

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

# NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Fall 2021 | VOLUME 3, ISSUE 2

Feature Story

## **DOWNTOWN TRANSFORMED**

Using public and private funds, downtown Salina has undergone historic restoration and rejuvenation

See Page 4

## **TELLING THE TALE**

Kansas Storytelling Festival brings acclaimed performers to Downs

See Page 10

## **SUPREME SACRIFICE**

USS Oklahoma crewman laid to rest in Ellsworth nearly 80 years after Pearl Harbor attack

See Page 30



# Inside this issue



Northwest Kansas Today is a publication of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation  
P.O. Box 187, Logan, KS 67646

#### 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.

#### BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Doug Albin  
Carol Bales  
Warren Gfeller  
Rhonda Goddard  
Robert Hartman  
Cy Moyer  
Brien Stockman

#### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Erin Mathews  
Betsy Wearing, editor

#### CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS

Erin Mathews  
Betsy Wearing

#### PUBLICATION DESIGN

Julie Hess Design

#### CONTACT US

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](mailto:NWKansasToday@danehansenfoundation.org).

#### SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

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](http://www.danehansenfoundation.org).

#### CORRECTION

The location of Rock City was incorrect in the Summer 2021 Issue. Rock City is located in Ottawa County.

## Downtown Transformed 4

With the addition of a giant mural, the restored tower of the historic Stiefel Theatre and millions more in transformational investments in new businesses and restaurants, downtown Salina is a destination not to be missed.

## On the Big Screen 8

Concordia Broadway Plaza offers a gathering spot and green space that is giving people more reasons to come downtown.

## Telling the Tale 10

The 27th annual Kansas Storytelling Festival in Downs offered tall tales, ghost stories and plenty of wit and wisdom.

## Cattleman's Chorus 14

Max Haverfield loves being on the ranch – and on the stage. The Winona-area rancher produces Christmas and patriotic concerts throughout the area.

## Czech It Out 16

Wilson's annual festival offers fun and cultural heritage for this Czech community.

## Thanks to Dolly and Dane 18

Area children are reaping the benefits from participating in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, their parents say.

## Live with Purpose 21

A new store in downtown Hays features specialty furniture and gifts made by skilled local craftspeople: individuals served by Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas.

## Treasure Hunt 24

The Highway 36 Treasure Hunt and the Highway 24 Garage Sales offer something for everyone – from the serious buyer to the casual bargain hunter.

## Sunny Side Up 26

Dennis Wright and his father, Don, decided to start producing a product instead of simply growing a commodity on their Bird City-area farm. The result is Wright Farms Sunflower Oil.

## Burr Oak Blooms 28

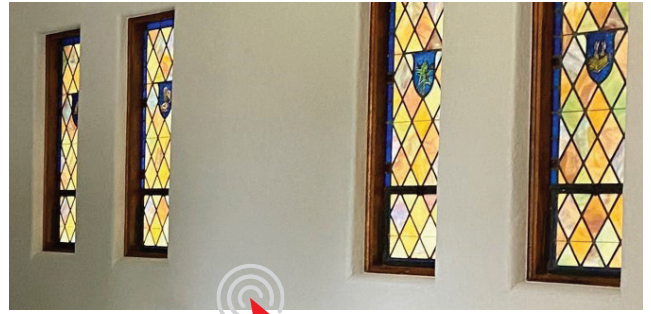
About 150 sunflowers made from old farm implements and other scrap metal are brightening Burr Oak. It all started with Amy Reed's vision.

## Supreme Sacrifice 30

After nearly 80 years, World War II Navy Fireman 1st Class Walter S. Belt, Jr. came home to Ellsworth. Belt was among those killed on the USS Oklahoma during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

**ON THE COVER:** Guido van Helten, renowned Australian artist, puts the finishing touches on the 100-foot-tall mural that covers 3 sides of the former H.D. Lee elevator on north Santa Fe Ave. in Salina. The Mural at the Mill is part of a multi-million-dollar rejuvenation of downtown Salina.





*Find more online!*

After a church in Gove closed, the community came together to transform the building into the Gove Community Center. The building also houses a fitness center and a community storm shelter.

Learn more at [danehansenfoundation.org](http://danehansenfoundation.org).

**Welcome** to our tenth issue of *Northwest Kansas Today*! This issue is a nod to both the rich history and the bright future of our corner of the state.

Many Kansas towns celebrated sesquicentennial (150th) anniversaries this year, including Dane Hansen's hometown of Logan. Read about a unique project in Jewell County where residents of Burr Oak used discarded metals – mostly farm implements – to create 150 sunflower sculptures to honor their community's heritage and anniversary celebration.

The return of a Pearl Harbor veteran's remains to his hometown in Ellsworth reminds us that Kansans have played a role in securing freedom for our country, and we honor those who served.

Today in Northwest Kansas, communities are moving forward. Read about the significant changes in Salina and Concordia, and how those communities are offering residents and visitors multiple reasons to come downtown to work, play, shop, and eat.

Read about an innovative Kansas farm that has incorporated manufacturing into its business model, and about how associations centered on main Kansas highways are drawing folks in with annual sales that highlight the collaborative nature of our communities.

Long-time Northwest Kansas organizations are also featured, with a look at new opportunities for our residents with developmental disabilities and the return of a beloved event, the Kansas Storytelling Festival.

It's good to look back and celebrate where we have been, but at the Hansen Foundation, our focus is firmly on the future of Northwest Kansas, and we believe that future is bright. Our trustees continue to review and respond to ideas presented through

grant request every month, and at the same time are working on significant issues that affect all our towns, such as the availability of housing and childcare, early childhood literacy, the growth and development of local community foundations and more. Recently we revised and affirmed our primary mission and goals:

The Dane G. Hansen Foundation is committed to providing opportunities for the people of Northwest Kansas to enjoy the highest possible quality of life. Fulfillment of our mission is predicated on three specific goals:

- Strengthening and supporting our communities
- Creating an environment for growth
- Increasing economic opportunities

The Foundation created this magazine to showcase the good things happening in our region, and I hope you find it as uplifting as I do. Northwest Kansas is a great place to live and work ... and fly!

Brien Stockman, Trustee





# DOWNTOWN TRANSFORMED

Using public and private funds, Salina Downtown has undergone historic restoration and rejuvenation

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[SALINA] The children loom large above the buildings and power lines. Their game of *Ring Around the Rosie* has attracted families, photographers, and an array of other curiosity seekers. That was the plan all along.

The mural of the children painted on the grain elevator of the former H.D. Lee Flour Mill at 343 N. Santa Fe in downtown Salina was completed in early October.

It is one of several murals and street art projects planned downtown by the Salina Kanvas Project, with the hope of sparking conversations, inspiring onlookers, and providing a catalyst for further growth of the community. The largest piece is the mill mural, an almost photographic picture of children playing, done by world-renowned Australian artist Guido van Helten.

The inclusion of the arts is important to the downtown revitalization, says Salina Arts and Humanities Director Brad Anderson.

“Salina has long had a rich cultural arts tradition,” he said. “I am thrilled that there has been such strong private sector support for the Kanvas Project and other aesthetic initiatives in the last few years. It is the true sign of a visionary and healthy community.”

There are many visible

changes to Salina’s downtown. The mural might be the largest, but it is just one piece of the vast change the area has undergone.

“In the ’80s when the (Salina Central) mall was built, and then restaurants and hotels, the focus was on the south part of town,” said Leslie Bishop, executive assistant for Salina Downtown, Inc. “I feel like everything is coming back this way.

“I believe in my heart of hearts that Salina downtown has something for everyone: Lots of different businesses – Atlas Optical, Vernon Jewelers – where the fourth generation of the family is becoming certified, On the Pot (ceramics), Dagney’s Ice Cream, special order boutiques, three florists, a photography studio, Sharp Performance classes and gym, The Temple co-working space. There’s so much and such a variety.

“There are a lot of restaurants, too, favorites like Martinelli’s and Blue

Skye Brewery and Eats, and new ones like Auntie Rita’s Jamaican Cuisine, Old Chicago and Barolo Grille.”

A walk through downtown Salina today is certainly a different experience than the same stroll just four years ago. That’s when a group of citizens – some who were already investing

in downtown and others who were eager to see the heart of the community again flourish – came together to form Salina 2020, with a goal of revitalizing downtown Salina.

## Building on a vision

“Salina 2020 was the group that served as the visionary and master developer for the project,” Bishop said. “It started in 2017 with the new fieldhouse, a \$12 million public-private partnership.”

Located on the corner of North Fifth and Ash streets, the Salina Fieldhouse is now owned and operated by the City of Salina. The Parks and Recreation Department

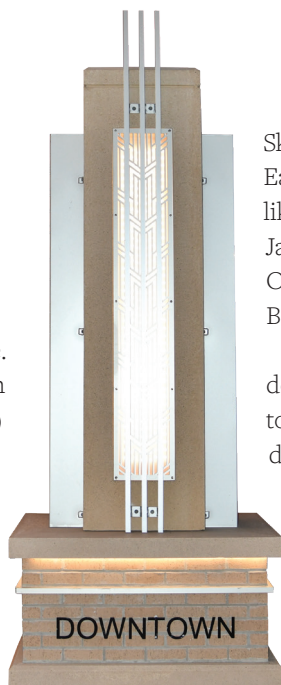
books the multi-use facility with basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer, baseball practices, football, and pickle ball. Private parties also can be booked.

“The fieldhouse got the conversation going,” said Guy Walker, president at Blue Beacon and a member of Salina 2020. “Then the question was, ‘How can this be leveraged into something larger?’

“It was a true public-private partnership with the city and donors, and later was important to the rest of the project when we went to pursue STAR (Sales Tax and Revenue) bonds for other enhancements.”

After the fieldhouse came the renovation of the former Bank of America building on North Santa Fe Avenue into the state-of-the-art KU School of Medicine and Nursing. Again, the project was completed with private donations, including support from the KU Endowment, Salina Regional Health Foundation, and the Dane G. Hansen Foundation.

With those two significant additions, the area rapidly began to change. A new bowling and entertainment facility, The Alley, opened just northwest of the fieldhouse. Multiple new restaurants and businesses opened.



LESLIE BISHOP





The Mural at the Mill wraps around 3 sides of the historic H.D. Lee elevator. The artist, Guido van Helten, used a selfie provided by Salina children to create the piece.



*“Salina has long had a rich cultural arts tradition. I am thrilled that there has been such strong private sector support for the Kansas Project and other aesthetic initiatives in the last few years. It is the true sign of a visionary and healthy community.”*

BRAD ANDERSON | SALINA ARTS AND HUMANITIES DIRECTOR

Left: The original Lee Hardware building has been recently restored, adding 53 apartments. A nod to the history of Lee Jeans is found in the mill mural – where the children are wearing an assortment of denim pants.

Walker has been involved in many of the downtown changes. Blue Beacon’s hotel division, Lighthouse Properties, built a new Homewood Suites by Hilton, on the corner of Santa Fe and Mulberry. It includes a popular new restaurant, YaYas Euro Bistro. YaYas’ other locations are all in large urban communities. The hotel opened in June 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The hotel is doing very well – the first year of operation has exceeded our expectations,” Walker said. “We are seeing a lot of interstate travelers,

also Kansas tourists – people coming to Salina downtown.”

Some visitors are drawn to the area by the historic Stiefel Theatre, located a block north. The Stiefel also benefited from the revitalization effort, including a rebuild of the original lighted tower, a new state-of-the-art sound system, and refurbished community and artist space. The Stiefel has become a major concert venue since it was restored and reopened in 2003.

