

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

# NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Spring 2022 | VOLUME 3, ISSUE 4

Feature Story

## INTO THE INFERNO

Area volunteer firefighters show skill and courage as they put themselves in harm's way

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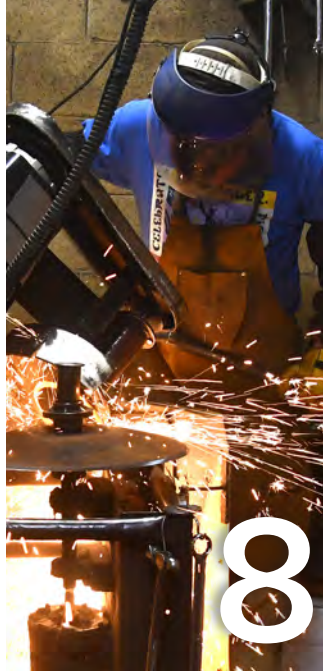
Sheridan County farm fills Northwest Kansas demand for lettuce

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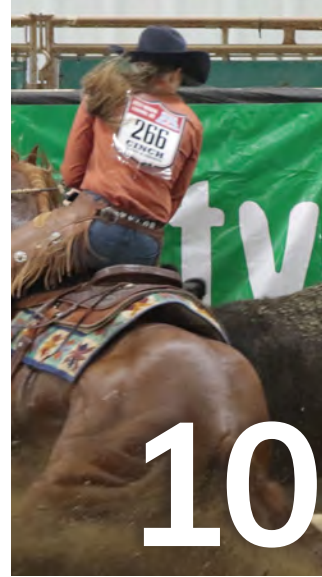
4B Farms LLC  
Grinnell, KS



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Rural firefighters exhibit skills and courage every time they are called into service, but they were tested on another level during December's Four County Fire.

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Area restaurants and businesses, including HaysMed, happily serve fresh, crisp lettuce in several varieties, grown year-round in Dan and Carol Buck's hydroponic greenhouse in Sheridan County.

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Rolling Hills Zoo offers more than 100 species of animals for you to get to know.

***Flip the magazine over to read our special section on child care!***

**ON THE COVER:** Dan Buck, who co-owns 4B Farm in Sheridan County with his wife, Carol, supplies lettuce for grocery stores, restaurants, and other businesses throughout Northwest Kansas. See story, page 14.



## Welcome to the Spring issue of *Northwest Kansas Today*.

For me, this is a special issue because of our feature story on rural firefighters. As a rancher in Russell County, I saw first-hand the dedication of these amazing volunteers when the devastating wildfires swept through the area last December.

As residents of rural communities, most of us are called upon to serve a variety of roles. A firefighter might also be a teacher, work in one of our local businesses, or be a farmer. He or she might serve on the city council or school board or the township board. It takes time to volunteer, but without these efforts, our way of life would be far different.

The same can be said for entrepreneurs. I'm always amazed when I read about some of the innovative businesses that started with a great idea and a person willing to put in the effort to bring that idea to fruition. Read about the hydroponics farm in Sheridan County or the garden tool manufacturing company in Republic County. Jewels like these are sprinkled all over Northwest Kansas.

I think you will also enjoy reading about Tylor Todd, a young Thomas County woman who is tearing it up on the rodeo circuit, the librarian and part-time sleuth in Wilson, and some quirky art installations going up in Lucas. There are a lot of interesting things going on in Northwest Kansas.

And finally, in this issue, we have a special section on child care. Flip the magazine and read about how this issue is being addressed and why it is critical for our area, and our state. Without quality child care, our workforce is limited. Jobs are not the issue in our area, it's people. Addressing the child care shortage will help our economy in a big way. Communities are tackling it in a variety of innovative ways.

I'm not surprised. It's just another example of the quality, innovation, and energy that makes Northwest Kansas a special place.

Warren Gfeller, Trustee



▶ Read more online!

### Wilson revisits editor's murder

Read Wilson librarian Cherilee Ward's full tale recounting a 1905 murder and the search for the weapon 113 years later. – Reprinted with permission from *The Ellsworth County Independent Reporter*



*Whole corncobs were blowing up and smacking into his windshield when, on December 15, Waldo Fire Chief Dustin Finkenbinder arrived to warn the occupant of a rural home that the worst wildfire he had ever seen was coming.*

In blowing dust and smoke so thick it looked like midnight at about 4 p.m., Paradise Fire Chief Quentin Maupin was trying to keep a tanker truck on a county road south of Paradise. Then a wall of fire came over the truck.

