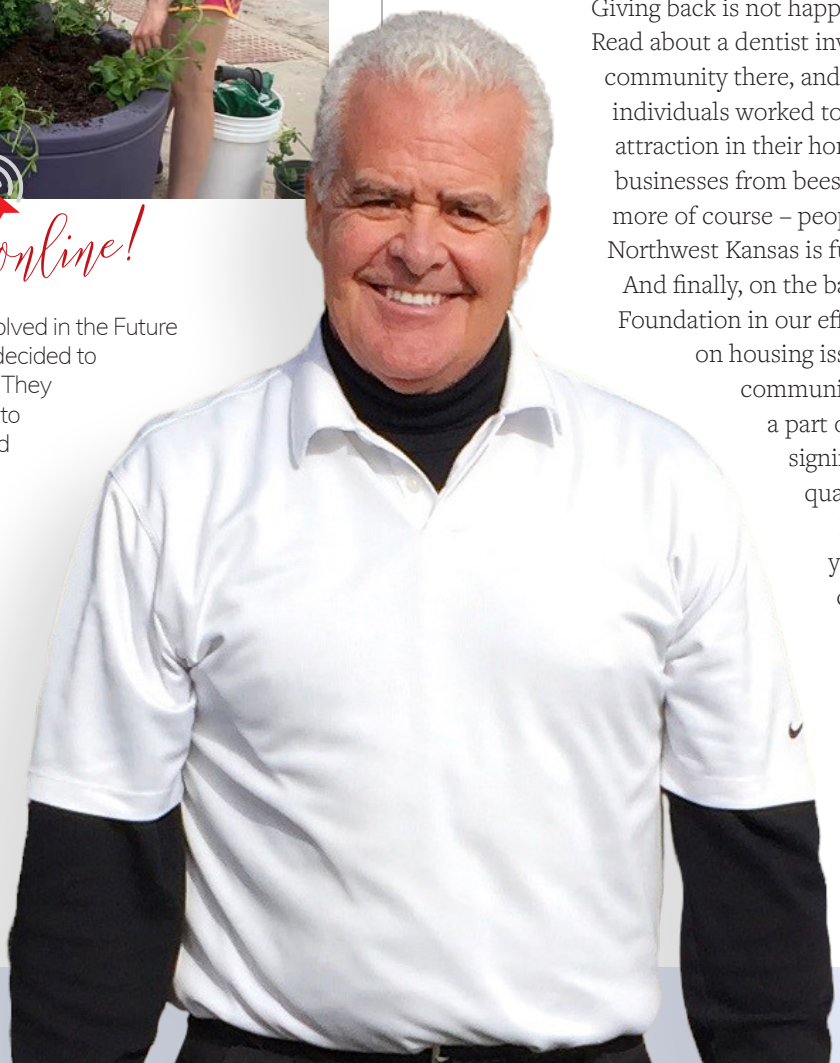
I hope this issue gives you a sense of the dynamic communities and remarkable people that make up Northwest Kansas. I know our Trustees, and our staff are sure proud to call it home.

Robert B. Hartman

Robert Hartman
Trustee

Find more online!

In Oakley, teenagers involved in the Future Philanthropist Program decided to beautify the community. They wrote grants, presented to the city council and found additional funding when costs increased. Now they are watering flowers growing in the 23, 820-pound purple planters they placed throughout Oakley. Learn more at *danehansenfoundation.org*.



Exactly What Buddy Wanted

One man's estate gift repays the kindness he valued from his two hometowns and ensures their future will be brighter.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[SIMPSON] Arguably the most influential person in the tiny town of Simpson doesn't even live there anymore. But James "Buddy" Louthan is present in a very visible way to every resident and visitor there, as well as in nearby Glasco.

Buddy was raised on a farm between the two communities. He was the only child of Frank and Lila Maxine Louthan. He never married and had no children, but he wasn't lonely. By all accounts, Buddy had a lot of friends.

"Buddy was a very caring individual," said Kris Nelson, a friend of the Louthan family and later, Buddy's power of attorney. "He would always ask about my kids, and he always had a good story to share."

Although he was born with hydrocephalus, an abnormal buildup of fluid in the brain cavities, Buddy did not let his disability slow him down. He graduated from high school in Simpson, attended Kansas State, and ran a successful small engine repair shop.

"I can remember taking our lawn mowers and things over for him to fix," Nelson said. He was actually very sharp. He was kind of a jack-of-all-trades."

"He had some challenges in life," said Curt Frasier, the Louthans' attorney. "He lived independently, but his neighbors and friends in both Simpson and Glasco helped him whenever he needed it."

That help was simply the right thing to do for the residents of Simpson and Glasco, but to Buddy, it was kindness he wanted to reward.

A total surprise

Working with Frasier to complete his estate plan, Buddy wanted to do something for the communities where he spent his time, and for the people he loved.

"His folks were gone, and he had inherited the farm. He wanted to leave it to the communities," Frasier said. "We talked about using the community foundation. He wanted to do that and divide the estate equally between the two communities."

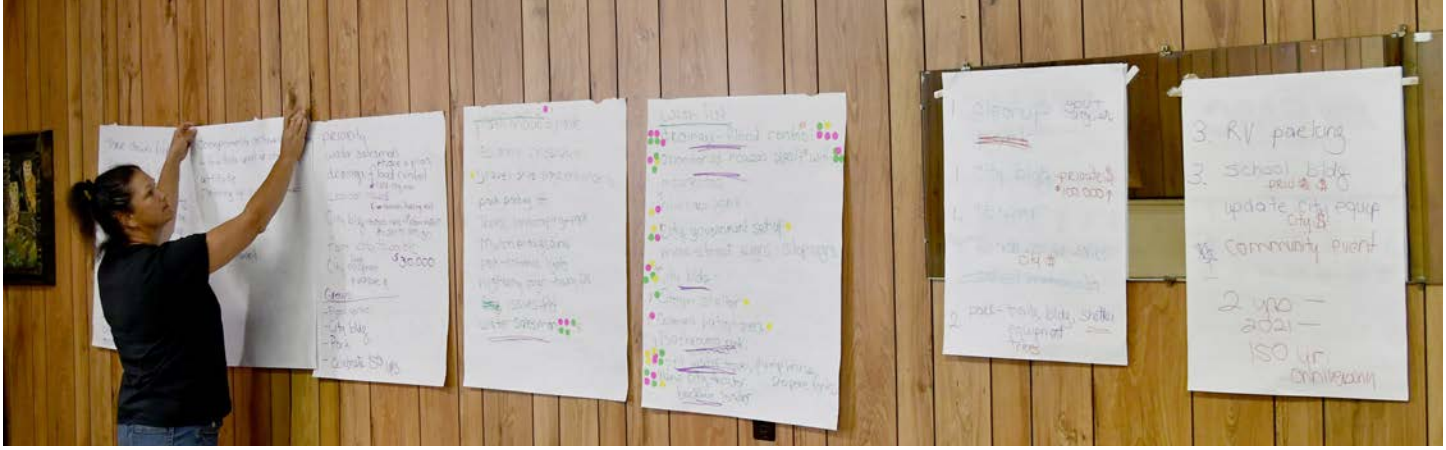
Buddy passed away in 2015. He was 68. He lived on the family farm until his health required him to move to an assisted living facility in Beloit.

Shortly after his death, Frasier met with representatives in the two communities. Simpson Council Member Stan Deneke recalled the meeting. "The room was packed," he said. Frasier

James " Buddy" Louthan lived on the family farm located near Simpson and Glasco, for almost his entire life. Upon his death, the farm was sold to create permanent funds for both communities.

"He had some challenges in life. He lived independently, but his neighbors and friends in both Simpson and Glasco helped him whenever he needed it."

CURT FRASIER | BUDDY LOUTHANS' ATTORNEY



Amy Bell arranges lists of projects – those completed and those still to complete – in the city building in Simpson.

explained the gift that Buddy had provided and how it would be administered for community projects.

Deneke said the news "was a total surprise."

Two funds, one for each community, are named for Buddy and his parents. They are administered through the Solomon Valley Community Foundation. The communities apply for dollars for specific projects. With the help of the community foundation, an advisory committee for each town reviews and approves the grants.

Frasier said the farm and some additional assets in Oklahoma were liquidated to establish the funds. The first grants were awarded in 2017.

"The first year, we put new gravel down on all the streets. And we paved the drive and bought new electric doors for the fire station," said Debbie Reed, Simpson City Clerk.

Available amounts from each fund are announced in August, and average about $21,000 - $30,000 each year.

The walls tell the story

The walls of the city building where Frasier announced the good news tell the stories of Simpson, past, present and future.

Alumni photographs and a packed trophy case are a reminder that the town once had a high school. Buddy Louthan was in the last graduating class in 1965. Large flip chart sheets that hang along the wall are a reminder that Simpson residents have accomplished goals and are setting more.

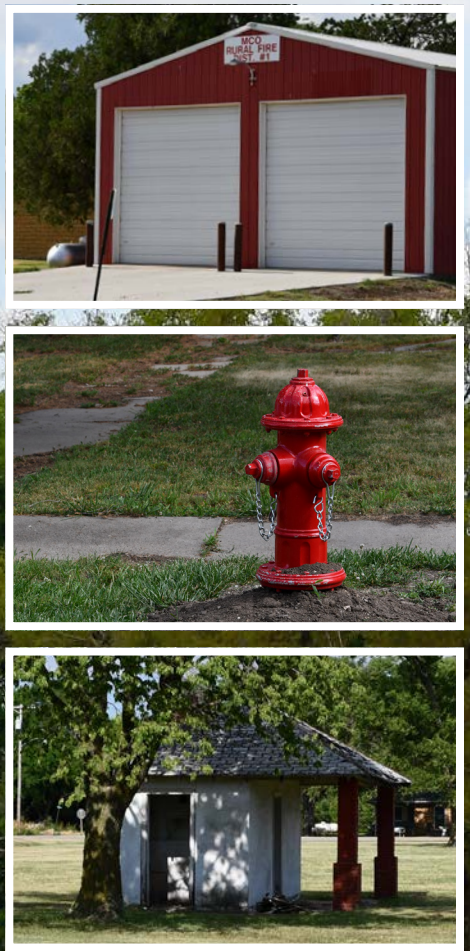
The council has used the Strategic Doing process and facilitator Betty Johnson, provided by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, to identify projects, then form committees to get them completed.

"I was there about two years ago, and they identified several things they wanted to do," Johnson said. "Then this year, they invited me back. They had the original sheets we used two years before and had crossed off all the things they had completed. They were ready for more. There is a lot of enthusiasm in the town."

Members of the Simpson advisory committee include Deneke, Amy Bell, Amanda Johnson, and Jean Krier.