### Lee Jeans Connection

Downtown was already home to multiple loft homes,

but the number of downtown residences increased when, on the north end of Santa Fe, about a block south of the mill, the restoration of the original Lee Hardware building was completed, adding 53 apartments. A second phase is planned in a sister building next door.

The Lee building is an important part of the history of Salina. It is the birthplace for Lee Jeans. The H.D. Lee Mercantile Company opened its first garment factory in Salina in 1912, where it produced famous Lee overalls and work jackets. The company

grew quickly, and in search of a larger labor pool, the headquarters moved to Kansas City in 1917.

A nod to the history of Lee Jeans is found in the mill mural – where the children are wearing an assortment of denim pants.

### Infrastructure and art

The overall project has been called the largest, most transformative project in the 160 years of Salina’s downtown.

As with any significant renovation, some of the work is less visible. The project

See **DOWNTOWN**, page 6





Left: The tower of the historic Stiefel Theatre was restored to mimic the building's original construction. The tower, along with the Art Deco crosswalks, create a beautiful display of changing colors that light up the night sky downtown.

#### DOWNTOWN, from page 5

included some important infrastructure changes, primarily a new, \$1.3 million water line down the center lane of Santa Fe. When it was completed, the center turn lane was replaced with beautiful, 100-year-old brick that was uncovered during construction.

Other aesthetic changes included new crosswalks with Art Deco style overhangs that light up at night. New benches, landscaping and street signs



GUY WALKER

also have been installed. New sidewalks along Santa Fe include

different brick designs that also reflect the Art Deco designs prevalent in much of the original architecture of the downtown buildings.

"Design work for the streetscape was by HDR out of Kansas City," Walker said.

The mill mural is only one of the many ways that art has been incorporated into downtown. Other murals supported by the Kanvas Project include one

located at The Yard – another new business located on south 4th street. The Yard is an indoor baseball and softball facility offering camps, private lessons, team and individual opportunities and state-of-the-art equipment. Additional mural projects are in the planning stages.

Sculpture Tour Salina provides a variety of original sculptures located all over the downtown streets. Between 15 and 25 sculptures are selected and installed each May to create an exhibit that changes annually. Because sculptures are also available for purchase, more than 40 sculptures are now a permanent part of the community, including 10 People's Choice Award winning sculptures voted on by the community and purchased by the city.

#### A true community investment

The downtown project has been supported by a variety of funding mechanisms, but private donations have been the most significant. The mill

mural was funded completely with a private donation from Salinans John and Kim Vanier.

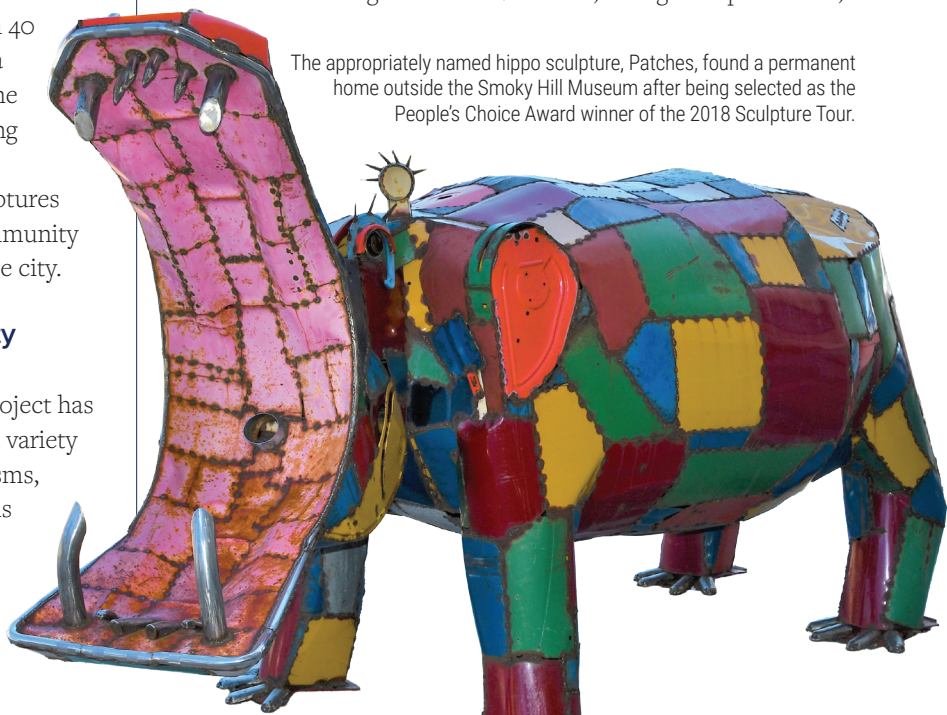
The STAR bonds added approximately \$19.1 million additional dollars. The bonds are a financing tool that allow Kansas municipalities to finance major commercial, entertainment or tourism projects.

According to the Salina 2020 website, including projects already completed and those underway, an estimated \$160 million, including about \$105 million in private dollars, will be invested downtown. Part of the financing will be

repaid from increased sales tax revenue generated by visitors to the revitalized area.

Bishop says the sales tax for the downtown district was increased in April to 10.25 percent. The sales tax in the rest of the community is 9.25 percent. "Part of the revenue goes to CID (Community Improvement District) funding, part to community programming, aesthetics, and support for downtown staff," Bishop said.

"This downtown work has been challenging and rewarding – very fun," said Walker, who grew up in Salina,



The appropriately named hippo sculpture, Patches, found a permanent home outside the Smoky Hill Museum after being selected as the People's Choice Award winner of the 2018 Sculpture Tour.





New landscaping, benches, lighting, crosswalks, and in-laid brick sidewalks all reflect the Art Deco design elements found in many of the original downtown buildings. The project has brought new businesses and more visitors to the heart of Salina.

moved away and then returned to join the family business. “I find it exciting. Everybody hoped it would create organic growth – and it seems to have done that.”

Blue Beacon is still actively working on several downtown projects, either as partners with other investors or independently.

“We are currently working on freeing up some additional first-floor space for retail,” Walker said. The company purchased the former UMB (United Missouri Bank) building at Santa Fe and Iron. They remodeled it and named it the Hoffman Building to honor the family that brought the bank to Salina.

“UMB owned the whole building but did not need that much space. They were looking for a buyer and hoping to consolidate the bank to the first floor. We have new tenants on the second and fourth floors and only the third is yet to be leased,” Walker said in September. “The Hoffman Building had not been renovated for 65 years. That project is one where we are working to bring daytime

people downtown – office jobs. Tenant-ready storefronts and second-floor office or residential will continue to be our goal for additional buildings moving forward.”

Another investment group with local ties, Grassroots Efforts LLC, has purchased property at 141-143 S. Santa Fe and renovated it for new retail businesses. Apron Strings kitchen store, Auntie Rita’s Jamaican restaurant, and the Baron Mushroom design store have opened there.

Walker said only about 2,500 square feet of the retail space at that location is still available.

“Those are the kinds of things that are exciting. As storefronts are renovated, they lease quickly. We are hoping to see more of that,” he said. “I’ve been surprised. Usually, to open a business an inquiry might say the time frame is a year. We are hearing from people who want to move in and open within a few months.”

Walker points out that the scope of the project was significant, and many people have played a role in its success.

“It’s important to recognize

that although Salina 2020 accepted the role as master developer, the project would be nothing more than a vision without the contribution of countless individuals and businesses that were willing to invest in downtown Salina,” he said.

### More to come

There are other downtown properties waiting for development, and Walker says funding is still available to help new downtown tenants.

“There are still incentives available for new businesses to locate downtown, and for existing downtown businesses that were open when the project began to make improvements,” he said. “It is a pay-as-you-go incentive – you get a portion of the project costs paid back using CID (Community Improvement District) and TIF (Tax Increment Financing) funding. There is significant funding left for future projects.”

Already underway and shooting for an opening in early 2022 is The Garage – a car museum and interactive space for all things automotive,

located at 134 S. 4th.

Another new restaurant with local ownership, The Prickly Pear, is being constructed next to one of the main outdoor gathering areas, Campbell Plaza, in the 100 block of South Santa Fe. Bishop said the plan is to have outdoor seating at the restaurant.

The plaza is undergoing significant renovation. A new stage and public outdoor seating will be installed. There will also be a green space where people can spread a blanket to listen to the performers. That should be completed in the spring.

The stage previously located at Campbell Plaza was moved to the lot on the southwest corner of Santa Fe and Ash, near the 67401 mural – a popular photo spot.

Stage access will be booked through Salina Downtown, Inc. on a first come, first served basis, Bishop said.

The plazas and stages are used throughout the year for First Friday events, Sculpture Tour openings and multiple parades and festivals. There is always something happening downtown. ■



# On the BIG SCREEN



Keep up with what's going on at Concordia Broadway Plaza at <https://www.broadwayplaza.concordia.com/calendar> or on Facebook: [Concordia Broadway Plaza](#).

## Broadway Plaza brings fun, life to Concordia's downtown

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS**

[CONCORDIA] When Tammy Britt looks out the window of her downtown loft apartment, she sees something she didn't used to see: people – young parents pushing strollers, people walking their dogs – just a lot more people.

Since the Broadway Plaza was created five years ago, there is fun to be had in downtown Concordia.

The outdoor gathering spot is bringing life to downtown.

People come

to toss a football on thick grass or enjoy lunch at a picnic table. There are outdoor events and live performances, a splash pad for kids to play in and a jumbo screen where movies, sporting events and locally produced videos are shown.

"Being downtown, I see all kinds of stuff at all hours, so I know how much it's used – it's used a lot," Britt said. "So many crazy things happen there. It's just delightful."

Luckily for her, the soda fountain at Britt's Fountain & Gifts is a popular stop on the way to the plaza. And Britt's isn't the only downtown business that benefits from the increased foot traffic.

"Girlfriends will get together from work, and, if it's not too hot, they'll come and get lunch here and take it to the Broadway Plaza," Britt said. "They'll

sit down there out in the fresh air, talking, no one's bothering them. That's fun, too."

In September, stunt comedian Wacky Chad bounced onto the plaza stage on his pogo stick as part of the plaza's fifth anniversary celebration. The weekend before that, homecoming candidates were introduced and a video about each was shown on the jumbo screen. The king and queen were crowned at the football game later that night.

The plaza has been used for all kinds of happy occasions, including community celebrations, class reunions, craft and vendor shows, an art walk, birthday parties, pep rallies, ice cream socials, family reunions, car shows, wedding receptions and church events. At the end of each school year, kids who meet their reading goals are rewarded with a field trip to the plaza to watch a movie. There are tailgate parties while the Kansas City Royals, K-State Wildcats and Kansas City Chiefs play on the big screen.





On concert nights, food trucks are available. During many other events, local nonprofit groups raise funds for their cause by serving up sloppy joes, ice pops and other treats at the plaza concession stand.

The plaza gets even more festive at holiday time. There's Halloween fun, and the Easter bunny hides treat-filled eggs there. At Christmas, each of the letters to Santa delivered to a big red mailbox receives a handwritten reply, and community members help decorate a 20-foot tree.

### More people, more business

Kim Reynolds, executive director of CloudCorp, an economic development organization, said more people downtown has been a good thing for the businesses there.