Keith Koelling, chief of the Waldo-Paradise-Natoma Rural Fire Department, worried about Finkenbinder, Maupin and all the firefighters he'd sent into harm's way during what became known as the Four County Fire. He knew exactly how bad it was. He was out in it, too.

"They always talk about the perfect storm in the ocean. That's what this was," Koelling said. "It was like a volcano went off."

Drought and extraordinarily powerful wind created a fire environment unlike anything area firefighters had ever imagined, but every one of the emergency responders working to keep people safe that day – and as fires flared up again and again for the next 10 days – survived the trial by fire.

## Nine counties, 10 days

"The fire departments that were really hit hard did a great job of handling and managing those fires. They did what they are supposed to do – what they're trained to do," said Christopher Hanson, Northwest District fire management officer for the Kansas Forest Service, in Stockton.

In the days following the fire, after the wind had died down, Hanson helped coordinate Black Hawk helicopters and airplanes that dumped water. Tactical fire crews from other areas also assisted as flareups continued until Christmas Day.

The Four County Fire was the largest – but by no means the only – fire driven by terrible winds in Northwest Kansas that December day. Firefighters in Gove, Graham, Logan, Sheridan and Trego counties also were battling blazes.

"There were young guys and guys who had been on the department for quite a while who said, 'I've never been so scared in all my life,'" said Steve Hirsch, training officer for fire departments in Sheridan and Thomas counties and the city of Grinnell. "There was no safe space. Typically, we think if we work in the black (areas that have already been burned), we're in pretty good shape because the fuel's gone, but that night even the black was not safe because the fire was blowing over the top of your head."



STEVE HIRSCH

## Who would do that?

Hirsch, in his third year as board chairman for the National Volunteer Fire Council, said afterward that as bad as it was, none of the firefighters he works with decided to quit. Firefighters in his departments, like the men and women who protect 90 percent of the landmass across the country from fire, are volunteers.

People don't realize that 67 percent of firefighters – mostly in small towns and rural areas – are not paid professionals, he said.

"We have people even in Hoxie who come by for a fire station tour and ask, 'Where do you guys sleep at?' No, that ain't the way it works here," he said. "We're at home; we're at school; we're at kids' events, and we leave from there."

# Into the inferno

Area volunteer firefighters show skill and courage as they put themselves in harm's way

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Kansas Forest Service fire protection specialists engage the Four County Fire in Ellis County. (Photo Courtesy of Christopher Hanson)



## The same but different

The state does not have a set training requirement for fighting wildland fires. Each local chief decides what kind of training the crew should have, and there is no standard structure for hazard pay.

During monthly meetings for Waldo-Paradise-Natoma firefighters, Chief Koelling said they usually cover firefighting basics, but Koelling said his volunteers simply don't have time for a lot of classes. They learn fastest on the job.

"The way we train our guys is say, 'You go with this 50-year-old man over here and learn how to fight fire,'" Koelling said. "You learn real quick that way."

Volunteer firefighter Don Wessel, Plainville, said on average he handles two to three ambulance calls a week, in addition to less-frequent fire calls. He receives a \$20 stipend per run and \$10 for each bimonthly training meeting attended.

He said during the three days a week he's on call for the ambulance service, he is expected to respond within five minutes. For fires, no one's on call. Everybody available responds to fire calls.

Likewise, in the Waldo-Paradise-Natoma Rural Fire Department, Koelling said everyone is expected to respond when there's a fire. His goal is to keep 15 volunteers on the roster for each of the three stations. Firefighters get paid \$13 an hour while out on calls, and station chiefs get an additional \$250 a month. But they drive their own pickup trucks, which means their vehicles get hard use. Koelling had a \$1,200 repair bill – well over what he earned that day – to fix fire-damaged brakes on his truck after the Four County Fire.

## Heroes and also victims

Homes belonging to three Paradise firefighters were among an estimated 30 destroyed during the December blaze that encompassed 121,622 acres in Ellis, Osborne, Rooks and Russell counties within about 12 hours' time. The large conflagration resulted when several fires combined. Dry lightning is believed to have started at least one fire, although many were likely ignited when utility poles snapped.