Another project was to upgrade Shanks Park, including new and refurbished playground equipment (see cover) and landscaping. The community used grants from the Louthan fund and other

See **BUDDY**, page 6



Completed projects in the town include updates to the fire station and a new water system. An historic restroom facility is on the future project list.

BUDDY, from page 5

foundations, including the Hansen Foundation, to purchase the equipment, but all the labor was donated.

"That was a job," said Nick Jensen, owner of Trapper Joe's restaurant. He said the town's population is about 100. "But half of those are children."

Jensen, Bell, Deneke, their spouses and neighbors are all working hard to ensure those children have a place to call home for a long time.

A shot in the arm

Some improvements are harder to see but critically important. One of the latest projects that is nearing completion in Simpson is a much-needed new water system. Using the Louthan funds as a required match for an application for a CDB grant, the town learned it qualified for a grant from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

Frasier said that was one of the great things about the gift.

"It's a shot in the arm. Those dollars allow them to leverage other resources."

Other projects completed in Simpson have included removing dilapidated and hazardous buildings, adding water hydrants at the park, replacing a door and windows to the city building, renovating the pumphouse and removing and trimming trees. The town is also paying on upgrades to the water tower.

Committees have been formed to tackle new projects, including looking at the flood plain and addressing potential issues; building a new storage facility for the city; a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the town; and continued work on the park.

Members of the grant advisory committee for Glasco, Kris Nelson, Kent Studt, and Jean Schmidt stand by the veterans memorial, one of the projects made possible by Buddy Louthan's estate gift.

"We have a restroom building that has historic significance," Bell said. "It sits right on the north side of the park near the highway."

Once called Hobo Junction, Bell said, the building offered transient people a restroom and also a place to keep warm for a bit. The stop was along the Midland Trail, a dirt path that in 1921 became the first paved national highway, US 40 North.

"It has a little room between the bathrooms where there was a stove and travelers could sleep in there and stay warm."

The building is standing but needs major work to restore it. The park committee is looking at that and also at improving the picnic and storage structure.

Similar efforts are happening in Glasco. Larger than Simpson, Glasco has a population of just under 500.

"Buddy was always in here – every afternoon, and sometimes in the mornings for coffee, too," said Judy Wells, owner of Hodge Podge, a Glasco business that lives up to its name – with a soda fountain, groceries, jewelry, and other items that keep folks from having to run to Beloit for every little thing.

"He'd sit on the end stool and just visit with everybody. He smoked a pipe until it was done and then stuck it in his pocket," Wells said. "He was just a character. But very smart. He helped his dad farm and then took care of his mom. And we all took our mowers to him to repair."

A gift that keeps on giving

When she first learned about Buddy's estate gift, Wells said, "I was just floored. What a neat thing to do."

Glasco's advisory committee includes Nelson, former mayor Kent Studt, and Jean Schmidt, who also serves on the Glasco Community Foundation board. Like Simpson, Nelson said, Glasco has made grants to the volunteer fire departments – both city and rural – for radios and other equipment. Likewise, they have upgraded equipment in the park.

Grants have also been awarded to the preschool for new windows, the library for an upgraded microfilm system and to help refurbish the Senior Center and the VFW Hall, which also serves as a community center.

"It's nice to be able to provide for these needs," Nelson said. "And sometimes things that are just extras. We funded a veteran's memorial, and we helped a church buy school supplies for kids who might not have been able to afford them. The kids were able to come in and pick out their own things."

Because the Louthan funds are permanently endowed, Buddy's gift will continue to grow, and grants will be available in perpetuity. It's truly the gift that keeps on giving. That's good news for Simpson and Glasco.

"It's meant a lot of projects have been completed that there probably would not have been funds for," Nelson said. "I just know that it is exactly what Buddy would have wanted." ▪

Judy Wells, owner of Hodge Podge in Glasco, spent many afternoons with Buddy at the counter while he smoked his pipe and greeted customers.

What's your legacy?

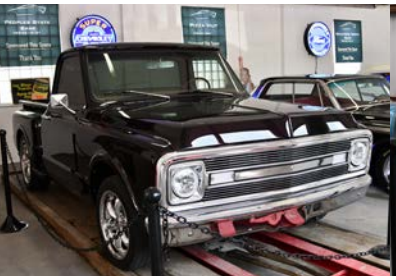
Completing your will or estate plan is often the item on your to-do list that gets pushed aside in favor of more immediate matters. But having your affairs in order can provide true peace of mind. It's also a tremendous help for loved ones left behind to take care of details such as your home, farmland, investments, heirlooms and just stuff we all have, such as clothing, dishes, furniture and art.

Whether a person's passing is part of the aging process, or an unexpected illness or accident, an estate plan is important. The Dane G. Hansen Foundation wants to encourage everyone to have a plan in place that takes care of family and also community.

Visit our website at *DaneHansenFoundation.org*, and click on the NWKansas GIVES logo to learn about tools available to help with education and planning. See how even a small gift (just 5%!) can make a difference in your hometown or to a charity that is important to you.

Make sure you can write your own legacy.
Plan to Make a Difference!

NWKansas GIVES



Volunteer Samee Smith brings in the open flag at the end of the day. Smith spends most days welcoming visitors to the museum.

A Collective

Hill City's new Auto and Art Museum is attracting tourists, thanks to the effort of local volunteers, and an impressive collection of cars.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[HILL CITY] When he was a student at Hill City High School, Stephen Tebo pumped gasoline at a service station on the southwest corner of Highways 24 and 283. Today, the opposite corner of the same intersection has been dubbed Tebo's Corner. Tebo is the main exhibitor in the new Graham County Auto and Art Museum, located in – what else – a former gas station.

Tebo said since childhood he has worked and been a collector. At the age of 8, he got his first job shining shoes. At 11, he started collecting coins. After college at Fort Hays State, he combined the two and opened a coin shop. Later he sold the coin shop and started collecting art.

"When I ran out of walls, I started collecting cars," he said. "I couldn't afford a car in high school, so now I guess I've overdone it," said Tebo, whose car collection now numbers more than 350.

The Boulder, Colo., resident never lived in his hometown after he graduated in 1962, but he has a granddaughter and great-granddaughter there, and a son and grandchildren and 2 great-grandsons in Hays, so he still has strong ties to the community and the area.

The museum's grand opening was April 24 and attracted about 250 to 275 people, according to museum board president Cory Simoneau.

"Since then, it's been about 40 a week. It's been a good draw," he said.

A $5 entrance fee buys visitors a leisurely stroll through three different showrooms displaying 30 vehicles on loan from a variety of collectors, either from the area or with local ties.

Something special

Tebo is the largest contributor, with five vehicles, including the feature vehicle, on display until October. The 1964 Miller-Meteor Classic Cadillac Hearse is the vehicle that transported the body of slain President John F. Kennedy from Parkland Memorial

Effort

CARS ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: 1969 Chevy C10 Pickup; *Tucker* movie prop vehicle from 1988; 1930 Pierce Arrow; 1940 Chevrolet Master Deluxe Sedan; 1924 and 1925 Model T Fords, used in the movie *Paper Moon*; 1939 Super H. International McCormick Farmall Tractor.

Hospital to Love Field in Dallas to fly back to Washington, D.C., on Nov. 22, 1963.

"We had one man drive from Topeka just to see it," said Samee Smith, the 84-year-old volunteer who staffs the museum's front desk.

"We have had visitors from nine states already. And about 125 over Memorial Day weekend," Smith added. When she is not available to work, board member Phyllis Weller said board members or spouses step in.

The cars will be rotated out a couple times a year to keep people coming back. The hearse is on display until sometime in October, when Weller said it will be replaced with another specialty vehicle. She was not yet at liberty to disclose the next one, but she promised, "It's going to be special."

There are other items on display as well, including motorcycles and tractors.

The idea for the museum originated in 2016 with Hill City resident Fred Pratt. Weller said a board formed to work on the project, and they received nonprofit status in January 2017.

"This building went up for sale in 2018 and Stephen Tebo donated the funds to purchase it in January 2019," said Weller, who was part of that original board.

The building – originally Dean's Service Station – has been renovated and expanded to become the 8,000-square-foot museum. The expansion included steel framing from a building donated by Tebo.

"I was developing a shopping center in Hays and had a metal building to take down," Tebo said. "I was talking with Fred about the museum, and so I donated the building."

The original site was a block or two off the main intersection, but Tebo said he

See **MUSEUM**, page 10

GRAHAM COUNTY AUTO AND ART MUSEUM
Intersection of highways U.S.-24 & U.S.-283
Admission: $5
Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Thursday-Saturday
Noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday

ABOVE: Board Members of the Hill City Auto and Art Museum pose with donor Stephen Tebo in his 1953 jaguar XK120 during the grand opening in April. From Left to Right: Ray Toll, Cory Simoneau, Phyllis Weller, Stephen Tebo, Rick Roberts and Kade Tremblay. (COURTESY PHOTO)

BELOW: Until October, museum visitors have a rare chance to see the 1964 Miller-Meteor Classic Cadillac Hearse that transported the body of John F. Kennedy from Parkland Memorial Hospital to Love Field in Dallas.

Northwest Kansas Donors

MEET THEIR MATCH

Jessica Cole, a member of the board of directors for the Sherman County Community Foundation, celebrates surpassing the $50,000 fundraising goal. (COURTESY PHOTO)

STORY BY BETSY WEARING

In a year where the world endured a lot of hardship and loss, a bright light shone in the form of the human spirit and generosity toward our neighbors.

Giving USA recently announced that charitable donations during 2020 increased by 5.1% over 2019. Combined with a strong stock market performance, the significant needs that arose from the global pandemic of 2020 resulted in a generous outpouring of contributions to charity.

Count Northwest Kansas donors among those who responded to a tremendous opportunity to double their charitable dollars and create

MUSEUM, from page 9

encouraged the board to look at the current location.

"Fred said they were looking at a site to put up the metal building south of Main Street," Tebo said. "I said 'You don't want to do that, it has to be on (Hwy) 24 so people will see it.' "

The community steps up

The process of getting the museum up and running was not always smooth sailing. At one point, the board completely turned over.

That's about the time Simoneau got involved. He is the owner of Red Mountain Building Systems and was doing concrete work and erecting the Tebo-donated building when things came to a halt.

"I asked Stephen if he wanted some help," Simoneau said. He helped rebuild the board, recruiting back original members Russ Ingle and Weller.

"When we started back up, there was zero money and several bills to be paid," Simoneau said. "I wasn't going to ask Tebo. We were going to have to raise funds and do whatever we could to make it work.

"I went after several grants," he said. "Through the Dane Hansen Foundation and Graham County Community Foundation, we got money, and then Phyllis had a great idea to do space sponsorships."

Weller said that from January to April 2019, the board secured all the local sponsorships. A space goes for anywhere from $300 to $700 a year, depending on where it is in the building.

"The community really stepped up," she said.