"From an economic development standpoint, you can visit with businesses downtown and they will tell you that their traffic by far increases anytime there is an event down at the plaza," Reynolds said. "Yes, it's quality of life, and it's beautiful, and it gets people out and about and down into that area, but then it draws people into our downtown businesses. It's kind of revitalizing those areas, too."

The city contracts with CloudCorp to manage the plaza at a cost of about \$15,000 a year. A groundskeeping crew takes care of the manicured lawn, and a staff member oversees scheduling and assisting with events.

The 15,000-square-foot space is clean and inviting, but mostly just wide open. That makes it flexible for the most uses. People can bring their lawn chairs or picnic blankets, and organizations can erect tents to suit the needs of a particular event. Gates in the perimeter fence can be closed if the space has been rented for a private event.

"Visually, it might appear kind of plain, but it's just a tremendous flex space," said Concordia Mayor Chuck Lambertz. "It really is a blank canvas that can be adapted for any use. It just works so well."

### Devastating fire

Concordia's downtown, like many downtowns, was lined with commercial buildings and had little room for outdoor

green space until the night of April 14, 1999. That's when a driving wind ensured that a fire sparked in a TV and appliance store spread quickly, leaving three downtown buildings in rubble and a fourth heavily damaged. After the mess was cleared, Concordia was left with a vacant lot at the intersection of Sixth and Broadway.

Various uses were proposed over the years – at one point a monument company looked at displaying headstones there – but nothing stuck. Then in 2014,



Stunt comedian Wacky Chad made the fifth anniversary of Concordia Broadway Plaza a memorable occasion for about 1,000 people who participated in the Sept. 23 celebration. (COURTESY PHOTO)

the city purchased the property for \$75,000 to convert it into a downtown gathering space. The idea was to utilize tax increment financing (TIF), which would allow the city to pay for improvements with future property tax revenue increases.

The commercial downtown area was part of a TIF district designated in 2000. Twenty-year bonds had been issued to complete several public and private projects, mostly along the Highway 81 corridor, including an access road and other improvements to accommodate a new Walmart Supercenter. Funds collected from property taxes on the new or improved property in the TIF district paid

off the bonds.

"In that time, our assessed valuation has increased by over \$4 million in that area," said City Manager Amy Lange. "Using this public financing mechanism, the city has invested \$9 million in the TIF district."

Money remained available as the bond period neared its end. That's when the idea of transforming the vacant lot full of patchy grass into a drawing card for downtown started gaining traction.

In June 2014, a tent was erected on the lot and community members were invited to talk about what features the space should have. More than 100 people came to express their ideas, and there were "a lot of central themes," Lambertz said. Those included a screen that could show movies, a concession stand, restrooms, a splash pad, and a stage.

To stay within the \$1.2 million budget, some aspects of the plan were cut – including an area of fixed seating initially planned near the stage.

"We wanted something that would be different than we had in our city parks already and that would be a nice place for people to gather, but the flip side would be kind of an economic driver to draw people into downtown," said Lambertz.

### The jumbo screen

One popular feature is the 20-by-12-foot, free-standing LED screen presented in front of the red-brick sidewall of the adjacent Coldwell Banker building. The screen is similar to what you'd see in professional and college football stadiums. It can show movies, broadcast cable television, slideshows, videos or regularly scheduled advertising at any time, day or night.

Nicki Reed, administrative assistant for CloudCorp, is also the Broadway Plaza coordinator. She can use her smart phone as one of the ways to manage what's displayed on the screen – whether it's a happy birthday ad for a 7 year old or the opening scenes of *The Princess Bride*. Since starting the job in February, Reed has learned how to run the technology associated with the big screen. It's fairly similar to a home theater system. She makes sure to keep up with any software

See **BIG SCREEN**, page 10





Children enjoy cooling off in the splash pad at Concordia Broadway Plaza. (COURTESY PHOTO)

#### BIG SCREEN, from page 9

updates and do a practice run before any event.

"The kids have had movies down there at 10 in the morning, at 2 in the afternoon; we could run a movie at midnight if we want to. The building behind the big screen provides shade for the evening events in the summer, which helps get more people out," she said. "It's really pretty cool."

Lambertz said representatives of several other communities have come to Concordia to see the big screen. Then they've gone home to look for a place to install one in their downtowns.

"We get validation from folks who enjoy it," he said, "but imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

During the summer, each month one movie and one live concert have typically been offered free of charge, with costs underwritten by grants from the Community Foundation for Cloud County.

Movies that have graced the big screen include *The Wizard of Oz*, *Back to the Future*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Grease*.

"My older daughter and I went to *Singin' in the Rain* when she was 5 or 6," Lambertz said. "She still loves that movie."

#### Pandemic purpose

In 2020, because of COVID-19, the summer concerts and movies didn't happen, but the plaza became even more important to the community for other reasons. When school went remote during the pandemic, some

students sat at the plaza picnic tables and connected to classes through the plaza's wireless internet.

"The kindergarten graduation was during that time, and there's usually a big ceremony," Lambertz said. "My younger daughter happened to be in that kindergarten class and was just devastated the kindergarten wasn't going to do it."

A local business partnered with the plaza so that each child's house got a yard sign, and their pictures were displayed on the plaza screen.

When high school sporting events resumed, attendance was limited, so games and other competitions were livestreamed on the plaza.

"I had a senior last year. There were a few things we weren't allowed to go to as senior parents watching our kids for the last time," Reynolds said. "This gave us the opportunity to go and watch on the big screen. You weren't stuck at home wallowing in the fact that you couldn't be there. You were with other people who were kind of in the same boat."

Lambertz, a Wichita native, said Broadway Plaza has become one of the many reasons he is thankful his family lives in his wife's hometown.

"The quality of life that we've experienced by moving back to Concordia and living here and raising our kids here has been tremendous," he said. "There's a remarkable sense of community, and I think some of that gets lost in more metropolitan areas. It's really exciting to live in Concordia right now." ■

# Telling

## Kansas Storytelling Festival brings acclaimed performers to Downs

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[DOWNS] In the end, there were two people left ... and they were ready to kill each other.

As Dan Keding wrapped up his final piece, *The Two Warriors*, the Kansas Storytelling Festival audience in Memorial Hall in Downs sat in silent anticipation. They had enjoyed two full days of tall tales, ghost stories, and all manner of entertaining personal accounts, but this last tale had the feel of ancient wisdom and modern-day relevance.

Keding, a storyteller and ballad singer who has performed for nearly 50 years throughout the United States, Great Britain and Ireland, told of the final encounter between two fighting men who opted to listen to each other instead of drawing their swords.

"My grandmother always told me you can never hate anyone once you've heard their story," Keding concluded.

This year was Keding's third appearance at the 27th annual Kansas Storytelling Festival, and his first in-person performance since the COVID-19 pandemic started causing events to go online.

"It's a wonderful festival," he said afterward. "It's one of those festivals that



DAN KEDING



# the Tale

Read the full story of *The Two Warriors* by Dan Keding at [danehansenfoundation.org](http://danehansenfoundation.org).

For more information about the 2022 Kansas Storytelling Festival on April 22 and 23, watch *Kansas Storytelling* on Facebook or visit [kansassstorytellingfestival.com](http://kansassstorytellingfestival.com).

the community gets behind, and that's so nice."

Festival coordinator Glennys Doane said Keding told her the audiences at the Kansas event are "refreshing and stimulating."

"The appreciation for hearing a good story is noticed by the storytellers," she said.

Like so many other events last year, the 2020 festival was canceled. This year's festival was rescheduled from its traditional date in April to the third weekend in September to allow time for more people to get vaccinated, Doane said. Keding and the other storytellers – Tim Lowry, Adam Booth and Anne Rutherford – all had been scheduled in 2020 but were able to make the 2021 date work.

Doane said she was happy with how things went this year, although she attributed a smaller-than-usual crowd size to the date change and a continued hesitancy surrounding COVID-19.

"I was pleased so many people did feel good about coming and really enjoying themselves," she said. "That part, I think, was very successful."

See **TALE**, page 12

Storyteller Tim Lowry uses a kazoo while telling a story to an audience of school children during the opening session of the Kansas Storytelling Festival



Storyteller Anne Rutherford made her first appearance at the Kansas Storytelling Festival



## In the beginning

How did Downs become the location where internationally known storytellers perform, where local legends are celebrated, and the best tall-tale teller is awarded a traveling shovel prize?

The heroine of the festival's story is the late Joyce Koops, who moved to Downs – her husband's hometown – about three decades ago when they decided to retire from teaching in Michigan. Koops, who specialized in reading education for illiterate adults and English as a second language for immigrants, found that storytelling was a powerful tool in her classroom. She had attended the national storytelling festival and believed Kansas needed its own event.

"She thought that was something that needs to be nurtured out here," Doane said. "She worked tirelessly and had other arts council volunteers working with her. They got the first festival booked."

Kenneth Lee, one of the festival's master storytellers, earned that designation after winning the tall tale contest three times. He said he would go straight to Koops if he wanted honest feedback.

"When I was working on a story, she's the first person I would go ask, 'How did you like it?'" he said.

Festival steering committee member Sherry Knouf, and her husband, Jerry, have also been involved since early on.

"In the early years of this festival, I didn't really get it," Jerry Knouf said. "I didn't think it was ever really going to get off the ground. Then the first really talented person came in, and I got it. I look forward to it now. I really, really do."

## Finding the festival

During this year's two-day event, various storytellers appeared each hour at locations throughout downtown Downs. To get to the sessions, festivalgoers put on their \$20 full-access admission button and walked, rode the official shuttle – a trailer pulled behind a tractor – or went in style in a Model T that offered rides.

Among those in attendance were seven couples who belong to the Wichita Model



Gideon Bowles, a Downs high school senior, appeared as Chalmer Goheen Jr., a World War II Navy veteran.

A Club. It took them 6½ hours to get to Downs at 40 miles an hour, said Don Grabendike, who organized the trip. He said they spent the night at a motel in Beloit and attended both days.

"It was wonderful," Grabendike said. "We had 14 people, and everyone had a great time. All the stories were great. There wasn't a bad story among them."

The featured professional storytellers deliver different tales each time they step on stage. Lowry, who usually appears in a seersucker suit and calls himself the "Sweet Tea Commentator," told Doane that he once figured the length of all the stories he could tell and realized he could talk for 24 hours nonstop, "but no one's asked him to do that." Through a collaboration with the Smoky Hills Education Service Foundation, Lowry told stories in Northwest Kansas schools all week before the festival.

"These tellers can have you laughing one second, and the next you're bursting into tears because there's something that touches your personal experience and is so poignant," Doane said. "That's the way stories are."

## Local legends

In addition, there were local storytellers who performed as "legends," or historical figures from the area who had a unique story of their own. Gideon Bowles, a Lakeside High School senior,

appeared as Chalmer Goheen Jr., a World War II Navy veteran who lived in Osborne County before he served on a destroyer escort that sank in the Battle off Samar, in 1944, in the Philippines.

From his account:

*"We slowly entered the water, which was covered an inch thick with oil and diesel fuel. Sections of the water had been lit ablaze, and now the water itself was a hazard. As we hung on to bits and pieces of the refuse, we started to see sharks – dozens of them."*

Afterward, his mother, Jennifer Bowles, of Downs, gave his performance a favorable review.

"I'm really excited to see him be a performer at the festival," she said. "He grew up watching it and seeing all these amazing storytellers from everywhere, and now he's joining in."