Propelled by shifting winds, reported at a high of 100 miles an hour at 3:48 p.m. at Russell Municipal Airport, the fire took the life of a Natoma man, killed more than 1,500 head of livestock, destroyed barns and miles of fencing, turned large round hay bales into

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Waldo Fire Chief Dustin Finkenbinder helped evacuate homes in the path of the Four County Fire.



Paradise Fire Chief Quentin Maupin used this special tool on his skid steer to wrap up old barbed wire from fences on his land that burned.



Fire Chief Keith Koelling of the Waldo-Paradise-Natoma Rural Fire Department worked 40 hours straight, slept five hours and worked 15 hours again during the Four County Fire.







While fire raged through his farmstead and destroyed his house, an 84-year-old man survived by hiding under the farm truck with the red cab.

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small piles of ash and obliterated pasture grasses and crop residue.

“Our fire department figured out early on that we could not stop the fire so we were just trying to protect what houses we could and get people evacuated. We tried to stay far enough ahead of it,” said Butch Post, Rooks County emergency manager. “I’ve been fighting fires since 1981, and this was a whole other level. This thing was insane. It does make a

lot of our firefighters understand why we do the training we do.”

Ellis County Fire Chief Darin Myers said even if the

county’s 100 firefighters and 20 fire trucks had been doubled, “once that fire started it moved so fast there was nothing we could do.”

#### Fire and water

During the fire, the three-ton Paradise tanker Maupin was driving was rocking in the wind as he headed down a county road south of town. The tanker was hard to control even before the plastic lines for the air brakes burned in half and wiring harnesses melted. But the diesel engine kept running. After the fire’s intense heat subsided, Maupin put the vehicle in low gear and inched back to Paradise with the pedal floored.

“My wife and kids evacuated our house, and they were sitting in town waiting on me. I know they were sitting there wondering, ‘Where’s he at?’ because it took me a lot longer than I was expecting,” he said. “When I got there, mentally that was it. We drove to Lucas and stayed there for four or five hours wondering if our house was burned or not.”

In May 2021, because of a devastating flood, the Maupins had been evacuated by air boat from their home near Paradise. After that, they had the house moved about 200 yards to higher ground.

During the flood, firefighters had helped get people out of homes surrounded by swift-moving water. Just seven months later, drought conditions contributed to the massive fire.

Fortunately, the Maupin home survived the fire, but they lost outbuildings, 54 miles of fence, more than 300 cattle and two horses.

The tanker truck he was driving couldn’t be repaired. The department has a forest service brush truck on loan until it is replaced. Maupin said the fire’s biggest lesson for him was to make sure his family is taken care of before jumping in the truck.

“You always just drop what you’re doing and take care of somebody else, but then you think, ‘Well, I didn’t take care of my family at all that day,’” he said. “City firemen don’t usually have to worry about whether a fire will burn their house.”

#### Circle of life

In addition to the fire, near zero visibility for drivers and obstacles such as falling utility poles, made it hard to find a safe way out.

Waldo firefighters Tyler Lund and his father, Jason, experienced both the firefighting and rescue roles volunteer firefighters routinely play in the very un-routine blaze.

“This thing here was a monster,” said Jason Lund.



Keith Haberer, emergency manager for Russell and Ellsworth counties, comforts Melissa Chrisler, whose house burned down Dec. 15.



On Dec. 15, the Lunds recognized an overturned truck and horse trailer in a ditch. They were checking inside for their friends and neighbors Stephanie and David Dickerson when the Dickersons pulled up in another vehicle. They were trying to find an escape route.

With fire lapping at them from the ditch, the Lunds and other firefighters led the Dickersons' truck full of people into a wheat field with thin crop residue and green plants. There, they waited for the flames to pass. Tyler was on the back of the truck, spraying water over the vehicles when the fire arrived, and Jason operated a nozzle on the front. Firefighters Tanner Portenier, Jake Graf and Aaron Bean sprayed water from a tanker.

"It burned around us," Jason Lund said. "You could see an actual circle in that field where we were all parked that didn't burn."

Stephanie Dickerson said it was the hottest she's ever felt, and "by far and away the scariest situation I've ever been in." Although later they discovered they'd lost their house, four barns, four vehicles and about 200 head of registered Bar S Ranch cattle, the Dickersons were glad to be alive.

"My husband and I both say had we not run into the firefighters we don't know what we would have done," she said. "There would have been nowhere for us to go if it wasn't for their quick thinking. We'll never be able to repay them for what they did. I'm very, very thankful that they were there."