Each sponsored space includes a large sign thanking the business for its support. The GCCF grant covered the cost of the signs.

"That program really made the museum a success," Simoneau said. "Those dollars funded the stand signs and barricade chains, (to keep visitors from touching the cars) and we actually started going."

Giving back

Tebo credits Weller and Simoneau for the success of the museum.

"Some people give money and others give time," he said. The two of them have done an amazing job. They spearheaded this whole thing."

Weller deflects credit for her role in getting the museum up and running, but she has been the one constant in the project. She was one of the original board members along with Pratt, Danny

permanent funds to help their hometowns face unforeseen needs, forever.

Since 2016, the Dane G. Hansen Foundation has offered countywide community foundations in its Northwest Kansas service area an opportunity to double donors' dollars and create permanent grant funding for their counties by establishing endowed countywide grant funds.

At the conclusion of the 2020-21 campaigns, for the first time, ALL 25 participating, countywide foundations received enough donations from their communities to qualify for the full match.

"The trustees were really thrilled with the results this year," said Brien Stockman, president of the board of trustees for the Foundation. "Several counties who had never made the goal reached or surpassed it in a year when I think many were apprehensive about the outcome."

Campaigns run from fall to spring. As of spring 2021, donors supporting the first five years of the Northwest Kansas match campaigns had contributed just under $7 million! The Hansen Foundation matches up to $50,000 per county, per year. The total contributions from the Hansen Foundation for the countywide grant funds thus far is $5.5 million. Together, the 25 participating counties have grown their permanent, countywide endowed grant funds by almost $12.5 million. That total will generate approximately $624,425 in distributed grants every year for communities in Northwest Kansas.

"Halfway through this initiative, we feel like the participating community foundations have really hit their stride and donors are responding," Stockman said. "Our goal is to create a mini-Hansen Foundation in every county."

The matching initiative will be offered for five more years, sunsetting in the spring of 2026. In addition to the grant endowments, beginning with the 2021-22 campaign year, the Hansen Foundation will also provide a $50,000 match for the community foundations to create permanent operational endowments that will help sustain these vital foundations throughout our area.

That means that contributions from donors who participate in their county's match month campaign will receive a 200% match for the next five years.

When your county community foundation match month starts, consider making a donation. ▪

Area community foundations used social media posts to share their progress and success with the matching campaigns. From left to right: Colleen Eberle, executive director of the Solomon Valley Community Foundation, announces the total raised. Seth Kastle, former board member of Heartland Community Foundation, gives an update early in the campaign. Amber Peschka, board member of the Smoky Hills Charitable Foundation, uses a selfie to announce the total raised. (COURTESY PHOTOS)

Board member Phyllis Weller shows a visitor the 1994 Callaway competition "body buck." The buck is a pattern. Reverse molds are made from the buck and used to produce body parts for the actual racecar.

Jackson and Ingle. And she is still on the board, serving with Ray Toll, Rick Roberts, Kade Trembay and Simoneau.

"I give a lot of credit to Fred for starting the whole thing," Weller said. "And bigger credit to Cory Simoneau. He got thrown into being president," she laughed. "And of course, to Stephen Tebo for his generosity. We are so grateful he wants to give back to the community."

Weller said the board is looking at next steps. They want to expand the art section located in the museum's lobby. Currently two area artists, Michael Boss and Larry Zvolanek, have their work on display. They also want to look at special events that will bring people to town, and to the museum. All in good time, for now they are taking a breather after the work of getting it up and running.

Simoneau grew up in Damar and Lenora. When he and his family moved to Hill City seven years ago, he knew he wanted to be involved in the community.

"I kinda dedicated myself to doing a lot of volunteer work. I have a full plate, but I enjoy it. The museum really took a lot of time to finish all the details, but I'm glad I did it."

Weller's involvement has also been a labor of love, but not for the automobiles.

"I don't know squat about cars," she said, "but I care about Hill City. Small towns need to do things in order to attract visitors or we won't be sustainable.

"I grew up on a small farm in Northwest Kansas and went to school in Logan. When I left, I said there were two things I would never do. One was move back to Graham County, and the other was marry a farmer. I did both, but I never regretted raising my kids in a small town. This is home." ▪

GROWING TECHNOLOGY

Agricultural advances provide jobs, increase profits

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Sparkly pink seeds. Tractors that drive themselves. Productive fields that don't get tilled. If you're thinking you're not in Kansas anymore, you'd be wrong.

Advances in technology and methodology over the past couple of decades are transforming agriculture. Now food producers are increasing yields and staying profitable by paying attention to data on screens on their cell phones or in the cabs of their row crop planters.

Three Northwest Kansas companies – Agrilead, PACLeader Technology and SureFire Ag Systems – are among the businesses that are part of this agriculture revolution, bringing precision to all elements of farming — the seeds, the planting and the fertilizing.

SEEDS OF SUCCESS

AGRILEAD
WHERE: 345 S. Fossil St., Russell
PHONE: (785) 483-5000
WEBSITE: *agrileadinc.com*

TOP: Jeff Ochampaugh, president of Agrilead, stands near a test field of Bob Dole variety green wheat.

ABOVE: In May, Agrilead began experimenting with peanuts. On the left are untreated raw peanuts. In the middle are peanuts treated with a standard fungicide and insecticide. On the right are peanuts treated with the fungicide/ insecticide plus Agrilead's Pizazz dry seed finisher.

[RUSSELL] The sea of swaying, brilliant green wheat plants that surrounded Jeff Ochampaugh as he stood in a test field in late May appeared to be a living testament to the effectiveness of what he does.

"We did everything to this field that we would recommend doing," he said.

Ochampaugh, president of Agrilead in Russell, specializes in caring for seeds. In 2014, his company launched its portfolio of seed care products "and we haven't taken our foot off the gas since."

Agrilead makes liquid polymer and dry powder coatings that can be mixed with seed treatments to make them stay on the seed better and improve the flow of seeds through planters.

Pesticides, fungicides and nematicides – which control pests in the soil that attack plant roots – as well as fertilizers and biological products that promote germination and enhance plant growth can

be applied to the seed. Whatever treatment farmers want can be mixed with Agrilead's products to give the seed a uniform coat.

In 2020, the company grew to 10 employees, including Russell native Gage Nichols, who graduated in December with a master's in grain science from Kansas State University.

Nichols is manager of research and development. In the lab where he works are drawers containing samples of a variety of seeds that Agrilead products have been applied to, including garbanzo beans, cotton seed, canola, rice and radish seed. In May, he was kicking off a project at the request of South Carolina peanut growers to see if Agrilead products could be used to enhance growth of peanuts.

"That's an important part of our business – that pipeline – having a lot of hopeful projects going," Ochampaugh said.

Pick your color

In this area of the country, Agrilead's products are more likely to be used at co-ops or seed dealerships on seeds for soybeans or wheat.

"We estimate we're going to get our product on somewhere between 7 and 8 million acres of soybeans this year across the Midwest," he said.

Seeds are treated in a continuous flow process that typically coats 1,200 pounds of seed per minute, Ochampaugh said. Sometimes it is done while the farmer is standing there, and sometimes it is completed in advance.

He said treating seed is a lot like painting – the quality of the application involves coverage, cure, and finish.

Agrilead seed finishes also include colorants. Environmental Protection Agency regulations require that if a seed is treated with a pesticide, it must also impart an unnatural color to make it easily recognizable. Bright colors also make it easier for farmers to spot seeds in the ground when checking planting depth and spacing. Plus, they just look cool.

Gage Nichols, manager of research and development, and Jeff Ochampaugh, president, discuss differences observed in soybean plants grown from treated and untreated seed during a recent experiment at Agrilead.

"At trade shows, we talk about a seed that flows, shows, shines, and plants better," Ochampaugh said. He said 90 percent of treated seeds are red, but they also provide green, blue, yellow, violet, purple and orange at the request of the co-op.

"We had a seed care operator in Illinois who was a breast cancer survivor, and we worked up a pink formulation for her," he said. "It was a little something special that her customers thought was great. It's OK to have fun every now and then."

Making farming safer

Agrilead's wheat finisher, called Impress, is particularly good for reducing the amount of dust that comes off the seed, he said.

"When you're augering wheat into the drill, you get this red dust that comes off," he said. "It can be a concern for worker exposure and an environmental hazard."

Pixy, one of Agrilead's first products, is a powder finish used on soybeans that received its name from customers.

"It was experimental and didn't have a name, but every one of our customers said, 'I'm interested in that pixie dust.' " he said.

Ochampaugh said since then a low-dust formulation called Pizazz has been patented, and a third-generation product is under development. Before any of the products reach the market, they are extensively tested in field trials across various growing regions.

"My city friends are concerned at times about the impacts of agriculture on our environment," he said. "I don't blame them for wondering about these things, but I can testify that during the course of my career, we've made huge leaps forward."

PLANTING THE SEED

PACLEADER TECHNOLOGY

WHERE: 520 W. Main, Morland
PHONE: (785) 627-3100
WEBSITE: *pacleadertechnology.com*

[MORLAND] Mike Frakes enjoys the calls he gets after harvest.

"We have a lot of growers and agronomists that call and say, 'That's the best corn Joe's ever had.' That's a really good feeling," he said.

Frakes, who owns PACLeader Technology in Morland, sells a variety of precision agriculture enhancements to help area corn growers improve the way their planters operate.

Frakes and his three-person staff look for problems that decrease a planter's

See **AG TECH**, page 14

TOP: Employees of SureFire Electronics in rural Atwood assemble an electronic harness with more than 100 wires that will be used to connect a tractor and a planter.

LEFT: Matt Wolters, one of the founders of SureFire Ag Systems, stands in front of one of the company's products, the Quick Draw, a system that mixes herbicides and insecticides, improving efficiency and reducing human exposure to the chemicals.

The SureFire Ag Systems warehouse in rural Atwood contains parts that employees assemble into customized kits for farmers looking to improve fertilizer application techniques.

AG TECH, from page 13

efficiency. He said the first step is placing a monitor on the planter to evaluate its performance.

One area that can be problematic is the down pressure applied by the planter's gauge wheels. Too much pressure, and the sidewalls of the furrow become too compacted. The plant's roots can't break through the compacted soil and so they grow straight down, missing out on available nutrients.

"What that causes, is dryland corn that in a normal year would have been 120-bushel, is 82 bushel," he said. "It's a huge impact."

Too little pressure, and the seed might not land as deep as it should, causing it to miss out on moisture in the soil and not grow at the same rate as surrounding seedlings.

"That little seed doesn't come up until it gets enough rain," he said. "You want to see all the little plants come out of the ground on the exact same day. When you do that, you see good things happen."

Another problem area can be the seed metering system, designed to dispense one seed at a time with the correct spacing between seeds.