At each session this year, an average of about 50 people listened to stories or attended workshops on specific aspects of storytelling, Doane said. The evening concerts – the tall tale contest and ghost stories told by Booth Friday night, and the grand finale featuring Lowry, Rutherford and Keding on Saturday – drew an estimated 100 to 200 people.

*"She pulled open the drawer with her mother's knives, and she picked out the biggest, sharpest one, and she took it upstairs to her bedroom and held it tight and covered up with the blanket and waited..."* Booth recited, as he neared the climax of an Appalachian witch story Friday night.

It turned out a knife isn't sufficient protection for the disobedient daughter of a witch.

Booth, of Shepherdstown, W.V., has been telling traditional mountain folklore and personal stories professionally for 17 years. Booth shared the short version of how he became a professional storyteller:

"I did a college report on a pair of brothers who had won the West Virginia Liars' Contest 11 times, and I thought, 'I could do this,'" he said. "I grew up with all kinds of storytelling, and the stories that they were telling were like the stories my family told. So, I started competing, and along the way I met one of those brothers, who had become a full-time storyteller. He said, 'People do this for a living. Do it.'"





Storyteller Adam Booth specializes in stories and music in the Appalachian tradition.

### In the audience

Glenda McLin, of Wichita, said she was not particularly interested when an acquaintance first proposed attending the storytelling festival.

“He told me about this a couple of years ago, and I’m thinking in the back of my mind: ‘Downs, Kansas, really? This is going to be a real bummer.’ But I think I’m going to be a sport, so I say I’ll go,” she said. “You know what? I fell in love. It was awesome.”

Back for her third time this year, McLin described the festival as “a little piece of paradise” that she doesn’t want to miss. She said she still tells her grandkids a version of a story she heard at the first festival she attended. She’s contemplating participating in a future tall tale contest or “Swappin’ Grounds” – an open mic time.

“For the last two years, it’s been me saying, ‘Can we go to that thing in Downs, Kansas?’ So, here we are,” she said.

Doane said many people come from out of state or from urban areas of Kansas who wouldn’t otherwise have a reason to visit

Downs. She said guests enjoy the unusual access to the professional storytellers the event offers, like the opportunity to eat supper with them at the senior center.

“Our audiences love that they can sit across the table from a storyteller at a meal and visit and hear stories,” she said. “It is an environment where people realize I have a story to tell or this incident would make a good story if I practice by telling it to someone. I think we have a lot of storytellers in the audience that would just like to share the story within them.”

### Colombia Connection

Among audience members with stories of their own was Juliana Marin, of Medellin, Colombia. Marin had been working as a professional tour guide in her city, but with tourism falling off during the pandemic, she decided to come to the United States and visit storytelling festivals. She caught a ride to Downs from a festival the previous week in Utah.

Marin, who holds a dual citizenship in Colombia and the United States, grew up bilingual. As a tour guide in Medellin, she enjoyed sharing the story of how her city went from being considered the

most dangerous city in the world to being the most innovative. She said areas under bridges where people used to do drugs are now well lit and full of public art and exercise equipment.

She said before becoming a tour guide, she was a storyteller in Colombia. She said storytelling in the United States is very different from what she had experienced at home.

“In the States, the purpose of storytelling is to educate and to entertain,” she said. “In Colombia, quite often the purpose is to dig deep into raw emotions and either to denounce or to shock.”

She said many people in the U.S. would associate storytelling with a librarian reading to children.

“In Colombia, I would say 80 percent of the storytellers are men in their 20s,” she said. “It’s much edgier, more dark humor, political satire.”

Doane said she enjoys meeting new people who discover the festival for the first time. She is hopeful that more of the regulars will return in 2022 on the festival’s regularly scheduled weekend – April 22 and 23.

“It fills the streets with cars, and it brings the town back to life for sure,” she said. “It’s very satisfying when you see people happy and having a good time, and it’s good for our community. I like that.” ■



Diane Cox, of Omaha, Neb., and Jennie Hovey, of LaVista, Neb., were among adults who took up puppets and created a story when not enough children showed up for a youth storytelling workshop.



# Cattlemen's Chorus

Winona man combines livestock, singing careers

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY ERIN MATHEWS

[WINONA] "Go to New York!" is the standard advice for someone hoping to become a professional singer. But like the cattle on his grassland in Wallace County, Max Haverfield is forging his own path.

"I do sing out at the ranch, but I don't know that they pay me much attention," the 29-year-old cattleman said of his steers and heifers.

Audiences at the Max Haverfield & Friends Christmas and Americana concerts have been more enthusiastic about his baritone voice. This December, Haverfield will host five concerts in Northwest Kansas with a professional musical ensemble of friends and colleagues.

"We always do *Joy to the World*, *O Holy Night* and *Holy Night Lullaby*, a beautiful arrangement of *Silent Night* by my aunt and our principal pianist, Garee Geist," he said. "I keep working and adding new songs to make it feel like a fun thing you want to do every year at Christmas."

Haverfield said while he was a student of music performance at Fort Hays State University, he got a lot of time in the spotlight, landing lead roles in numerous musicals and operatic performances. After graduating in 2016, he found he still had a desire to perform.

However, the bright lights of the big city did not appeal to the fourth-generation rancher, whose great-grandfather founded the family ranch in Logan County in the 1940s.

During college, Haverfield had purchased the family home in Winona that was previously owned by his parents. In 2017, he created living quarters inside the 110-year-old

Find the Max Haverfield & Friends concert schedule and ticket information at [maxhaverfield.com](http://maxhaverfield.com).

home for himself and uses the rest of the home to host guests, primarily through Airbnb.

Since then, he has lived about half the year in Winona tending cattle, and the other half in an apartment in Kansas City. There he auditions for musical productions and other performance opportunities. He also holds two weeks of rehearsals before his concert series begins. This year there will be a total of nine performances, but he hopes that number keeps growing.

While he's on the road, his father, Jay Haverfield, assists in managing his cattle operation.

Max Haverfield refers to his genre of music as "big singing." He said he blends his classical Italian bel canto (beautiful singing) training with popular songs to achieve a grand, yet relatable style of music that appeals to a wider audience than pure opera.

He agrees with his vocal coach, who told him to "earn" the ballads by first performing well-known tunes that energize the audience. He also likes to throw in some stories and a bit of humor.

Max Haverfield's cattle don't pay much attention to him when he sings on his Wallace County ranch.

Max Haverfield, Raeanna Peacock and Catherine Dowling perform *There's No Business Like Show Business* during the Sound of Glory tour in the summer of 2021. (Photo by Smoky Hills PBS)



## Market not so musical

The year he graduated from Fort Hays, Haverfield acquired a young farmer loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. He used the money to buy 800 acres of land in Wallace County and his first herd of stocker cattle. Anyone familiar with the 2016 cattle market will know how that turned out.

"I lost tens of thousands of dollars," Haverfield said. "The cattle market had ridden high in 2013 and 2014. In '15 it was kind of steady, and in 2016 it collapsed. I remember my accountant saying, 'So, you sold all your cattle for less than you actually purchased them for?'"

But Haverfield learned from that rough start. He also could draw on his memories of working on the ranch during the summer with his grandfather, and ongoing advice from his father. The years since have been better, and he said it looked like 2021 would be "a home run." In September, he was preparing to sell 450 head of cattle at a significant profit.

Haverfield, who earned his Master of Business Administration from the University of Kansas this summer, has gotten better at projecting profit and loss. While most of his classmates planned to utilize their MBA for jobs with large corporations, Haverfield applies his knowledge to his cattle operation, Airbnb and his concert business.

"I had to just try to implement it in my own realm," he said. "I've kind of made everything fit together. Working 9 to 5 doesn't

suit me. I would if I had to, but I figured out a way not to."

Haverfield said he loves working in cooperation with his family on the ranch.

"We get to live our lives in a very beautiful way," he said. "I worked on the ranch all through as a kid and professionally for my grandpa for five years in high school and college, and it's like a beautiful backdrop to the life that we get."

## Grandpa sets the stage

It was his grandfather, Larry Haverfield, who found he preferred ranching to farming. Over his 60-year career as a rancher, he transitioned about 2,000 acres from cropland back to grass. He established a system of rotational grazing for cattle on his 10,000-acre ranch that mimicked the way bison herds once grazed the prairie. Fences separate the ranch area into 150 paddocks that the cattle rotate through every day or two. The system forces the herd to eat a larger variety of vegetation for a more varied diet.

"If you just leave the whole ranch open to them, they'll go to the sweet stuff, and they won't eat all the other stuff – even if it's nutritious," Haverfield said.

Max Haverfield loves the beauty of the rural landscape and the creatures that live there. He also loves the beauty of Christmas music, and he knew there were plenty of other people who do as well.

"I just watch Christmas programs all the time – The Bing Crosby Show, Liberace, Andy Williams, Josh Groban, Celine

Dion, Sandi Patty, the Gaither Vocal Band," he said.

## Hitting the high note

In 2017, he recorded a CD of Christmas music and did his first miniature concert series to promote it.

"That first year – kind of like the cattle – I didn't know if I was going to lose money or not," he said. "Luckily I didn't, but it was hard for me to predict at first what all my expenses were going to be."

The next year, when he still had 900 CDs left to sell, he decided the concert would be more interesting for the audience and more fun for him with a variety of voices. He hired four friends who sang, a cellist, a digital keyboard player who produced the sounds of other stringed instruments and his aunt as principal pianist. He also expanded the number of performances.

With significantly increased expenses, he knew the show would have to have sponsors. Haverfield had previous experience selling advertising for his mother's sports video business, so he set to work. Joy Haverfield helped him connect with and call on local sponsors in 2018.

"I thought maybe people would go for that, and they did," he said. "I went out all fall and raised money for the shows."

In 2019, he added a second, summer concert series called the Sound of Glory featuring Americana and patriotic music. This year, he secured a spot on the Kansas Department of Commerce Touring Artists Roster. As a result, his concert events that are promoted by nonprofit organizations became eligible for grant funding through the state agency.

The Fick Fossil & History Museum in Oakley received one of the grants. Museum director Jodee Reed said people were clapping and singing along during the sold-out summer concert in the museum, and now they are really looking forward to the Christmas show.

"It was magnificent," she said. "We had hors d'oeuvres and wine and listened to the wonderful music. I was just so impressed at how everything turned out. Everybody's still talking about it." ■





# Czech it out







4



5



6



7



8



9

1. Mary Stodelman, Ft. Worth, Texas, at the ax throwing trailer.
2. Sage Gray, 11, Ellsworth, is the Kansas Czech-Slovak Junior Princess.
3. Ava Ptacek, 4, Wilson, shows off her own decorated Czech eggs.
4. Logan Murphy, 8, enjoys a trip down the water slide.
5. Steve Burns, Russell, as Abraham Lincoln.
6. Joe Dolezal polka band plays at the beer garden.
7. Families taking photos near the world's largest Czech egg.
8. Jessica Bohnenblust (left) and her sister in law, Abby Bohnenblust, from McPherson, shop for flower crowns.
9. Couples polka to the Kevin Koopman Trio in the big barn at the Midland Hotel
10. Randy and Heidi Pospisil, Wilbur, NE, have been vendors for about 15 years.
11. Emily Cole, 2019-21 Oklahoma Czech-Slovak queen & Jerusha Brown, Ms. Czech USA runner-up, both from Oklahoma City.



10



11



# Thanks to Dolly

## STORIES BY BETSY WEARING

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was launched in 1995 in her hometown of Pigeon Forge, Tenn., to get books into the hands of children and encourage a love of reading. Dolly has no children of her own, but millions have benefited from her generosity.