Waldo firefighter Tyler Lund said it's difficult to see the burned homes.

"You almost feel guilty that you have a place to come home to and you still have to do your chores in the morning," he said.

### Could have been worse

Keith Haberer, emergency manager for Russell and Ellsworth counties, said he continues to have contact with victims of the blaze. The stories of survival he's heard make it clear it could have been worse.

There was the woman who realized she'd left her purse in the house as she was evacuating. When she turned back

### You Can Help

Many victims of the Four County Fire could still use help in their recovery. Several have GoFundMe accounts. Contributions for disaster relief funds established for Ellis, Rooks and Trego counties are being accepted on the Heartland Community Foundation website at <https://heartlandcommunityfoundation.org/heartland-disaster-relief-fund/>. The Russell County Area Community Foundation has also established a disaster fund at <https://www.gnwkc.org/donate-rcacf-disasterfund>.

to get it, her house was already in flames. There was the 84-year-old man who survived by hiding under an old grain truck as the fire raged through, destroying his house and melting aluminum off other vehicles on his property.

And then there were Tony and Melissa Chrisler and their son, Riley. They got separated in the blowing dirt and smoke and for a time didn't know if each other had made it out. They all did, but their home was destroyed and most of their cattle did not survive.

Melissa Chrisler said they plan to rebuild in the same spot.

"Each day is better," she said. "That doesn't mean you don't cry."

### Calling all volunteers

Hirsch said departments almost always need more volunteers, and there is a variety of work for them to do.

Koelling said he and many of his crew are getting old. He said he'd like to have some younger volunteers, but finding reliable people who are available to respond to calls during the day is tough.

"Realizing you're part of the solution is a pretty good thing," Hirsch said. "You could help people when they need it the most. There's nothing more rewarding – nothing more satisfying – than that."

He said people who live in rural areas tend to realize the importance of volunteering.

"If we're going to live in small-town America, we've got to step up," he said.

The December fires were proof that there are those who do.

"Do I want to do another one of these things? Absolutely not. Never," said Waldo firefighter Jason Lund. "Would I do another one if I had to? Yes." ■



A home south of Natoma burns on Dec. 15. (Photo courtesy of Justin Frye)

## There are steps you can take to make your home safer from wildfires

For fires that occur under less severe weather conditions than the Four County Fire, there are steps homeowners can take to make their homes less likely to burn.

Wildfire is often spread by floating embers. Anyone constructing a new home in the vicinity of uninhabited areas should prioritize fire resistance when choosing building materials – especially roofing, siding and porch or decking materials.

Owners of existing homes in proximity to uninhabited grassland can take steps to make their houses more resistant to being ignited by a wildfire. Those include:

- Thinning trees and shrubs in the vicinity of the home and pruning lower branches. Trees should be more than 30 feet away from the house.
- Clearing anything flammable from within five feet of the house, including shrubs, plants, mulch and piles of firewood. Be aware that the corners of a building are particularly vulnerable.
- Keeping gutters and roof cleared of debris.
- Checking eaves and walls for cracks and openings where an ember could enter. Place metal mesh across attic vents.
- Paying special attention to places that wind causes leaves to pile. Those places are also where an ember is likely to blow.
- Keeping the lawn well irrigated.

Source: [firewise.org](https://firewise.org)

To learn more, contact Christopher Hanson, Northwest District fire management officer for the Kansas Forest Service, at (817) 907-5302 or email [cehjr@ksu.edu](mailto:cehjr@ksu.edu).



# ROGUE

Going

## Need gardening tools? Prohoe, Home of Rogue Tools

ADDRESS: 202 S. Main St., Munden

PHONE: 1 (800) 536-5450

WEBSITE: [Prohoe.com](http://Prohoe.com)

FACEBOOK: [Rogue Hoes by Prohoe Manufacturing](https://www.facebook.com/RogueHoes)

Munden manufacturer Prohoe still growing after producing Rogue Tools for more than 30 years

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[MUNDEN] The 1980s were a tough time for farmers. The U.S. was in a major agricultural crisis due to plummeting land prices, increased debt, low commodity prices, reduced exports and high oil prices. A record number of farms were sold at auction. Republic County farmer Loren Kisby and his wife, Judy, remember it well. Times were tough in 1985, and yet, there was the issue of their son, Jon, who really needed a different place to sleep.