"If I'm planting irrigated corn at 30,000 seeds per acre – if I miss one seed, if I have a skip, that's a six-bushel loss to the acre," he said.

"We go out and walk a farmer's field with him, and I'm looking for skips and doubles. Every time seeds double up, it's usually a three- to five-bushel loss."

In the past, such problems only became visible when the crop started growing. By then, it was too late to solve.

Correcting on the fly

Today's Precision Planting monitors allow farmers to tell if equipment is working properly while they are planting and to make adjustments immediately. The system, which utilizes the red, yellow, green of a traffic light, is easy to understand, he said.

"When you're using our monitor, you're going through the field and all the sudden it tells you your down pressure's not correct, so you can make the adjustment right then," Frakes said. "The monitor tells you everything's fine now, and later you get a beautiful stand of corn."

Frakes said farmers used to plant all season long on the same planter settings.

"Now we're changing things by the minute, the second, the millisecond," he said. "We're making changes as we go through. That's what science has done."

Frakes started his business in 2011 to help guide growers through the technology market. He said technological advances in agriculture "have only scratched the surface."

"We get a behind-the-scenes look sometimes at new things coming," he said. One example is a fully automated irrigation machine expected to be on the market in 2023 that will roll through an entire field leaving water directly at the roots of the plants.

"There are so many advancements coming so quickly. I know there will be something that we haven't even thought of that will make farmers' lives easier," he said. "It's neat to be a part of that."

TENDING THE CROP

SUREFIRE AG SYSTEMS AND SUREFIRE ELECTRONICS

WHERE: 9904 Kansas Highway 25, Atwood
PHONE: (785) 626-3670
WEBSITE: *surefireag.com*

[ATWOOD] In July 2007, a long drive to Minnesota gave Blaine Ginther, Matt Wolters and Josh Wolters the opportunity to discuss goals for a new company they planned to call SureFire Ag Systems.

"We were writing the business plan and thinking about what was important to us, and one of the key principles was that we be an economic engine for Rawlins County," Matt Wolters said. "The three of us are all fifth-generation Rawlins County residents."

The early years of SureFire Ag turned out to be boom years in agriculture.

"It was a phenomenal time to start a business selling goods to farmers. They were spending money, and we grew very rapidly," Matt Wolters said. "2013, '14 and '15 were leaner years, so we learned a lot of other skill sets – about how to survive through those times. Since then, we've been able to grow quite significantly. In late 2020 and '21 – commodity prices were up and there were significant amounts of government money that flowed into farmers' pockets."

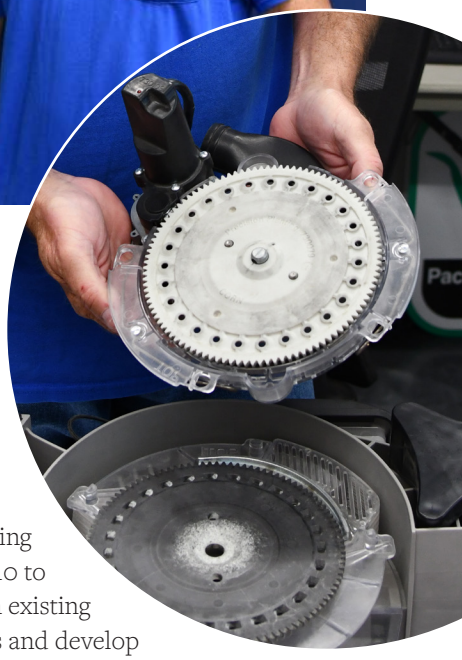
SureFire Ag Systems, as well as SureFire Electronics, added in 2012, employ 79 people – 69 of whom work in Rawlins County – and both companies continue to grow.

Brandon Barnhart, who has managed the SureFire Ag warehouse for 10 years, said the company has been able to find the staff it needs in the county of about 2,200 people.

"I'm nervous about it every year, but we've always seemed to find the people," he said. "The good news is we've got a lot of quality kids around here. There's a lot of small-town kids who have a good work ethic, either from farming or just being raised well."

Making it easy

So, what is it all these people do? "Our goal is to provide technology that helps farmers do their job better," Wolters said.



ABOVE: Mike Frakes, owner of PACLeader Technology, stands next to a display in his Morland office of several of the pieces of equipment his company sells to improve the performance of row crop planters.

RIGHT: The seed disk is an important part of the seed metering system on a planter that ensures that seeds are planted one at a time in the correct spacing.

The core business is assembling and selling attachment kits for the precision application of fertilizer. The kits include pumps, liquid tanks, and plumbing that distributes fertilizer to each row unit and harnesses that connect the electronics in the tractor with the planter.

Each package is customized for the type of planter and type and quantity of liquid fertilizer to be used.

"Liquid fertilizers and the way they're applied can vary greatly," he said. "Some products may only need two to five gallons per acre, others you could use at 40, 50 or 60 gallons per acre. They have vastly different physical properties. It requires different types of equipment to do that successfully. The easier we make all this stuff so that it just plugs in and connects, the easier everybody's life is."

Fertilizer application systems account for about 70 percent of SureFire Ag's business. Other products include Quick Draw, which automates the mixing and measuring of herbicides and pesticides for field sprayers. There's also Marksman, which injects fertilizer and chemicals into pivot irrigation systems, for "fertigation" and "chemigation," even late in the season when plants are tall.

Albert Popp leads an engineering team of 10 to maintain existing products and develop new ones. He grew up on a farm near Hoxie and majored in computer and electrical engineering at Kansas State University. After working in Kansas City, he wanted to move his family back to rural Kansas.

"Honestly, I didn't think that I would ever have an opportunity to have a job back in this area," he said. It was his wife's idea to contact SureFire. Popp's arrival ultimately helped lead to the creation of SureFire Electronics. The electronic harnesses the company had been utilizing had been problematic and designing and making their own provided better quality control.

Across the United States, whether they are growing wheat, corn, or soybeans in the Midwest, potatoes in Washington and Idaho, almonds in California or on a research farm in Hawaii, SureFire equipment has made it easier for its customers to get plants the nutrients they need. ▪

Rock

MUSHROOM ROCK
ELLSWORTH COUNTY

TOP: Gail Muston, of Wichita, enjoyed a day trip to Mushroom Rock State Park in June.

MIDDLE: People have left their mark on Mushroom Rock

BOTTOM: Brock Steele, of Wichita, came to explore Mushroom Rock State Park with his grandparents, Roy and Claire Lyon.

MONUMENT ROCKS
GOVE COUNTY

CENTER: Cliff swallows tend their young in mud nests built above the iconic arch at Monument Rocks.

On!

PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS AND BETSY WEARING

CASTLE ROCK
GOVE COUNTY

ROCK CITY
OTTAWA COUNTY

Caden Peterson, Christian Peterson and Nolan Schoenfeld stand atop a rock as Patrick Peterson climbs up. The boys were part of a group visiting Rock City from the Assaria Summer Youth Program.

Judi Lippincott, Lake Helen Fl., walks through the massive rocks. Lippincot and her husband, Pete, were traveling through Kansas to pick up their granddaughter for a summer adventure in their motorhome.

The Depot Market store at 1101 30 Rd., Courtland, features a selection of fresh produce grown onsite, as well as homemade ice cream, doughnuts and a variety of other goods. It is open 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Visit depotmarket.net or the Depot Market Facebook page for information about current activities.

Dan and Kathy Kuhn (left), owners of Depot Market, stand inside their rural Courtland store, where produce grown in their fields and hoophouses is sold. The store is located inside Courtland's former Santa Fe Railroad depot (below).

PLEASING PICKY EATERS

Pick-your-own blackberries, apples add to the fun at Depot Market

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY ERIN MATHEWS

[COURTLAND] After more than 40 years of growing things, Dan Kuhn still finds nature hard to predict.

Kuhn, who owns Depot Market with his wife, Kathy, wanted more people to know about the large, juicy blackberries they'd been growing in a pick-your-own patch in rural Courtland, but the extended period of bitter cold in February gave him pause. What if the canes that would produce this year's crop didn't survive?

"The jury is still out on the blackberries," Kuhn said in April. "They are leafing out as per normal, but whether the flower buds are OK remains to be seen. With all my heart I hope we can have berries, but it's still too early to tell."

Most people know Depot Market for the pick-your-own pumpkin patch. Families come to select their own future jack-o'-lanterns, as well as navigate the corn maze and ride the hayrack. This year, they will be able to take pictures in a field of sunflowers, and they can also find every manner of pumpkin and decorative squash, apples and other goodies at the store inside an old Santa Fe train depot.

People with longer memories remember the apple trees. Kuhn said people came from all over to pick apples when he first cared for an orchard in the area 43 years ago. Armed with a degree in crop protection from Kansas State University, the Kansas City-area native had relocated to Courtland in what became a successful attempt to avoid a desk job.

"I'm very blessed to be able to do what I do – richly blessed," Kuhn said.

Apples get the axe

But over the years, fewer pickers came as fewer people were canning and freezing. Eventually, most of the apple trees were replaced with irrigated fields of vegetables and melons, which Kuhn sells wholesale to grocery stores in nine states across the Midwest and South. Starting with eight acres of asparagus and ending with 130 acres of pumpkins, there is now produce being harvested from mid-April through Halloween in the Kuhns' fields and hoop houses.

Currently, Depot Market's 40-acre watermelon harvest is well underway. Soon, the wholesale pumpkins will be ready. Harvesting those fields is hard work, and farm manager Mark Stadler said they are fortunate to have a reliable farm labor crew on agricultural work visas from Mexico. Stadler said a crew of about 17 harvests nearly 4,000 watermelon a day in July and August, and up to 27 men pick the 25 to 30 varieties of pumpkins in August through October. Many of the men they hire to pick have been returning to Courtland for the growing season for nearly 15 years.

"They know how to pick, and they're really good at what they do," he said.

Pick-your-own pleasure

The wholesale trade has been going well, but in recent years, Kuhn had started hearing from customers who missed picking apples.

"People would come into the depot and say, 'I remember my grandma and I used to pick apples when I was little, and we had the best time. I want that for my kids,' " he said.

Kuhn, who has become

adept at rolling with the changes in fruit and vegetable markets, decided to add to the pick-your-own opportunities at Depot Market.

"We're trying to make this kind of a destination for pick your own," Kuhn said.

He and Stadler added the blackberry canes five years ago, and they are currently in the process of re-establishing a variety of apple trees, which they expect to produce a few apples this year but be ready for picking next year.

The new apple trees planted in 2019 and 2020 will offer a different experience. They are what's known as a high-density orchard. Stadler said the trees are all grafted onto dwarfing rootstock, so they will grow only 10 to 12 feet tall. They are planted close together and carefully pruned, so that branches don't shade each other.

"There are about 1,200 trees to the acre," Stadler said. "The goal is to just have branching as high as you can reach and load the whole thing up with apples, like a fruiting wall.