In 2017, the Dane G. Hansen Foundation began offering access to the Imagination Library by providing the required matching funds for all children from birth to age 5 who live in 25 of the 26 counties the foundation serves. (The Barbara Creighton Reading Fund has continued to sponsor the program in Rawlins County.) Dane had no children of his own, but thousands in his beloved Northwest Kansas have benefited from his generosity.

Children participating in the Imagination Library receive a free, age-appropriate book in the mail every month. Children who sign up for the Imagination Library at birth will receive a full library of 60 books by the time they graduate from the program.

Recently, the Hansen Foundation reached out to families who are receiving the books and asked them to help evaluate its investment in this early literacy program. More than 600 responded. Here are the highlights.

### What we learned

45% said that before enrolling in the Imagination Library, they had fewer than 20 books in their home, including 20% who reported fewer than 10 books and 3% with no books in their home.



### What they said

*This program really blesses our children and makes access to new books so much more convenient.*

*I'm just very thankful to have this resource available to us! We have a beautiful library of books at home for my daughter because of it. Otherwise as a single parent, I would not have been able to purchase so many books. Thank you!*

*The books are great choices that we as new parents hadn't seen as there is no bookstore in our city to browse.*

### Why it is important

According to research published by Scholastic, "From a study published in Research in Social Stratification and Mobility comes the astonishing information that just the mere presence of books profoundly impacts a child's academic achievement."

Jeff McQuillan, author of *The Literary Crisis*, says, "The only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home. An analysis of a national data set of nearly 100,000 United States school children found that access to printed materials—and not poverty—is the critical variable affecting reading acquisition."

### What we learned

50% of families responding said they now read to their child every day when they did not before.



### What they said

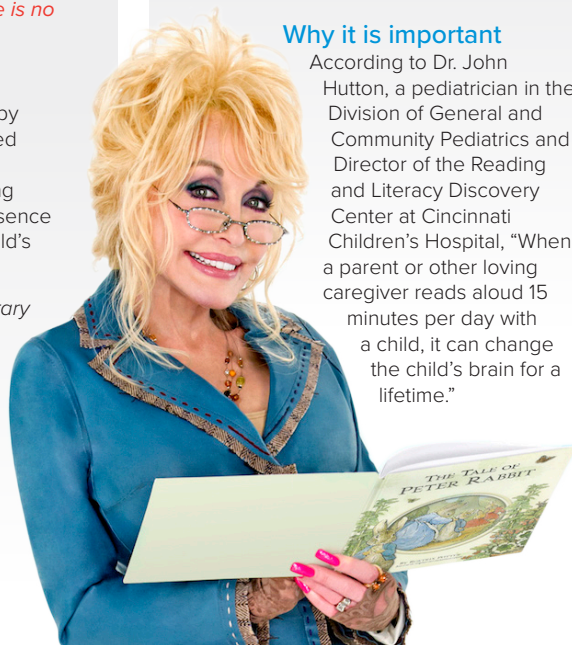
*Everybody in the house gets excited when a new book comes, and it is definitely a very special reading time for all our kids!*

*Reading is one of the best ways to interact and spend quality time with our 1-year-old. When he brings over a book, we know what he wants and can feel good about participating in the activity with him.*

*We make it a point to have at least 1 to 2 bedtime stories every night with our boys, which brings us closer together and makes lasting memories.*

### Why it is important

According to Dr. John Hutton, a pediatrician in the Division of General and Community Pediatrics and Director of the Reading and Literacy Discovery Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, "When a parent or other loving caregiver reads aloud 15 minutes per day with a child, it can change the child's brain for a lifetime."



## A WIN for Kansas Kids

Thanks to the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, nearly 7,000 children have been able to receive a free book every month through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. In 2017, the Foundation began offering the free books for all children in the Hansen Foundation's 26-county area. Soon, more Kansas children will have the pleasure of a new book delivered to them every month.

"We have a commitment from the Kansas Legislature and

Governor Laura Kelly for expansion of the program with a bill that offers support for all new and existing programs, in Kansas," said Nora Briggs, executive director for the Dollywood Foundation.

"The first year, a 50% match is available for new programs, children, and locations," Briggs said. "Starting with the second year, the match will expand to include existing programs as well. That is anticipated to be July 2022, but that is not a firm date."

The match must come from a nonprofit organization or from businesses and/or donors that partner with a nonprofit



# and Dane

# NW Kansas READS

## What we learned

74% of families responding said their child has shown an increased vocabulary since they have been receiving the Imagination Library books.



## What they said

*I am loving how my son's vocabulary has gotten larger since reading to him.*

*We love getting books in the mail. He gets so excited for new books and loves to read them. He is excelling with his letters and comprehension skills.*

*We LOVED the books for our older child and now LOVE getting them for our youngest. Our oldest is reading well beyond grade level and has an amazing imagination and writing ability, and we see the same trend beginning with her little sister.*

## Why it is important

A study from the Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics says parents who read to their children are not only strengthening their bond but also increasing their chances for success at school. The study shows that kids who are read one short book a day enter their first school years having heard almost 300,000 more words than those whose parents didn't read to them at all. When parents read more than one book the number increases again; five books per day increases the number of words heard to 1.4 million!

## What we learned

77% said their child is more interested in reading because of getting the books.



## What they said

*He loves his books so much and reading is his favorite thing to do. He sits and reads his books multiple times a day.*

*This program has made it feel like my daughter's birthday every month! She never used to be excited for books before, but the personalized nature of getting her own book in the mail has created a love of reading in her!*

*Imagination Library gets my kids SO excited. They absolutely love receiving books in the mail. It has provided us with books that we would not necessarily be interested in reading but have ultimately fallen in love with. It broadens our interests, gets the kids excited, and creates wonderful family time.*

## Why it is important

According to Reach Out and Read, more than 80% of a child's brain is formed during the first three years, and what they experience during this critical window can irreversibly affect how their brain develops. Attention and nurturing from a loving parent or caregiver supports healthy brain development — and one of the best ways to engage young children is to read books together.

In *Why Read?* an article from the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester, literacy expert Carol Anne St. George, EdD, says "Instilling a love of reading at an early age is the key that unlocks the door to lifelong learning. Reading is a critical foundation for developing logic and problem-solving skills."

## What we learned

72% said other family members benefit from receiving the books.



## What they said

*I was an avid reader and wasn't reading as much after college. It's gotten me back into reading. My daughter is learning words and sounds, and I love it.*

*When our 3-year-old gets a new book in the mail, he wants EVERYONE to read it to him. That means our 12-year-old gets to re-experience some of his favorite books, as well as being reintroduced to cadences, poems, and literary features that children's books use often.*

*We have an older family member that lives with us, and the kids ask him to read, which helps his memory skills.*

## Why it is Important

According to Children's Educational Services website, one of the most important benefits of reading aloud to children is that reading relaxes the body and calms the mind — for the reader and the child.

The constant movement, flashing lights and noise which bombard our senses when we're watching TV, looking at a computer or playing an electronic game are quite stressful for our brains. When we read, the black print on a white page is much less stressful for our eyes and brains.

See **THANKS**, page 20

organization to serve children in a designated geographic area.

The full cost of the program is shared by The Dollywood Foundation, which covers all the administrative and infrastructure costs, and local funders such as the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, which provide the match to pay for postage and books.

Regional Director for the Imagination Library Pam Hunsaker said that six counties — Clay, Marshall, Riley, Pottawatomie, Wabaunsee and Washington — have committed to securing matching funds to begin offering the program.

There are 84 existing affiliates that will benefit when the state

of Kansas begins assisting with the cost. Many of those currently operate with a fixed budget and are not able to register all the children requesting to participate, so the state dollars will significantly increase enrollment.

Briggs credited two lawmakers from the Hansen service area, Rep. Troy Waymaster from Russell, and Sen. J.R. Claeys from Salina, for being champions for the expansion.

The Imagination Library mails more than 40,000 books a month to Kansas children ranging in age from birth to age 5. To register a child, visit [www.imaginationlibrary.com](http://www.imaginationlibrary.com).





Although he had none of his own, Dane Hansen loved children. He was said to carry shiny new dimes in his pocket to share with children he met. Here he shares a special moment with his great nephew, Dane Bales.

**THANKS**, from page 19

#### What we learned

73% report their children have increased listening skills



#### What they said

*We absolutely love getting the new books in the mail! Our son has one in particular that is his absolute favorite. We read it multiple times a day, and he has learned so much from it. He is only 17 months and has learned how to count to five and learned different animals from it. If you stop mid-sentence, he can say the word that comes next.*

*My baby & I love this program. It is an amazing bonding time for us while also building my daughter's vocabulary & listening skills.*

#### Why it is important

Attorney and author Karen Patten writes for Intentional Family Life. She says, "Listening skills are among the four pillars of language skills, in addition to reading, writing, and speaking. Reading aloud to children is one of the most effective activities to help kids improve listening skills."

#### Diversity appreciated

Many families also commented on the variety of books that they receive:

*We all enjoy reading the new books. There are such a variety of books that come about different people than just us.*

*We absolutely love the variety of books they send. Most books I haven't heard of before and we really like them. They are also so diverse!*

*I especially love the bilingual books as I feel it is important to expose kids to other*

#### What we learned

43% of families report their children have increased social skills



#### What they said

*Our child always says, "Thank you Dolly for this book!" I like that it gives activities to do – and introduces concepts like numbers that I have no idea how to introduce myself.*

*Some of the books cause my older child to ask questions about the world, which opens the door to conversations.*

#### Why it is important

According to Deborah Farmer Kris, for PBS for Parents, reading aloud to kids strengthens children's social, emotional, and character development. According to a 2018 study, reading to very young children is linked to decreased levels of aggression, hyperactivity, and attention difficulties. "When parents read with their children more ... they learn to use words to describe feelings that are otherwise difficult, and this enables them to better control their behavior when they have challenging feelings like anger or sadness."

*languages and cultures. Imagination Library does a great job selecting titles.*

Perhaps the true benefit of the Imagination Library can be summed up in this comment:

*We appreciate the mission of Imagination Library, and as a child who rarely had a book to call her own it means the world that my children will have a collection for their children.*

Dolly and Dane would be proud. ■



Find specialty furniture and gifts at Custom Creations.

**ADDRESS:** 1107 Main, Hays

**PHONE:** (785) 621-6785

**HOURS:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. M-F;  
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays

**FACEBOOK:** *Custom Creations DSNWK*

For more information about services for people with intellectual disabilities available through Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas, visit [www.mydsnwk.org](http://www.mydsnwk.org) or call (785) 625-5678.





# Live with Purpose

## DSNWK Custom Creations

New store in Hays features furniture, home décor made by individuals with disabilities

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[HAYS] What stood before Josh Leiker was an old dresser with warped drawers, held together with duct tape. What he saw was the beautiful kitchen island it would soon become.

“We make it into works of art and into good stuff,” he said as he sanded the top of the dresser. “I enjoy it a lot.”

Leiker and other individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities served by Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas (DSNWK) might not be the workers most people envision when they think of custom furniture craftspeople. But a visit to the new Custom Creations store in downtown Hays will quickly prove that they should be.

The store, which held its grand opening in October, offers a variety of individually customized “shabby chic” style furniture items – many of them repurposed from their original use. Headboards have become benches. Entertainment centers have become coffee bars and closet/shelving units for a child’s room. And

then there’s the old piano.