"He was sleeping in the laundry room," Loren quipped. So, the couple decided an addition to their modest home was in order, even if they had to do the work themselves.

"I dug a trench by hand for the foundation," Loren recalled. "Then it rained, and the trench filled up with water and mud."

Loren tried a number of conventional tools to clear the muck from the trench. Finally, he said, he headed to the scrap pile where he saw a partial disc blade.

He welded it to a pipe, and lo and behold, his homemade implement proved just the thing to clean out

the muddy trench.

Mission accomplished, and the tool was tossed back to the scrap pile. But Loren said he found that he was frequently returning to fetch that tool for other tasks.

"I kept going back to find that tool," Loren said. "Finally, in 1990, the pipe handle was giving out, but the disc blade was still looking good." An idea began to formulate.

### 200 combinations

Fast forward to today. Prohoe Manufacturing is producing hoes similar to that original tool, along with more than 65 other models.

"Together with the various kinds and lengths of handles, we probably have easily 200 product combinations," said Deanna

Derowitsch, production manager for Prohoe, home of Rogue Tools.

If necessity is the mother of invention, Loren Kisby just might be the father. From that first tool, he began to branch out to rakes and other garden implements – all made from old disc blades. Loren

found the blades were strong and retained their sharpness.

"I made one tool and showed it to family," he said.

"Then in the '90s we

started selling at garden shows."

They decided they needed a logo in 1990. Again, it was Loren who came up with the idea.

"I think he was on the tractor," Judy said. "He does some of his best thinking on the tractor."

The logo is an elephant – not an animal you would find in a garden. But it spoke to Loren, who wanted to incorporate the word rogue.

"Rogue has a double meaning. It's any animal that separates itself from the herd. And our product is strong like an elephant. But you also rogue a field to eliminate weeds and get a standard height," Loren said. "Our hoes do the job and also stand away from the herd."

### Out of the coop and into the school

When the school in Munden closed in about 1992, the Kisbys saw an opportunity to expand the manufacturing operation. At that time they were working out of an abandoned chicken coop on the farm.

"I bought the school building from the city. They were going to bulldoze it, so I got a pretty good deal," Loren said.

By 1992 the couple sold most of the farm and devoted their time to the business. They had a little land that was good for grazing cattle that they sold in 2003, and they moved to Munden.

The Kisbys said they hired a young man part time in 1994 to help with grinding, and then in about 1996, they hired their first "under roof employee."

"That was a big step. It meant more insurance, everything. But we were selling dozens, and that helped us move to selling hundreds," Loren said.

Along the way, the Kisbys said they had some good fortune. They reached out to his alma mater, Kansas State University, where they hooked up with a professor that assigned students to work with entrepreneurs.



DEANNA DEROWITSCH



Loren and Judy Kisby own Prohoe Manufacturing in Munden.



"I thought, 'These young kids won't be any help,' but we went with it, and they were tremendous individuals," Loren recalled. "They helped with marketing and sales research."

The Kisbys also made some good connections at the farm and garden shows, and that opened up markets across the country, particularly in Texas.

### More space

Business has continued to grow. In addition to the school building, Prohoe expanded to the former Munden community center building in 2017.

"When we bought it, I thought, 'What am I going to do with all this space?' " Derowitsch said. "Then we moved in and I said, 'We don't have enough space!'"

Derowitsch, who has been with Prohoe for 10 years, said the company employs 21 people, and all but three are full time. She said they don't have trouble with staffing. Most employees make the drive daily from Belleville, about 11 miles each way. Some live in or near Munden.

"The people we need seem to come when we need them," she said. "Folks seem to like it. The company is very family oriented."

Prohoe tools are sold through dealerships, wholesalers and online direct, Derowitsch said.

"We probably sent out about 45,000 units last year," Derowitsch said. "It just keeps growing. We'll do quite a bit more this year if I can get handles. It will far exceed last year."

The handles are made of ash or hickory. Like other wood products, they have been harder to get since the pandemic.

"We ship all over the world, but mostly in the United States. Direct sales from our website go largely to the two coasts. I think the fact that we use all reclaimed metal from disc blades – that recycled aspect really appeals to those buyers."

Prohoe purchases the used blades directly from farmers, or through companies that sell the new discs and remove the old ones for customers who don't want them.

"Our purchase area is north to I-80 in Nebraska, south to Oklahoma City,

Kelly Westervelt sharpens a disc blade on the turntable – one of several pieces of equipment used at the Munden plant that was designed by founder Loren Kisby.