"It's all in that two-foot to eight-foot zone where it's easy to pick," he said.

He said apple varieties planted include Fuji, Gala, Pink Lady, Cameo, Empire, EverCrisp and Ludacrisp.

Berries bounce back

By May, Kuhn was feeling more confident about the blackberry crop of 2021. The pivoting trellis system apparently provided enough protection for the canes, which were laid on the ground and covered until early March. Once the canes started blooming and forming fruit, each trellis was pinned into vertical position again, ensuring that most of the berries grew on the side facing the sun.

"You can just go down the row, and it makes this real easy picking," Stadler said. "All your fruit's right here, and the foliage's nice and dense, so you don't have to be reaching through a bush or anything like that."

In June, the newly enlarged Depot Market store opened for the season, and began selling tomatoes, zucchini, yellow squash, cucumbers and onions – all grown onsite. The store was doubled in size this year to accommodate a wider selection of specialty melons, gourds and bins containing a variety of fresh produce.

In July, blackberry pickers arrived to fill their buckets at the one-acre patch just to the east of the store.

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Deneen Barnes, of Clifton, brought her grandchildren. When so many other activities were no longer an option, picking blackberries was especially fun, Barnes said.

"With the squeals that little one's been having, it's like she's finding pieces of gold," Barnes had said of 4-year-old granddaughter, Adleigh, of Inman, as they picked.

"We were tickled we were able to do this," she said. "It's a special treat to come do this and take the prize home." ▪

TOP: Farm manager Mark Stadler discusses the recently planted high-density apple orchard he hopes will produce its first crop next year.

MIDDLE: Members of the hard-working watermelon harvest crew spend the day throwing and catching 25-pound melons.

BOTTOM: Adleigh Barnes, of Inman, was 4 years old in July 2020 when she picked blackberries with her grandmother, Deneen Barnes, of Clifton.

Honey Harvest

It's all about the bees at Labertew Apiaries

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[SYLVAN GROVE] Stan Labertew knows how to endear a new queen to her subjects. The secret is a miniature marshmallow.

"If we put a queen cage into the beehive without something like a miniature marshmallow, they would kill her right away because they know it's not their queen — she doesn't have their scent," he said. "By the time they can eat through that miniature marshmallow or another piece of candy, they will have realized she is their queen. She's the only queen in the hive, and they will accept her."

And, of course, it's good to be queen – if you don't mind a little spit.

"She doesn't feed herself or anything," Labertew said. "If she's hungry, she'll turn her head, and they'll spit right in her mouth. She'll have a court around her that are grooming her the whole time. The bees just stay there and clean her and care for her."

The queen's personality sets the tone for the rest of the hive.

"Every once in a while, we'll recognize what we call a hot one," he said. "She's aggressive, and we'll know that she's more temperamental."

He said typically 24 to 32 hives are placed in one location. When they check on the hives, they save the hot one's hive for last, he said, "then we jump in the truck and leave."

Labertew, of Sylvan Grove, spent his career as an educator and school administrator. He got busy educating himself about royal jelly, pollen substitutes and all things honeybee about half a century ago. That's when he fell in love with the daughter of a beekeeper. He's been spending his summers tending beehives with his wife, Sandy, ever since. Their three children, Brandon, Britney, and Benjamin all helped with the bees while they were living at home. Ben, his wife, Angie, and their three children continue to be actively involved with the family bee business.

> Honey doesn't spoil, but it can sugar up. Set a jar of crystallized honey outside on a hot day to return it to its liquid state, or put it in a pan of water on low heat.

"I had two uncles that raised bees, and my dad started to help after he got out of the service," Sandy Labertew said. "They probably started in the late '30s or early '40s. It is a family business. To me, it's what we do."

This year, by mid-May, Labertew Apiaries had wooden boxes containing about 1,100 hives placed in pastures and near fields throughout a seven-county area within a 45-mile radius of Sylvan Grove. The bees were busy extracting nectar from sweet clover, sunflowers,

Honey extraction is hard work, and for the Labertews, it is a family affair. At left, Angie Labertew returns hive frames to bee boxes after her son, Cai, a seventh-grader, pulls them out of the honey extractor. Cai's sister, Maggie, a freshman, helps her grandfather, Stan, prepare frames to go into the extractor by removing the wax caps bees have sealed over the honeycombs.

soybeans, alfalfa and other blooming plants. A late freeze in April took plum thickets out of the mix this year.

Bees can fly about two miles to gather nectar, Stan Labertew said. If it's a matter of life and death, they can go about five miles. They're social animals, with a division of labor that keeps a clean and organized hive. Scientists have figured out how they communicate through what's called the waggle dance.

"They waggle their back end in a certain direction and do so many turns, and scientists have got it all figured out exactly what that means," he said. "They are telling the other bees exactly where the flowers are and exactly what flowers they are."

Which bee will it be?

Labertew said his bee stock includes two varieties. The Italian bees they bring in from Georgia are larger and more yellow, and they are good at producing larger populations. The Carniolan bee they acquire in California is smaller and predominantly black. It is better at controlling population and at surviving through the winter.

Most of the landowners who host their beehives have been working with the apiary for many years. Labertew said they appreciate the farmers who host the bees and permit the Labertews to check in on the hives every week to 10 days.

"If we're running late, they'll ask, 'Where are my bees? What's going on?'" he said. "Everything is timing, and everything is Mother Nature. She'll throw you a curve ball once in a while that changes things."

He said bees can make an appreciable difference in the productivity of a soybean crop.

"The honeybee will increase yields by anywhere from 10 to 40 percent," he said. "If you've got beans pushing $15, and you were making 40 bushel an acre, but you got another 20 percent, that would be 8 bushels. Take that times $15, and it's $120. If you had 1,000 acres, those honey bees just made you $120,000."

Jase Labertew, a junior at Sylvan-Lucas High School, helps his dad, Ben, tend the family's beehives during the summer. In early July, some of the hives had honey ready, and the father and son picked up those boxes from fields and pastures. They also applied mite treatment and probiotics to improve bee health.

He said whenever flowers are in short supply, the bees are fed a corn syrup mixture, so that the queen will continue to lay eggs and increase the size of the hive. A healthy colony includes roughly 50,000 to 60,000 bees in the summer, he said.

"During this time period, we're feeding," he said in late May. "No matter what's blooming, we're feeding. We're trying to grow the hives to get them stronger for the summer, so we never let them run out of something to eat. The queen's laying her body weight in eggs every day, so she's laying eggs all the time. As long as there's nectar coming in so she knows there's a food source, she will continue to fill the hive."

Each hive has two, one-gallon feeders, and the bees are also producing and eating their own honey. The Labertews let the bees of each hive keep the first two boxes they fill for themselves. Each box is constructed with eight frames inside, where the bees build their honeycombs. A full box will typically weigh 80 to 100 pounds.

Any additional box of the sticky, golden goodness is extracted and sold under the Labertew Apiaries or Labertew Honey brand at grocery stores in Goodland, WaKeeney, Hays, Plainville, Luray, Lucas, Sylvan Grove, Lincoln, Salina and Lawrence.

"We check on them, and as they get crowded or need more room, we stack another box on," Stan Labertew said. "We keep stacking boxes as the season goes on."

Check the honey-do list

Honey harvest typically starts in July, although sometimes it doesn't start until August. When the bees get the moisture content of the honey down below 18 percent, they will seal the honeycomb with wax. When about 80 percent of the honeycomb is sealed, it's ready for harvest.

"If we pull out a honey frame, and it's full of honey but they haven't capped it, we don't want to harvest it because it will ferment," Labertew said. "The moisture content is too high, just like wheat. You've got to get that moisture down in wheat somewhere around 11 or 12 percent. In honey, it's 18.5."

During honey extraction, a machine called an uncapper cuts off the wax caps, so the honey runs out. Then another machine called the extractor spins the honeycombs, throwing the honey out,

See **HONEY**, page 24

TOP: Dr. Ashley Swisher examines the teeth of 8-year-old Olivia McMillan, of Concordia.
BELOW: The All Smiles Dental Care staff
RIGHT: Crowns that have been 3-D milled and printed on site.

Sharing smiles

Minneapolis dentist brings new businesses to downtown

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[MINNEAPOLIS] A year out of dental school, Dr. Ashley Swisher committed to a major investment in a building to house her dental office in downtown Minneapolis. Eleven years later, she's giving visitors to downtown new reasons to smile.

"My building was a more than $1 million investment, which was really scary as a 26 year-old," she said. "It was really scary, but it has paid for itself."

In November 2019, she and her husband, Dr. Keir Swisher, an emergency medicine physician, purchased the building next door to All Smiles Dental Care to expand the dental office and add a dental lab. Once that was accomplished, they set about renovating the rest of the 20,000-square-foot building.

So far, "The Farm," as the building is called, includes a coffee shop and a pickleball court on the main floor. By Labor Day, plans are to open an activity center in the basement and a brewery operated by brew master Kyle Banman on the second floor. Also in the building will be a nut-roasting business and an office for family-child therapist Paige Holcom. Her husband, Levi, manages the coffee shop.

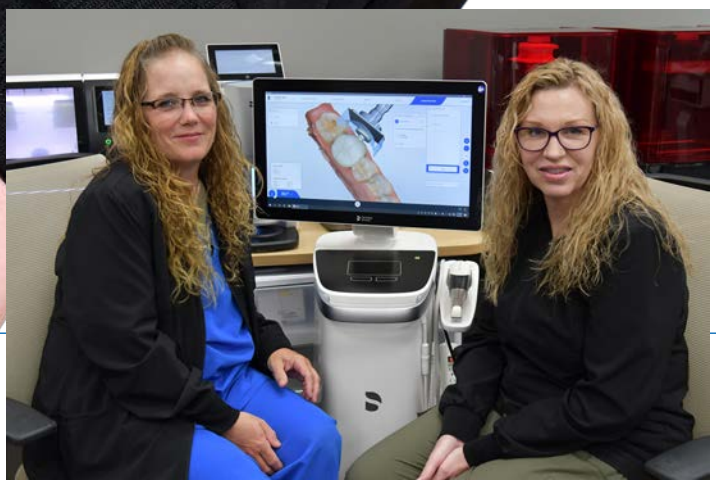
"The inspiration is to have a place that people can hang out in community and do community," Swisher said. "This is a really scary investment too, but I am really enjoying it. We keep saying we are done with projects, but it's hard. I get a vision in my head, and I just want to do it. I don't want to just think about it."

Vision, funding, excitement

In December 2020, Swisher asked the city of Minneapolis to issue bonds of up to $2 million with some sales tax exemptions and property tax abatements to ensure that her and her husband's investment in downtown would be sustainable.

In June she found out she was receiving a $20,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to fund solar panels for The Farm, which also provide power for the dental office. An electric car charging station is also planned behind the building.