“They saved the top and the back piece, and now it’s a bar,” said LaVonne Giess, program manager for DSNWK’s Employment Connections. “They’re going to call it a piano bar. It’s got lights that light up and flash to the music if you hook it up to your Bluetooth.”

Each piece is unique, well-constructed and beautifully decorated by a team of creators and their support staff.

“Shabby chic is my favorite – it’s forgiving if we make a mistake or sand too much,” said Dustin Olsen, work coordination assistant for Custom Creations, who oversees the furniture workshop. “Shabby chic and rustic stuff have always been my thing – and tiki bars – stuff with gouges in it.

Olsen said he enjoys learning new skills and teaching them to Leiker and others. Recently, he taught Leiker how to operate the Glowforge, a 3D laser printer that is used to make decorative accents for furniture pieces, and unique gift items. The printer was purchased with a grant from the Heartland Community Foundation.

Leiker and his coworker, Cole Robben, both said they like to create artistic pieces of furniture.

See **PURPOSE**, page 22

Above: Jerry Michaud (left), president and chief executive officer of DSNWK, and Scott Stults, director of programs and services, stand in the downtown Hays building being renovated to house the Custom Creations store.

Bottom Left: Trudi Mapes was acting as the official greeter on opening day of the Custom Creations store in downtown Hays.

Bottom Right: Josh Leiker, of Hays, sands the top of an old dresser he was working to convert into a kitchen island. Leiker is one of five men who rehabilitate furniture in the DSNWK workshop in Hays.





**PURPOSE**, from page 21

"I can't take all the credit," Leiker points out. "My team does help, too."

Olsen said Leiker has recently been on a coffee bar kick, although he doesn't drink coffee. He said Leiker is very good at wet sanding – using super fine sandpaper to sand a piece after lacquer has been applied.

"It gives it a mirror image finish that's really shiny," Olsen said. That's often the last step to completing a creation. Olsen said that typically the five individuals who work on rehabilitating furniture will spend about three hours of work on each piece. They've been preparing about four to eight pieces a week for the store since June. One woman is learning to reupholster.

Leiker remembers working on projects as a boy with his grandfather – experience that has made him a quick study. For others, such as Robben, the workshop at DSNWK's Employment Connections building in Hays is offering opportunities to learn and excel at new skills, all while having fun giving staff a hard time.

"Mostly, I do the grunt work," Robben said. "I do all the hard stuff."

"Oh, come on!" Olsen responded. "These guys are a blast to work with. They're obnoxious just like me."

Olsen described Robben as "very skilled with his hands."

"He's really good at taking things apart," Olsen said. "A lot of things have to be completely disassembled – hardware, hinges, everything – and he's quick at that."

Robben smiled. He said he gives Olsen "so much heck," because Olsen's wife told him to.

### There's more – décor

In addition to the furniture, the store features various home décor items created in whole or part by other individuals DSNWK serves through its College for Living day program throughout an 18-county region. Holiday decorations, wall art, coasters and tea towels are among the assortment of handmade items offered. On the tag attached to each item is a photo and information about its creator, so that buyers can get to know the person behind the product. When an individual's creation sells, he or she will receive a commission.

"In terms of the folks that we serve, we



Staff member Taylor Wentz helps Lynette Simminger paint a gourd they planned to transform into a snail at the Norton DSNWK office.

serve really the whole spectrum – people like Josh (Leiker) who really get along pretty well, to people who need hand-over-hand support," said Jerry Michaud, president and CEO, who has worked for DSNWK for 30 years.

In late August, Neva Lou Holub, employment specialist, and Sheena Luedke, day services coordinator, were assisting with craft-making at DSNWK's Prairie Developmental Center in Atwood.

"We have a crew of four that cleans every Monday at a church, and eight who clean different places in the community," Holub said. "When we have time, I get them back here, and we work on stuff for the store. They're enjoying it."

Alvin Bieker and his sister, Betty, were busy crafting. Alvin was constructing snowflake ornaments out of clothespins, and Betty was painting a wall hanging.

"I've been pretty busy at the center all day," Alvin said, before posing for a photograph holding the snowflakes he made. "I've been working."

In Hill City, people are learning to operate a sublimation printer to put designs on fabric. In Norton, many of the people who utilize services are nonverbal. There, staff assist them to paint decorative dried gourds.

"Some of the individuals don't have a lot of motor skills, so the staff give them a small balloon that fits into their hand; they can dip it in the paint and that's what they'll paint the piece with," said Sara Biggs, director of programs and services for DSNWK. "It's just finding their ability

to make these special pieces. I really hope people see that everything's so unique and one of a kind, and you see your artist and you get to know a little bit of who we are."

### How it began

Olsen, who has worked for DSNWK for 13 years, is perhaps the primary reason the Custom Creations store came to be. About five years ago, the weather had been mild, and he was looking for something to keep his snow removal crew busy. He looked in the warehouse where donated furniture was stored. Sometimes items contributed to help DSNWK clients furnish their homes weren't in the best of shape, and Olsen soon spotted a couple of end tables that needed some work.

When he suggested that he work with some of the crew to refinish the tables, he got the green light.

Giess said she was stunned by the finished product.

"They were gorgeous," she said. She immediately thought they would sell well at DSNWK's annual benefit sale, and she was right.

"We sold four pieces that first year, and people raved about them," she said. The next year, a few more pieces were fixed up for resale. The next year, even more.

"One year we set up downtown at Styles Dance Centre for the December Frostfest day," Giess said. "We had filled up the room, and we almost completely sold out. That got the word out. We hosted events out here in the back, and the pieces sold. Two years ago, we developed a catalog



people could look at on [mydsnwk.org](http://mydsnwk.org). You could see all the furniture we'd made, and people could come out and buy it."

By then, Giess and others were thinking bigger: Could they keep a downtown store stocked?

"People were just going on and on about our stuff: 'This is beautiful.' 'I don't see stuff like this.' 'This is made really well.' 'You guys should be charging more,' " she said. "We were selling it as fast as we were making it."

### Valued for what they can do

Michaud said DSNWK, which will celebrate its 55th anniversary in 2022, provides community services that help people live independently as possible, or in a group setting. The agency also provides employment training and support to people with disabilities in the communities where they live. Of DSNWK's 500-plus clients, 112 have been hired by 109 employers to work a variety of positions, including food service, janitorial work and store stocking.

"With COVID, everybody is desperate for employees. We're getting called weekly," Giess said. "We've developed really good relationships with our employers. They reach out to us a lot of times when they have openings because they know they're going to get a good, dedicated employee."

DSNWK staff are also excited about the new possibilities the store offers to make community connections.

"We plan to have some classes in the store, where the public can work one-on-one with our artists," Biggs said. "There will also be a TV in here so you will be able to interact with the class in Russell or Norton, and you can see what they're doing."

Leiker and others are paid for the hours they spend in the workshop, as they would be for any job in the community. But the opportunity to be appreciated for their creativity offers something more.

"When they're not only welcomed but they're valued for what they can do and not what they can't do, that emboldens the spirit," Michaud said.

"This store front is like a window into the reality of what's invisible most of the time," he said. "For everyone to live with purpose is the driving force behind DSNWK's programs and services." ■



Above Left: Cole Robben, right, of rural Hays, and Dustin Olsen, work coordination assistant, work on a wooden chair. Above Right: Rachel Stielow, who receives DSNWK services in Atwood, crochets items for the Custom Creations store.



Dustin Olsen, work coordination assistant for Custom Creations, stands with a tiki bar he helped DSNWK clients construct out of parts of an old rocking chair, a dresser and other used pieces of furniture. Olsen painted a beach scene across the top.





# HIGHWAY TREASURE HUNTS

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS  
PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS  
AND BETSY WEARING



Dave and Nancy Stortz, owners of the Stortz Auction Co. in Smith Center, said the Highway 36 Treasure Hunt brings in a lot of buyers from out of the area.

## Highways 36, 24 garage sales offer communities a boost

By Sunday morning, the white surface was finally beginning to show here and there on the three tables loaded with assorted collectibles commemorating the King of Rock 'n Roll. Three additional tables had already been cleared and put away.

"It's a lot of Elvis. It really is a lot of Elvis," Brendon Moravec said from the yard of his Agra home as he stood looking at the items he was still hoping would go home with someone else. "These tables had no open space when we started two days ago."

The Christmas ornaments, music boxes, porcelain guitars and other items the Moravec family was selling represented only a fraction of the collection that Brendon and his wife, Kayla, had helped her grandmother amass. They were being offered at prices that were deeply discounted from what those items were selling for online.

"She was a true fan and she had us trained: 'You come to Nana's, you bring something,'" Kayla said. "This stuff brought her a lot of joy."

But now she's gone, and on the third weekend of September, the Moravec family was hoping to find people participating in the Highway 36 Treasure Hunt who would enjoy a little – or even a lot – of Elvis Presley.

"It's cool stuff," Brendon said. "We just don't have room for it."

The Moravec sale was just one of the hundreds happening in 30 communities in 13 counties along U.S. Highway 36. It was the 16th year that

the Highway 36 Association has encouraged sales to be organized on the same weekend along the highway spanning 400 miles east to west across the top of the state.

"It seems like every year it just grows," said Kylee Bergstrom, vice president of the Highway 36 Association. "We know we have people who come from all over for the Treasure Hunt. A lot of them have shops out of state and find items to take back. There are people who love to find a bargain or flip furniture, all that type of stuff."

She said board members proposed the idea in 2005, and in that first year eight communities participated. While it's all one large, overall effort, each community does things a little differently, she said. Some sell booths inside a large community building. Others track participating sales on a community map that can be viewed on the Highway 36 Association website.

## Highway 24 does it, too

Since 2016, a similar event has occurred for communities along U.S. Highway 24, which crosses the state from Kansas City to near Brewster, where it merges with I-70. The annual Highway 24 Garage Sales were canceled in 2020, so people were excited for their return on June 4, 5 and 6, said Shannon Duskie, of Cawker City, event coordinator. This year, 29 communities spanning 11 counties and 336 miles participated. A mobile map of the sales was viewed nearly 16,900 times, Duskie said.

At Jo Herien's barn in Glasco, there





wasn't any Elvis memorabilia, but a flatbed trailer was full of piggy banks of all shapes and sizes.

Jona Knox, who had recently moved to Colby from Des Moines, Iowa, returned to a sale in Edson to see if a trunk she'd admired when she stopped by earlier was still there. She lucked out. Connie Cullens, of Goodland, who worked the sale, helped load it into her car. Knox said she'd also attended sales in Colby and Goodland looking for things to furnish her apartment.

Jason Carlgren had things for sale in and around a building he owns in his hometown of Miltonvale. He stores inventory there for his antique shop in Castle Rock, Colo. He said his cousin owns a shop in Scandia, so he brings things to the Highway 36 sales as well.

Cory and Katherine Pellerin, of Pueblo, Colo., who were at Carlgren's sale in Miltonvale, were attending the Highway 24 sales for the first time.

"I've never spent this much time in Kansas in my life," Katherine said. She wasn't looking for anything special – just "whatever hits me."

"We like antiques," Cory said. "We got a few hundred dollars of stuff."

## Treasure Hunt brings big business

On Highway 36, Kevin Herbert, of Arapahoe, Neb., was in Norton selling items he hauled there for his 10th year as a Treasure Hunt vendor.

He said he finds things at clearance



Connie Cullens, of Goodland, carries a chest purchased by Jona Knox, left, who recently moved to Colby and was shopping on Highway 24 for items for her new apartment.