Swisher said both



TOP: Becky Williamson and Stacy Flanery work in the new dental lab. They print crowns, make appliances and models and repair dentures.

ABOVE: Keir, Rowen, Madex and Ashley Swisher show where they marked the new concrete behind All Smiles Dental Care. (COURTESY PHOTO)

Bennington State Bank and Citizens State Bank & Trust have provided loan financing for the project. Ryan McMillan, vice president of Bennington State Bank, brought his four children in for checkups in June.

"It's great. It's got the entire town excited," McMillan said of the project. He said he hoped others would be inspired to invest in downtown Minneapolis.

Owen Kindall, vice president of Citizens State Bank & Trust, agreed that the project has potential to be transformative.

"It could really jump start a lot of other things within the community and the county," he said. "It just takes somebody like Ashley as a visionary to start it, and hopefully it snowballs into bigger things."

Swisher said she has been contacted by another local business owner who wants to find out more about how she funded the project.

"I think there are good things happening, for sure," she said.

Swisher had been making plans for the lab expansion and other improvements to the adjacent building when, in March 2020, COVID-19 forced the clinic to close for six weeks to all but emergency patients.

"When I found out we were going to need to shut down, I called my builders and said, 'OK, that plan that we have in place needs to start now.' We had been looking at starting the whole project three or four months later," she said. "I called Harbin Construction on a Thursday, and they came in the following Monday and started tearing into stuff. They moved really quickly."

Planting and cultivating relationships

In the process of renovating the old structure, workers uncovered several hidden treasures, including the entryway flooring that features three rings representing friendship, love and truth. The floor was installed by a tenant from the early 1900s – a fraternal organization known as the Odd Fellows. Other treasures, including a coal shovel, old liquor bottles and a piece of the old elevator beam that had been signed by several people in 1916, are now part of the décor.

Customers enter The Farm through a massive door painted to look like old barnwood. The building features original tin ceilings that were stripped and repainted. Swisher said Dave Sweat, who co-owns Auto-Tek in Minneapolis, was helpful in that process.

"The Farm and the Odd Fellows are all about – it sounds cheesy, but it really is a passion of ours – planting and cultivating relationships," Swisher said. "You are not going to invite people to play games at your house if you don't know them that well, but if they are playing games at the table next to you, you can get to know them."

Swisher, who grew up on a farm near Jewell, said she and her husband learned from the example set by their own parents about the importance of giving back to the community.

"We took a lot away from what we saw that they did, and we just want to do the same," she said. "Take care of people, and it's amazing, they will take care of you."

Making people smile

Swisher and the 14-member staff of her dental clinic, which happens to be all female, enjoy coming to work every day. She said she hasn't had difficulties with employee recruitment. Employees, like the patients, are willing to drive from across the area. Employees commute from Lincoln, Salina, Assaria, Lindsborg and Chapman.

"We have an extremely strong team," she said.

Employees were quick to respond when asked why they liked working there.

See **SMILES**, page 24

HONEY, from page 21

so it runs into a holding tank. The Labertews still use some equipment that was passed down from Sandy's uncles and father.

When they interact with the bees, the Labertews wear white suits because bees are supposedly less aggressive toward white. During circumstances when the bees might be riled up, they leave them alone.

"We're not stung much – we dress right, and we work the bees when we should," he said. Bees aren't fond of cloudy days, for example.

"They want to go out and fly, and they can't leave the hive because they're afraid it's going to rain," he said. "So, they're sitting there waiting for it to clear up, and they're mad."

He said working alfalfa fields also makes bees testy.

"Alfalfa has a pistil that's attached to a trigger, and the only way alfalfa produces nectar is when that trigger snaps," he said. "When they work alfalfa, they get kicked in the face all the time. They're not very happy."

It's tough out there for bees

An array of ailments and injuries can befall a worker bee and shorten its already short lifespan. The worker bees live an average of six weeks. Workers born in the summer tend to have shorter lives than workers born in the fall, which can go into semi-hibernation and survive until spring, Labertew said. Queens live one to two years on average.

In recent years, deadly mite infestations have become all too common in hives. Strong Kansas winds can shatter a bee's wings. Bees can also succumb to farm chemicals applied for crop protection. Neonicotinoid pesticides that have been banned in Europe because of their effect on pollinators are still allowed in the United States.

Sandy Labertew said aerial sprayers do a good job of notifying the apiary when they are working in the area, so that hives can be protected. However, seed treatments can also include pesticides that impact bees.

"There's just a lot of things out there anymore that the honeybee has to overcome, so it's pretty tough," she said.

Stan Labertew said government programs help cover the cost of replacing bees each year, but it can be difficult and stressful to tend hives that aren't thriving. Fewer people are doing it in Kansas, he said. He said in 1988 there were 47,000 commercial hives in the state. In 2020, there were 4,500.

"I guess we've kind of grown used to it, but we struggle to keep them alive," he said. "It's pretty hard for a little honeybee, and that's just what we have to deal with. Some years are worse than others, and we can't tell you why. It's nothing for us to lose 50 percent of our hives. We try to monitor it and do the best we can, but that's just where we're at."

Struggling hives are moved to shelter belts of trees on host farms where they have more protection from the elements. The boxes are wrapped in black tar paper, but bees can still get out on warmer days.

Once the temperature gets below 50 degrees, bees "pretty well shut down," Labertew said. "They go into semi-hibernation. They cluster with the queen in the middle, and they keep her warm. If it gets real cold, some of the bees on the outside will freeze, but the ball of bees will maintain that hive."

Hives that are strong get a trip to sunny California for the winter, but it's not a vacation. Most varieties of almond trees need cross-pollination and rely on commercial honeybees to get the job done. About two-thirds of the honeybees in the United States are shipped to California between January and March to ensure that there will be an almond crop, Labertew said.

The Labertews work with a beekeeper in California who places and monitors their hives. This year, they loaded a semi with about 400 boxes of bees. That's an improvement over last year, when none of the Labertews' hives were strong enough to go.

"If there are no bees, there will be no almonds," he said. ▪

SMILES, from page 23

"She's a mom, so if you have a kid problem, you go and you do what you need to do because she gets it," said Cheryl Peterson, who works in orthodontics.

Patient coordinator Kaely Jackson said her co-workers were more like sisters.

Family-child therapist Paige Holcom works on her laptop in The Bean coffee shop. Holcom will have her professional offices above the coffee shop.

A passion for dentistry

Swisher said she'd planned to go into accounting until one summer when she was in high school her older sister, who worked as a dental assistant, couldn't find anyone to fill in during her maternity leave. She got approval from the dentist to train her younger sister as a stand-in.

"I did that for the summer, and I absolutely fell in love with it," she said.

Although she started off with accounting classes at Bethany, she soon switched her focus. After graduation, she attended the dental school at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She worked in the summer for Leawood endodontists Dr. Robert Altomare and Dr. Steven Gish, and they "kept pouring the passion of dentistry into me."

"My business accounting start definitely plays a role in what I do now," she said. "I still do all my own bookkeeping and payroll because I enjoy it."

Swisher was recruited by the community and the Ottawa County Health Planning Commission in 2010 to purchase Dr. Fred Hargis Jr.'s practice when he retired. Kerm Wedel and Tom McGavran were instrumental in bringing Swisher to Minneapolis. Since then, the number of operatory rooms in her office has doubled from five to 10.

"We have kid-friendly rooms, and adults really like those, too," she said. "One of our staff is an artist who does some painting. We have decided to use Lego, superhero and astrology themes when she repaints our rooms."

No icky molds

Swisher said to succeed in a small-town practice where profit margins are slim, she does what she can to control costs – as long as it's not at the expense of service to patients. She said it's important to stay on top of the latest technology.

"Early on in my practice, I invested in a 3D radiographic unit, and I would not practice without it," she said. "That has been my No. 1 advice for new dentists – you don't know what you can't see, and radiographically, when you can see things in 3D imaging, it changes the way you practice. You find conditions that you are able to diagnose that you would not be able to with 2D imaging. To me, it's more about quality of care. It can be fun; it can be challenging; it can be stressful, but quality of care is improving all the time because of technology."

She said she makes every effort to stay current "because I don't want to be behind. If you wait too many years it's a lot harder to catch up."

In the newly expanded lab, Becky Williamson and Stacy Flanery operate a milling machine for making porcelain or Zirconia crowns, a 2,000-degree oven for curing teeth, a hood for soldering and two 3D printers. They can print crowns, make appliances and models and repair dentures.

"You never have to have any of the molding stuff in your mouth," Swisher said. "We scan, and then we can print and make whatever we need to make. We do a lot of orthodontic appliances. Before the end of the year, we will be able to print dentures and make them in a day. We will print the teeth, print the actual resin base and mold them together."

A cup of joe

When they need a coffee break, dental office employees can now head next door to "The Bean," as the coffee shop is called. It opened to customers May 24. In early June, the shop's best seller was the Caramel Delight Frappuccino. Fruit smoothies are also popular. Swisher said she tried to introduce healthy smoothies to the menu, but ultimately bowed to feedback from customers and made them sweeter.

"We were trying to do a quiet, soft opening, and the first day we had 150 people come through," Swisher said. "One guy posted one thing on Facebook, and we had 6,200 hits on our Facebook page in the first 36 hours.

"The community has been fascinatingly supportive, even outside communities, because the social media has been huge."

Minneapolis High School students who are taking an entrepreneurship class are helping staff the coffee shop. A $25,000 Ottawa County Community Foundation grant helped purchase some of the coffee equipment as part of an agreement to allow students to do scheduling, ordering and inventory, marketing, bookkeeping and other business functions for the shop. Swisher said there's plenty to be learned from working there, including the chemistry behind making coffee.

"You can grind the same beans three different ways, and guess what? You get a different amount, a different flavor – the chemistry part is really what's cool and what matters," she said.

She said in keeping with the farm theme, both the coffee shop and the brewery, which will be called "The Hops," will be recycling food waste and reusing items when possible. She said the goal is to use ingredients that are as farm fresh as possible.

"From one week of having the coffee shop, we've got three barrels of compost, between bananas and coffee grounds and the rinds of all the fresh fruit we are using in smoothies," she said. "We want to do some kind of composting with all of our brewery ingredients as well."

Swisher said from the dental practice to the brewery, the businesses may seem unrelated, but there is a common thread.

"We are trying to create experiences, so whether it's the dental practice or the coffee shop or the brewery, it's all about people, connections, and the education behind it," she said. ▪

Kyle Banman helps out in the coffee shop. In the fall, he will be the brew master for the new brewery opening upstairs.

Pickled Pink

Concordia women and others are tickled pink with new courts and the chance to play the game they love

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[CONCORDIA] What do a dog that lived in Washington state, a love of competition and a tight group of women in Concordia have in common? Pickleball, of course.

On any given Tuesday or Thursday afternoon – if the weather cooperates – a group of about a dozen women gather at Concordia City Park for a little friendly competition and a lot of healthy fellowship. They range in age from 63 to 80, and they are mostly retired, from a variety of careers. What brings them together is a love of pickleball, and each other.

Pickleball is a racket sport that is a bit of a cross between badminton and tennis. It is growing in popularity with players of all ages.

"It started here about six years ago when a group of retired teachers and other school district employees were playing pickleball on the tennis courts," said Kayleen Lewis, 65. "My cousin told me about it, and that's when I got introduced."

On Wednesday evenings, the ladies are joined by younger players who have adopted the game.

"It's a really cool mix of different folks, some retired, some still working, some as young as 19-20," said Shelly Farha, who at 63 is one of the younger regulars.

"The Wednesday group are young guns – but they don't mind playing us old people. The caliber of play is definitely elevated. They make us run more," she laughs.

Farha teaches at Cloud County Community College, Concordia, and has been playing with the group for about two years.

Lewis is retired from the post office, and recently retired again from her parttime gig at the local pharmacy – where she recruited some of the "young guns" such as Paul Rundus, 20.

Rundus is a Concordia native who will be heading to pharmacy school next fall. He plays most Wednesday nights but also joined the group for a few games on a Tuesday in May while on his lunch hour.

"He's the one who hits it the hardest," Farha says.

"Kayleen is the organizer. She tracks who plays, and hauls the balls and tape. She's also a parttime meteorologist, because she's the one who checks the weather every Sunday. Sunday night she sends the text out about the date and time and where we'll play."

Transforming the park

The pickle ball court as well as four tennis courts – one lined for both tennis and pickleball – and a basketball court, were all resurfaced in May of 2020.

The project was funded in part with a grant from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, but also garnered a lot of local support, said Ben Retter, a Concordia native who submitted the grant for the project. Retter and his wife, Tawni, collaborated with the city, CloudCorp and USD 333.

BEN RETTER

Retter said they used a surface called Sportcourt. It was initially less expensive than traditional resurfacing, and also maintenance is less costly. It has an 18-year warranty from the maker. The bright red makes a splash as you drive by the park.

"The school uses the park for recess, because it is located right here," Retter said, "so they were contributors as well."

Retter grew up in Concordia, graduated from K-State and spent 17 years at Cloud Ceramics before taking his current job as president of Manhattan-based Stone Industries. He has fond memories of playing basketball at City Park. He called the resurfacing of the courts "a transformation of my childhood playground."

"The basketball courts had 50-year-old metal rims with chains, and the surface was cracked and really bad," he said. "Now when you drive down 11th Street in Concordia, instead of seeing dilapidated green surfaces, you see this. For a community our size, we are blessed."

Several donors were alumni from out of

town, Retter said. "They grew up here and enjoyed playing on these courts. Other donors are recent pickleball enthusiasts. Some are people who grew up here, and their parents are now playing pickleball, so they donated to give back to them."

Picture L to R: Colleen Larsen, Shelly Horkman, Virginia Charbonneau, Carmen Johnson, Kayleen Lewis, Janice Hattan, Shelly Farha, Janice Swenson. Sitting: Nancy Collins

At the park, at the school, at the fair

The ball in pickleball is perforated, much like a whiffle ball. So, the park is not an ideal location if the weather is particularly windy – or for that matter if it is raining or during the winter.

The group made arrangements to use the gym at the middle school for indoor play. Lewis brings the tape, and they mark the courts on the gym floor. That worked great until COVID hit last year and the schools closed to the public.

"These courts (at the park) opened Memorial weekend last year," Lewis said "So when COVID hit, these courts were not open yet, and we got shut out of the middle school. So, I painted a court on my driveway."

"That's how diehard we are!" Farha laughed.

When the weather turned, the group got creative and reached out to the fair board. They were offered a building that was used to store items for 4-H.

"One of the Wednesday night gals found it. The fair board was going to let us use it as a donation," Lewis said. "Then we got in there, and they had those low-hanging florescent lights – well, that's not going to work."

"We all donated money, each of us, to get light fixtures upgraded," Farha said. "And there were several of us that went out and moved a ton of furniture and exhibits."

"Basically, I got on text message and said this is what we are going to need," Lewis recalled. "It was like $1,000. Within 45 minutes, I had $850 from everybody who played. One gal's husband is a heating and air guy, so they donated a lot of stuff at cost."

"The Blosser Foundation made a donation, and the fair board made up the difference," Farha shared. "They got an upgraded building out of the deal."

The pickle in pickleball

One of America's trendiest new competitive sports, pickleball began almost by accident by two friends who lived on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle.

After playing golf one Saturday in 1965, Joel Pritchard and his friend, Bill Bell, returned to Pritchard's home where they found their families sitting around with nothing to do. The property had an old badminton court, but they couldn't find a full set of rackets, so they improvised and started playing with ping-pong paddles and a perforated plastic ball. The ball bounced well on the asphalt surface, so they lowered the net more like a tennis court. The next weekend, they introduced friend Barney McCallum to the game. Soon, the three men created rules, keeping in mind the original purpose, which was to provide a game that the whole family could play together.

The game was officially named after the Pritchard's' dog, Pickles, who would chase the ball and run off with it.

PICKLEBALL: THE BASICS

- A fun sport that combines many elements of tennis, badminton and ping-pong.
- Played both indoors or outdoors on a badminton-sized court with a slightly modified tennis net.
- Played with a paddle and a plastic ball with holes.
- Played as doubles or singles.
- Can be enjoyed by all ages and skill levels.

From *USApickleball.org*

Competition and fellowship

Pickleball courts are laid out like tennis courts, but smaller. The game can be played as singles, but the Concordia group exclusively plays doubles. It allows for greater participation and also requires less movement. Not that these ladies can't get around.

Lewis and one other member of the group are playing on artificial knees, but you would not know it from watching them play. Nor would you guess that the oldest player, Nancy Collins, is 80.

"I'm one of four sisters, and we all play," Collins said. "My sister in Wisconsin is addicted, and my older sister in Virginia got a net for her birthday."

"She can get to balls I can't." Farha says of Collins. "There are times when she gets a ball, and it's like – 'How can she do that?' It's awesome."

For Collins, the competition is welcome.

"I was a PE major," she said. "At the time I graduated, there were no options for competition for women."

She taught adaptive PE, mostly in Concordia schools, and has been playing pickleball for about two years.

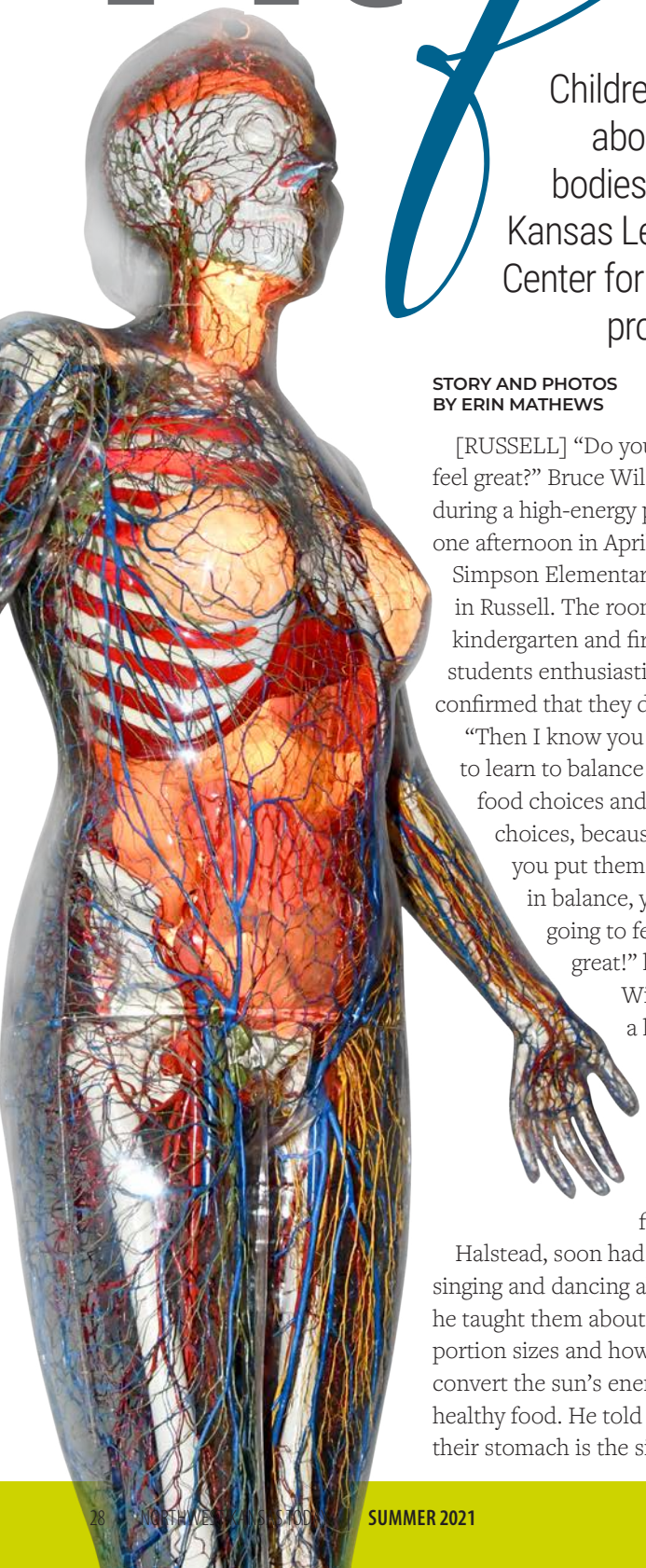
The women all enjoy the competition and the chance to get out and move, but they are in total agreement that the biggest benefit has been the time with like-minded neighbors.

"The beautiful thing is just that it's a great mix of people," Farha said. "It's a small town, so we've known each other our whole lives, but to come together and play a sport, we probably wouldn't be doing that if it weren't for pickleball."

Lewis agreed.

"The beauty of this is not just exercise but also fellowship. Last year we got together for a barbecue. That would not happen if pickleball hadn't brought us together." ▪

Fit and feeling fine



Children learn about their bodies during Kansas Learning Center for Health programs

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Kansas Learning Center for Health instructor Bruce Wilson utilized singing and dancing when teaching Simpson Elementary students in Russell about fitness and nutrition.

[RUSSELL] "Do you want to feel great?" Bruce Wilson asked during a high-energy program one afternoon in April at Simpson Elementary School, in Russell. The roomful of kindergarten and first-grade students enthusiastically confirmed that they did.

"Then I know you want to learn to balance your food choices and fitness choices, because when you put them together in balance, you're going to feel great!" he said.