By Sunday, Brendon, Kayla, Natalie and Brayden Moravec had already sold much of the Elvis memorabilia in the family's Highway 36 Treasure Hunt sale in Agra.

Allie Breneman, Natalie Palmer, Clara Breneman and Tyler Palmer look at jewelry for sale at a Highway 24 sale in Brewster.

Below: Jo Herien's sale in Glasco featured a flatbed full of piggy banks.

sales – he and his wife have gone to 84 Dollar General stores in four states. He had kept more than 250 pairs of flip flops, T-shirts that had never been worn and a wide variety of other items stored in totes and covered with tarps awaiting sale day.

"This year is our best year so far," he said.

He set up on Thursday because the unofficial day before the event is always big.

John O'Dowd, of Kensington, said his sale, which featured Canadian geese decoys and other hunting supplies, had the best attendance on Thursday as well. He said Sunday was slow and "I should have stayed

in bed," but, overall, he was glad he participated for his second year.

"I had people from Illinois, Colorado, Nebraska – they come from far away," he said.

Dave Stortz, owner of the Stortz Auction House in Smith Center, said he was on the Highway 36 Association board when the idea for the sales started. He said the event has proven to be hugely beneficial to businesses along the route, including his.

"We've had some fantastic years," he said. "Last year, everybody was tired of being locked up, so they came out in full force. We had people from 27 different states that signed in last year, and that's just the ones I knew about."

Stortz said he doesn't think most people realize how important the event is for the economy of the area. He said vendors need to offer more than baby clothes, shoes and the regular garage sale fare, because that's not what the big spenders are looking for.

People who visited his store during the event this year included a man from Alabama who spent \$4,000 on tools and other primitive items, and three women towing a race car trailer, which they had more than half filled with the \$4,000 worth of collectibles they purchased.

"It brings a lot of money to a community. The motels are all full. Everybody's stopping at the convenience store to fill up with gas. Everybody goes out to eat," he said. "I'm one little bitty business in a small town, and I can knock out several thousand dollars in three days. If they'll spend that kind of money at my place, how much will they spend at other places?" ■







Bumble bees and other insects help pollinate the sunflowers in the Wright family's fields.

80-mile-an-hour winds and marble-sized hail that had whipped through it a couple of nights before. Bees were humming as they navigated from flower to flower, and plenty of other insects were busy helping with the pollination process on a sunny afternoon in August that didn't even hint at the frenzy of the storm.

"Sunflowers are a hardy crop," Dennis Wright said as he walked among the 400 acres of flowers that he and his father, Don, grew this year. "They seem to make things work. They root deep, so it takes a lot to blow them over."

Sunflowers have long been part of the crop rotation for the Wrights. They offer some flexibility because of their shorter growing season, allowing the dryland fields a longer period of time to build up moisture before planting.

But in 2015, the Wrights decided to do something that added value to that crop. They imported an expeller press from Germany to Don's rural Bird City farm and began figuring out how to process into oil the seeds they harvest in October.

"We're the only ones in the state who do it all ourselves," Dennis said. "We grow the sunflowers; we sort the seeds, clean them, press them, and bottle the oil. We're the only ones that actually go from putting the seed in the ground to putting the cap on the bottle."

He said they started looking for a way to add value to their crop after losing bidding wars to rent additional ground. They looked for something they could self-finance and start small on the 3,000 acres they already owned.

"We switched over to the mindset of instead of growing a commodity, we're going to try to grow a product," Dennis said. "The cooking oil market is established, and it seemed the logical choice."

Don said it was "too much tractor time" that led to the idea.

"We were driving tractors and talking: 'What do you think of this? I think we could do it this way,'" he said.

Consumer demand for healthier foods and locally sourced products is on the rise. Wright Farms sunflower oil is unrefined and still contains high levels of vitamin E and other nutrients naturally found in the Oleic sunflower seed. It also has a higher ratio of unsaturated fat, making it part of a heart-healthy diet, and has a shelf life of about two years.

"Part of farming is growing stuff that people want," Dennis said.

With the protein-rich remnants of the seeds and shells, they could even make a product animals want. The meal makes a tasty goat treat, and it is being evaluated as a potential supplemental feed for free-range chickens, he said.

# Sunny Side Up

Bird City farmers grow sunflower seeds into their own brand of sunflower oil

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BIRD CITY] Their heads were bowed toward the ground, and their leaves were riddled with holes, but overall, the sunflower field had withstood the nearly



Dennis and Don Wright stand before the expeller press they installed on Don's farm near Bird City to process their crop of sunflower seeds into oil.



## A healthy alternative

Most sunflower oil available commercially has gone through a refining process, utilizing heat and chemical treatments that extract various naturally occurring components and deodorize and bleach the oil so that it can cook at a higher temperature without smoking. However, all of that tampering leaves the oil tasteless and less nutritious, Dennis said.

Wright Farms oil can be used to fry at about 350 degrees without smoking. Other uses are similar to olive oil, such as salad dressing and sautéing, Dennis said.

"It still smells like sunflowers, and it still tastes like sunflowers," he said. "We're trying to put out a premium product."

By making their own farm-to-table product, the Wrights could improve their profits without investing in more land and a bigger tractor, Dennis said. It also offered a new venture that some or all of his three children might one day want to continue.

"Basically, the concept is just making what we grow worth more," he said. "A gallon of oil is about 25 pounds of seeds. If you take them to a processing plant, they usually pay about 19 cents a pound, so that's worth \$4.75, say \$5. These 32-ounce bottles we sell at \$8.99, and there's four of those in a gallon. That's \$35.

"Granted, that's not what we always get paid because we sell it wholesale

## Looking for a healthy cooking oil?

Wright Farms Sunflower Oil can be purchased online or from about 20 grocery stores and other retailers throughout Northwest Kansas. Find a map of stores that sell it on the Wright Enterprises LLC Facebook page.

**ADDRESS:** 1760 Road 29, Bird City

**PHONE:** (785) 734-7044

**EMAIL:** [dennis.wrightfarms@yahoo.com](mailto:dennis.wrightfarms@yahoo.com)

**WEBSITE:** <http://www.wright.farm>

**FACEBOOK:** [Wright Enterprises LLC](#)

to stores and they sell retail, but even if you make \$20 a gallon, you're still making three times as much money as if you sold the seed. Plus there's our meal. We get about two-thirds of what you'd get just selling the seed when we sell it. The value per acre is three or four times."

Dennis Wright said he was a political science major, so he's not strong on business terminology, but he's told the term for their business is "vertically integrated" – and that's a good thing.

## How did they do it?

There was an initial investment comparable to purchasing a new implement, and it took a couple of years to get the facility complete, the equipment operational and to garner the necessary permits from the Food and Drug Administration. There were a lot of complications. The press arrived in pieces with no instructions for assembly. Once they finally had it

up and running, they quickly found out that variables such as seed moisture and the temperature of the seed affected its operation.

"We had to figure out how to adjust the clearance on the head, adjust how tight you're squeezing it, how fast you run the motor and how big of a die you use," Dennis said. "There was a lot of experimentation.

"We fiddled around and changed this and changed that..." Dennis said.

"But we've pretty well gotten it dialed in now," Don added.

They set up the equipment so that it mostly runs on its own. The hopper automatically fills with seeds stored in the adjacent bin, and as the press runs, it fills a bag with meal, while oil flows into a tube attached to one of three tanks. As that tank fills with "crude oil," as they like to call it, another previously collected tank is being continuously filtered.

"We tried to minimize the labor intensity so we could farm and just have that going," Dennis said. "It's kind of like checking irrigation wells. You check it in the morning, move the filter from this tank to that tank, go do your work, and come back to check it in the evening."

That's a good thing, since Dennis is the Bird City fire chief, coaches junior high boys basketball and serves as president of the church council and the Tri-State Antique Engine and Thresher Association.

See **SUNNY SIDE**, page 28



Dennis Wright was pleased with the condition of his sunflowers a couple of days after a major storm.



## Finding new markets

The operation is not large scale – in fact, about 90 percent of the farm income comes from other crops, including wheat, milo and corn – but it pretty much runs around the clock to fill current demand. Each day, they produce about 30 gallons of oil. That keeps the supply fresh. Each week, they take the equipment apart and clean the press and the tanks.

They are evaluating the possibility of adding a second press.

“We’re a very pay-as-you-go type of operation, so when we get money in the bank, we’ll do it,” Dennis said.

He said they are looking at ways to produce products for the nonfood market. They already have several clients who make soap and lotion, but the sunflower oil also could work like linseed oil used by woodworkers. He said his wife suggested a waterless, healthy Slip ‘n Slide, that could be sprayed down with oil.

“It’s kind of the spaghetti effect – throw it out and see what sticks,” he said of the different ideas.

## Making new friends

To sell a food product, they had to have the facility inspected by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and do a shelf-life analysis and nutritional analysis.

At first, neighbors who participated in taste tests said the flavor of the oil was too strong, so they added additional filtering cycles that gave the final product more clarity

and mellowed out the flavor.

When they first started, the plan was to just sell big totes of oil, but that market turned out to be difficult for a small, independent supplier to crack. That’s when they decided to bottle it and create their own brand.

Now when the filtering process is complete, the oil is typically bottled using a two-head bottler. Don’s wife, Donna; and Dennis’ wife, Dana, and their children, Grace, Andrew and Abigail, like to help with bottling and labeling. The labeling machine, operated by a foot pedal from a child’s toy, a lawnmower belt and powered by a hand drill, shows the father and son’s cost-conscious ingenuity. The label itself was developed as a graphic design class project at Northwest Kansas Technical College.

The oil can be ordered through their website.

“On our pricing, we tried to set a price that’s a decent price, good for you, good for me. That’s the farmer in us. We’re not going to try to take advantage,” Dennis said. “It ships from the farm and goes all over the country – Texas, Virginia, Florida, Washington. People from the city think it’s dirt cheap. They’ll pay almost as much in shipping, and it’s still of value to them.”

To further develop their customer base, Don and Donna researched shops that would be along the route during their travels and delivered bottles of oil to independently owned businesses. It’s now available in more than 30 locations across the state.

“If it’s a new person who’s going to carry our oil, we will personally deliver it to them,” Don said. “There are some neat people around. It’s just impressive.” ■

The label for Wright Farms Sunflower Oil was developed through a class project at Northwest Kansas Technical College.



# Burr Oak Blooms



# Community project turns discarded metal into sunflowers

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[BURR OAK] Amy Reed dreams about sunflowers. She thinks about placing rocks on the ground in the shape of sunflowers and painting them. She hopes to transform an old, rusty residential antenna tower into the stem, and a piece of playground equipment welded to snow shovel-blade petals into the spinning bloom of the state's largest metal sunflower.

"You would think I'd go to a sunflower support group," the Burr Oak city clerk said, laughing.

Over the past year, Reed and local volunteers of all ages have

out of this," Reed said. "There were probably about 25 people who put a ton of energy into making them. I can't tell you how many people donated. People are amazing: You need help, and it's there."

The largest sunflower stands on the corner in front of an old downtown gas station. Its stem is the station's original signpost, and the flower mounted on top is made from a heavy hay rake tine wheel assembly.

"To get that baby up there, I had to pull every single favor I had," Reed said. She said the crew involved was proud of themselves when they got it done.

## Getting the wheel rolling

McEntee said the first project was sanding and then painting some big wagon wheels. They used automotive paint and learned about proper mixing at a local auto body shop, Kansas Kustoms.