Wilson, a health instructor for the Kansas Learning Center for Health, Halstead, soon had kids singing and dancing along as he taught them about nutrition, portion sizes and how plants convert the sun's energy into healthy food. He told the kids their stomach is the size of both fists put together and holds about three cups of food: Ideally, a half cup grain, a half cup fruit, one cup vegetables, a half cup protein and a half cup dairy.

He advised trying to avoid empty calories, launching into a catchy tune about the "least nutritious, most-fattening, most good-for-nothing food ingredient in existence."

"When your school day has ended
It's highly recommended
To have a little snack as you unwind
But before your snackage
You better check the package
There's one ingredient you don't want to find."

"High fruc-tose cornnnn sy-rup," the children enthusiastically chimed in on the chorus.

No need to sing

Wilson said teaching young kids about food and fitness requires a bit more singing and dancing than when he teaches older children about how their bodies would be changing as they grow.

"When I'm teaching puberty, it sells itself," he said. "The male and female reproductive systems completely sell

themselves. They don't need me to sing about it."

Except when COVID-19 intervened, Wilson traveled Northwest Kansas over the past two years, bringing health and nutrition information to schoolchildren as part of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation's

NWKansas LEARNS initiative. During the "reverse field trips," in which a presenter comes to schools instead of school buses bringing children to the health education center in Halstead, students learn a variety of information promoting healthy lifestyles.

"It's been really nice to be able to serve that part of the state, and it's only going to help us grow, so we appreciate that opportunity," said Carrie Herman, executive director of the Kansas Learning Center for Health.

Through its age-appropriate curriculum, the center offers presentations on farm-to-family, body systems, dental health, nutrition, drug abuse prevention, human reproduction, teen sexual health and healthy relationships. But puberty – one of those topics parents and classroom teachers aren't always comfortable discussing – is by far the most popular.

CARRIE HERMAN

"Kids have a lot of very valid questions, and if they don't have somebody they feel comfortable asking, at least we're here trying to help," Herman said. "All of our programs meet or exceed the state's Next Generation Science and Health standards."

Nothing but positive

Smith Center Elementary School Principal Michelle Stamm said this year Wilson taught an introduction to body systems to fourth-graders; puberty to fifth-graders, and human reproduction to the sixth grade.

She said Wilson was an "amazing" presenter, and the Kansas Learning Center for Health materials were "spot on."

"I've heard nothing but positive responses," she said. "I've heard no negative."

She was so impressed that she has accepted a position on the center's board. She said in the past the school had tried different programs to inform kids about puberty. In recent years, the subject had not been presented at all.

"When this opportunity came along, we jumped right on it," she said. "It's the best program we've had. We've tried different programs and presenters, and this is top-notch."

That trusted adult

Herman said the center's presenters always stress to talk to a trusted adult.

"I think sometimes kids will get online and find sources of information that are so inappropriate," she said. "That's why we want to help educate and make sure kids learn properly. We're giving information to young people to help them make better choices."

Founded in 1965, the Kansas Learning Center for Health has educated more than half a million children and adults about their health. Dr. Irene Koeneke founded the center in memory of her husband, Dr. Arthur Hertzler, a well-known physician who, around the turn of the previous century, traveled the Halstead area by horse and buggy while operating a hospital and clinic.

Salina graduates who toured the center decades ago on a school field trip still remember their first glimpse of "Valeda," a clear plastic female anatomical mannequin whose internal organs light up. Valeda – purchased in 1965 from her maker in Cologne, Germany, as a centerpiece for the health care museum – is one of only two such mannequins in the United States that still functions.

Families who can make a trip to Halstead can view Valeda, as well as the center's newest exhibit – a miniature farm-to-family diorama showing how grain, meat and dairy products become part of dinner. The small, colorful museum features several other fascinating, interactive exhibits as well.

Ambition for good nutrition

When a trip to Halstead isn't possible, the reverse field trips give students the opportunity to learn important information about how their bodies work so they can make healthy choices.

After school, one Simpson Elementary student pointed Wilson out to her father.

"There's that funny guy!" she said.

It wasn't just children who were paying attention to Wilson's performance.

"I've been watching what I eat and thinking about it more," kindergarten teacher Debbie Zachman said after the program. "The kids really enjoyed getting up and moving. It was a great way for our littles to learn about nutrition. They talked about it yesterday at breakfast, too."

Wilson, a Wichita native, previously spent a decade touring schools across the United States performing his own nutrition and fitness program called "Kid Power – Operation Lunch Line." After two years as the health instructor primarily responsible for schools in the 26 counties served by the Hansen Foundation, he is excited to have accepted a pastoral calling with the United Methodist Church. The area's new health education instructor, Aisha Moss, of Rexford, starts this month and is looking forward to meeting Northwest Kansas kids.

"We're excited to serve some new schools and grow our relationship with that area," Herman said. ▪

Making a Splash!

Beloit man takes home gold and more gold in Senior Olympics swimming events

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BELOIT] When Bob Severance gets in the pool at a Senior Olympics event, he's in it to win it. His collection of more than 160 gold medals shows that he usually does.

Then again, "let's face it. It's confession time," he said.

"Uh-oh, he's going to let the truth get in the way of a good story," said his son, Fred.

It turns out Severance, 94, has a decided advantage: He's typically the only swimmer in his age group. However, he can't win by default. He still has to swim.

"The joke is I don't know whether I'm out-swimming them or just out-living them," the elder Severance said. "The answer is, 'Whatever works.' "

Severance keeps himself in competition form by swimming for about 45 minutes a day, six days a week in the natatorium in the NCK Wellness Center. The pool is located in the Severance Student Union – named for none other than Bob Severance – on the NCK Tech campus.

Severance was the college's third director, and he's a big reason that the pool exists. Many of the names on the donor board were people who gave money for the pool, dedicated in 1993, because he asked them to.

"I twisted a lot of arms for that place out there," he said. "When people said, 'That will never fly,' I said, 'Give me a try.' "

Now he's glad he made the effort, and he continues to volunteer eight to 12 mornings a month to make the place run. Severance serves as the morning lifeguard, rising at 4:15 a.m. to say his devotions and pack a small lunch before heading to the pool.

"I take the tarp off the spa and get it started, check the chemicals and try to get the doors open by 10 till 6," he said. "When I'm ready, I go turn the lock, and they come streaming in."

He said nearly 30 people regularly come to swim and do water exercises during his five-hour shift.

"When I'm lifeguarding, I just have two rules: If you're going to drown, don't do it on my shift, and no skinny dipping," he quipped.

Afternoons at the new pool

Severance, who grew up in Beloit, said he learned to swim in eighth grade, around the time the city installed its first swimming pool.

"I couldn't believe it when you could go swimming for a dime or have a season ticket for $3. We just practically lived there in the afternoon," he said.

At the close of those lazy summer afternoons came real life. He graduated from Beloit High School in 1944, just in time to enter the Navy and serve as a trombone player in the Navy band

Bob Severance displays a few of his gold medals.

during World War II. He graduated from Kansas State University and became a vocational agriculture teacher in Simpson for 13 years. There, the FFA students he mentored won a national award for their work to establish a rural fire district to serve parts of Mitchell, Cloud and Ottawa counties.

Then he was chosen as the first staff member of the newly opened North Central Kansas Area Vocational Technical School (now NCK Tech.) He later became its director, a position he held for 25 years, retiring in 1992 after 28 years of service.

The NCK Wellness Center pool is located inside Severance Student Union, named for Bob Severance, the third director of NCK Tech, who secured many of the donations that paid for construction of the natatorium.

Swimming to success

Severance said he wasn't an especially good swimmer, and he never swam competitively until 2007. That was the year he went to Salina and competed in his first senior games. He brought home four gold medals – for the 50-meter breast stroke, 50-meter back stroke, 100-meter back stroke and 50-meter freestyle – and he was hooked.

"I never participated in a swim meet in my life until I went to Senior Olympics," he said. "There's some of those guys that just go wild. I paddle down. I paddle back. I don't care. I take my time. My two goals in all this are first, don't drown, and second, don't get towed in. I'm under no pressure."

He continued to dominate Salina senior games swimming events until 2010, when he discovered he could also win gold at the Kansas Senior Olympics in Topeka. After that, he began traveling even farther. Since 2012, he's won gold in competitions in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota and Oklahoma. Quite the opposite of families where parents spend the weekends hustling student athletes off to games, the Severance children transport their father to his events.

Those events were canceled for most of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so Severance was glad to have the opportunity to return to competition pools this year.

"We were in Wichita on Jan. 8 to get him his first shot, and it was like he was sitting there tapping his watch trying to figure out when the second shot was going to go in so he could go back to swimming full time," Fred Severance said. "It was a big thing. It was a huge thing."

Olympic dreams

Bob Severance will turn 95 in December, but he became eligible to compete in the 95 to 99 category as of Jan. 1. By June, he'd already racked up 11 gold medals in two competitions in Iowa, and he was planning to compete in Topeka in September.

"The best thing about it is that the people he has met along the way could not be nicer," Fred Severance said. "I think all of them see themselves at 95 still going to Senior Olympics and still being able to get out there and accomplish. He's a very popular selfie subject."

One of the people Severance became acquainted with was the former governor of South Dakota, whom he competed against in 2019. Each man swam away with three gold medals and three silver medals.

"The governor was some sort of local hero, and he had this huge entourage," Fred Severance said.

At the most recent competition in Des Moines on June 13, Severance was the only Kansan. The next oldest competitor was an 88-year-old woman. The next oldest man was 81.

"I keep asking myself, 'Do you really like to do this?' Yes, I do. I enjoy it," he said.

The competitions keep him swimming, and the swimming keeps him healthy.

"I have a different philosophy on exercise," he said. "So many say you need to be jogging. Jogging takes your knees, your ankles, your hips. Swimming is the most stress-free exercise there is, but I'm not going to make a big case of it. If you want to jog, be my guest."

He said he really wants to serve as an example for other people.

"The main reason I do things like this is people can say, 'Well, Bob Severance can do it. It can't be too tough.' Really. I want to get them off their dead ends and get some exercise," he said.

Severance said his inspiration was Ralph Waldo McBurney, a former Mitchell County extension agent who moved to Quinter, where he lived to be 106 and stayed active his whole life. He took up long-distance running in his mid-60s and began competing in the Senior Olympics and World Masters events in his 70s.

McBurney won 10 gold medals in track and field events – even the high jump, Severance said – and wrote his autobiography entitled "My First 100 Years: A Look Back from the Finish Line." He also worked as a beekeeper and was recognized as the oldest worker in America.

Severance, like McBurney, hopes to hit the triple digits.

"My ambition, of course, is to live to be 100," he said. "I'm a positive action thinker. There is good wherever you are. Also, I'm kind of a nut on aging."

"He's for it," Fred said. ▪

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