"When a guy brings you a wheel, you gotta use it," Volker said.

In addition to donations people provided, they sought out metal that had been lying about for years.

"Amy took us in creeks, and we went to junk yards, and then we went and did painting classes on how to paint with car paint," Volker said. "A bunch of women got together and helped paint. The guys welded, and everybody had a chance to do something – even the little kids. It brought everybody together. It really did."

Volker said early on, some kids came by and saw donated scrap metal in her yard.

"They asked, 'What are you doing with this stuff?' I said, 'You have to imagine, but we're going to make sunflowers out of this junk.' Those boys just grabbed stuff, and they were just laying them out and creating wheat and sunflowers. They came up with the coolest things."

Paint and welding supplies for the project – equal parts public art, beautification, community pride and cleanup – were purchased with a grant from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation. The effort helped inspire additional cleanup efforts, including the demolition of a dilapidated building, McEntee said.

Volker said she enjoyed repurposing the old metal. She said she had pulled what she thought was part of a bicycle out of the creek and painted it green before someone told her what it really was.

"This guy comes in and he goes, 'What have you done? That's a 1930 Harley Davidson frame. You guys could have sold that frame and paid for the whole project,'" she said.

Reed said some of the other pieces they have used also might be considered valuable antiques by someone, but "all it was doing is rusting out here in the sun."

"Personally, I think it makes a much better sunflower," she said. ■



Julie McEntee, Amy Reed and Renita Volker created sunflowers out of scrap metal to decorate Burr Oak in celebration of its 150th anniversary. In September, they also organized a community event called Sunflower Daze.

converted a sizeable pile of donated scrap metal into a variety of yellow and green sunflowers that brighten downtown street corners and other locations throughout the community. Tall sunflowers stand near both of the town's entrance signs.

Each metal sculpture is unique, and each is constructed out of pieces of old farm implements, car parts, floor grates and all sorts of discarded metal. Since Burr Oak celebrated its 150th anniversary this year, the goal became 150 sunflowers – but that goal was surpassed a while ago.

"There were people who would walk up to us with a piece of metal and say, 'I just know you can make a sunflower

While Reed refers to herself as "the bossy idea person," Julie McEntee and Renita Volker were two of the chief junk collectors, sunflower creators and painters. They also helped Reed organize a Sunflower Daze festival held on Sept. 18. They hope the event will become an annual tradition.

During and since Sunflower Daze, more than \$5,000 has been raised. People donated \$60 to pick out a sunflower from a field of sunflowers made from old farm implement parts. The money went to a fund to replace the roof on the historic limestone schoolhouse that now houses the Burr Oak Museum.



# Supreme Sacrifice

USS Oklahoma crewman laid to rest in Ellsworth nearly 80 years after Pearl Harbor attack

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[ELLSWORTH] The people saluting on Douglas Avenue of Ellsworth as the hearse carrying his coffin passed by didn't know Walter Sidney Belt Jr. – but they knew what he'd done, and that was enough.

Belt gave his life in service to his country on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941. He was 25. On Oct. 9, he was finally laid to rest in Ellsworth Memorial Cemetery with full military honors, including an

honor parade led by riders from the VFW, American Legion and the Patriot Guard. It had been more than 80 years since he left his parents' farm near



DENEEN URBANEK

Ellsworth to join the Navy.

"He's the last Kansan to be identified and brought home," said Deneen Urbanek, of Ellsworth, Belt's great-niece. "As word started getting out about this, oh my gosh, the number of people, especially military people – VFW, Legion – that wanted to participate and honor him has just been astounding."

During the memorial service, two

WWII-era Cessna airplanes from the Commemorative Air Force Jayhawk Wing, of Wichita, flew over the cemetery.

Seth Svaty, Belt's great-great-nephew, performed *Amazing Grace* on bagpipes, and Natalie Soukup, Belt's great-great-niece, sang *The Star Spangled Banner*. Jerry Gardinier, another great-great-nephew and member of the Kansas Air National Guard, was among the pall bearers.

Jeanie Johannes, Belt's niece and one of about 150 members of his family in attendance, was presented with the flag that had covered his coffin by Navy Rear Admiral Terry Eddinger.

Belt was 22 when he enlisted in 1938. He had risen to the rank of Fireman 1st Class during his three years in the Navy. He was serving on the USS Oklahoma when Japanese aircraft dropped multiple torpedoes on the battleship while it was moored at Ford Island in Pearl Harbor during the attack that brought the United States into World War II. He was one of 429 crewmen classified as killed or missing on the capsized ship.

Belt's remains were buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, along with those of 393 shipmates who could not be identified. There they stayed until 2015, when the Department of Defense authorized disinterment of unknown graves associated with the USS Oklahoma.

The remains were transferred to

Offutt Air Force Base near Bellevue, Neb., where scientists with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) began to identify them using dental and anthropological analysis, and scientists from the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System used mitochondrial and autosomal DNA analysis.

## Finally coming home

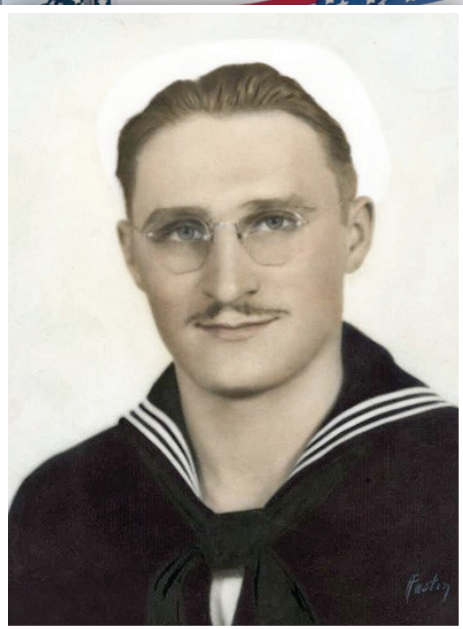
Belt was accounted for on March 3, according to the DPAA website. His family was notified in May, said Johannes, of rural Mentor. After that, efforts began for a memorial service and to have his remains transported to Ellsworth for burial.

"I just barely remember seeing him one time at my grandmother's. I was so little," Johannes said. "I saw him once, and then he was in the service, so I never saw him anymore. I heard my mother talk about him, of course. He was her brother. They tried for years to get some information about him."

Johannes said in recent months the family has received several documents from the Navy related to her uncle. She learned from Belt's enlistment form that he went into the service to learn a trade.

"The Navy did a wonderful job of saving documentation," she said. "They did a super job of keeping track of everything. We even have his physical. You'd think after all these years that would all be missing, but it's not. They kept it all."





Another document the family has is the letter of condolence sent to Belt's parents in February 1942.

"It is hoped that you may find comfort in the thought that he made the supreme sacrifice in defense of his country," wrote then Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox.

Belt was one of 10 siblings, the last of whom had been saving a red hat she planned to wear to his memorial service, Johannes said. Martha Bell, 100, died on Aug. 10, 2020, in Topeka. One of the two DNA samples collected in March 2011 and used to identify Belt had come from her.

Johannes said that Navy representatives offered the family a grave in Arlington National Cemetery, but the decision was made to bring Belt home to Ellsworth, as Bell had wished.

Johannes said she didn't know how to plan the military aspects of the memorial service, so she was happy when her niece, Deneen Urbanek, and her husband, Bob Laubengayer, who had retired after 23 years in the Navy, offered their assistance. Urbanek and Laubengayer are two members of a committee that met weekly to make plans.

### An early memorial

In 1996, Deneen's father and mother, Don and Sharon Urbanek, had secured a memorial marker for Belt from the Navy. It was placed near the graves of his parents, Walter Sr. and Annie, in

Ellsworth West Cemetery. Sharon had been researching family history when she discovered the Navy would provide such a plaque.

In 2011, Don, who was the closest living male relative, also provided a DNA sample used to identify Belt's remains. Don died at age 81 on Nov. 4, 2020, just months before Belt was identified.

Deneen Urbanek said her father and aunt didn't remember any stories about Belt as a person. She grew up knowing of the family connection to Pearl Harbor, but she knew Belt only by his Navy portrait. No one in the family could locate the Purple Heart medal Belt's parents were presented after his death. The Navy provided a replacement, which was buried with Belt's remains, Urbanek said.

"When I was in junior high, I did a report on Pearl Harbor and specifically focused on my great-uncle," she said. "I remember trying to interview my grandma [Elsie (Belt) Urbanek] for my report, and she just said it was too hard to talk about. It made my grandma sad if we would bring it up, so we never talked about it."

### A sleepless night

Perhaps the person with the clearest memory of Belt is Don Kozisek, of rural Holyrood. Kozisek was 7 years old when his family heard what had happened on the "date which will live in infamy," as then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to Dec. 7, 1941.

It's been nearly 80 years, but Kozisek said the memory remains clear of his parents staying up all night after the attack on Pearl Harbor, anxiously listening to the radio and hoping for any word about Belt. Belt had worked on the Kozisek family's

farm before he enlisted, and the trauma of hearing about his death seared Belt into the young boy's memory.

"I was just in the second grade when he died," Kozisek said. "I remember him, but I can't say that I really knew him. He worked for my dad on the farm."

Kozisek said that for 56 years his mother kept the Christmas card that Belt had sent the family in 1940. In 1996, after an article ran in *The Ellsworth Reporter* about the marker that had been installed in the cemetery for Belt, Kozisek sent the "Aloha and a Merry Christmas from Hawaii" card signed "From Walt" to the newspaper owner, who forwarded it to the Urbanek family.

Kozisek remembers his parents talking about what they heard later had been Belt's fate – and how close he had come to surviving.

"What we were told is that when the ship was attacked, the call went out to abandon ship," he said. "They were racing up the ladder to get out. The ship capsized, and the suction pulled him back in. His buddy who was ahead of him was flipped out in the water and survived. I don't know if that was true or not, but I remember my folks talking about that."

Deneen Urbanek said as the 80th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor draws near, her family is thankful for the years of effort invested in identifying the USS Oklahoma crew members.

"The Navy has just been working so hard to bring these folks home before the 80th anniversary and have them buried. They've been working for so many years to do this," she said. "We're so thankful for that. We're really happy that he's finally being brought home and laid to rest." ■



ECRWSS  
LOCAL POSTAL PATRON

## Make a plan for family, and for community

*“Now that our estate plan is in place, it’s comforting to know if something happens, we’ve made all the important decisions – together. There will be no overwhelming choices at a time of crisis or loss. We decided to include charitable giving and ‘Keep 5 in Kansas’ by leaving 5 percent to our community foundation.”*

– MORRIS ENGLE, PHILLIPSBURG

According to a 2019 study by the Center for Economic Development and Business Research at Wichita State University, more than \$70 billion in the 26 most Northwest counties in Kansas will transfer from one generation to the next in the coming 50 years – more than \$25 billion of that in the next 20 years. Most wealth will pass down to family. If just 5% were left to charity, such as local community foundations, Northwest Kansas hometowns would have a lasting source of revenue to ensure our rural quality of life will be here for future generations.

*“They say if you pass away without a plan, the state will decide where your assets go. Having an estate plan removes that unthinkable option!”*

**Contact your attorney or financial adviser to set up a plan.**

Don't have an adviser? Contact Gennifer Golden House at [Gennifer@gnwkcfc.org](mailto:Gennifer@gnwkcfc.org) to learn about free planning help for those who are considering a charitable gift in their estate.