See **ROGUE**, page 12





Tylor Todd and her prize buckle and saddle at the National High School Finals Rodeo. (Courtesy photo)



Tylor learned to ride as a young child on her family's miniature pony, Sonny. (Courtesy photo)



Tylor with her geldings, VooDoo on the left and Boyd on the right. (Courtesy photo)

# World's

## Rexford teen wins the All-Around title at high school rodeo finals

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[REXFORD] When she was 3 years old, Tylor Todd loved to ride on a miniature saddle on the back of Sonny, her family's miniature pony.

"He would just take me all over, and that's how I learned to ride," she said. "I picked up on it pretty naturally. I never wanted to be out of the saddle. I just wanted to ride all the time."

Then she moved up to a bigger pony. It wasn't long before she was on horseback. By age 8, she was showing reined cow horses through the National Reined Cow Horse Association (NRCHA).

With such an early start, maybe it's no surprise Todd is ahead of the competition now. At age 18, Todd, of Rexford, was named All-Around World Champion Cowgirl at the National High School Rodeo Association's rodeo finals in July in Lincoln, Neb.

Now Todd could literally meet herself coming and going. Since she won the NHSRA All-Around, her image appears on the side of

a CINCH Jeans semi tractor-trailer that travels the country.

"My sister went out and saw it and sent me pictures she took of it in Las Vegas," she said.

In the past year, Todd was the youngest competitor to make the finals at the World's Greatest Horsewoman Competition at Art of the Cowgirl in Queen Creek, Ariz. She placed second in the nonpro hackamore and won a world championship in the intermediate nonpro bridle competition at the Celebration of Champions in Fort Worth, Texas. She is a three time NRCHA world champion, two time Kansas High School Rodeo state champion and NRCHA national champion.

Todd was thrilled to earn the All-Around title. She'd been working toward the win since being named All-Around Rookie of the Year as a Golden Plains High School freshman in 2018.

"The last time a person from Kansas won the All-Around girl's title was in 1950," she said. "It's been a long time."

Todd's 1,190-point total topped the winning score for All-Around Cowboy winner Sam Petersen, of Helena, Mont. Todd earned those points by placing high in all



# Best Cowgirl

three go-rounds in the reined cow horse and girls cutting competitions. She and her 11-year-old quarter horse, Mr. Stylish Cat, known as Boyd around the barn, made the top 20 and ultimately came in third in the cow horse competition.

"I love Boyd. He's awesome," she said. "We really get each other, and we're a pretty good team."

In girls cutting, Todd and her horse Patarey, whose barn name is Chubbs, also made the top 20 and came in fourth. She also owns and competes on a third horse, VooDoo Whiskey, VooDoo for short.

Todd qualified to compete for the world championship by first winning the state championships in both events.

## Sliding stops, full gallop

For those who aren't already familiar with what a reined cow horse event might entail, competition scenes in the third season of the popular Paramount program *Yellowstone* give you a pretty good idea. The event includes rein work and cow work. Sliding stops, turn-arounds, backing up and moving at a range of speeds from full gallop to slow trot show how responsive the horse is to the rider. The horse demonstrates its athleticism, agility and ability to control a cow by running it down the fence, boxing it in, turning it to the left and right and circling it in

the middle of the arena.

"It looks really cool," Todd said.

The girls cutting competition occurs during a 2½-minute time frame. Todd and Chubbs cut three cows out of a herd individually and

She said she always eats something before competing, and she has a lucky shirt she likes to wear, but she's not superstitious. She has a formula that works.

"I have a lot of hardware.

riding events had started taking her away during the school year, so she switched to online schooling and graduated from the Manhattan Virtual Academy while on the show circuit.

"I couldn't show as much



Taylor and Boyd complete a sliding stop during the National High School Finals Rodeo in Lincoln, Neb., in July. (Courtesy photo)

demonstrate their ability to keep them from rejoining the other cows.

"I really try and let my horses do their job, and I try and stay out of their way," she said. "You really have to be relaxed. A horse picks up on your emotions pretty easily. As soon as you get tense, they're going to get tense. If you're going to win, you're going to win. If it's in God's timing, it's in his timing. If it's not, you just go on to the next one. That's my mindset about it when I go in a show. You can't force it."

It's displayed throughout our house," she said. "There are a lot of buckles everywhere and saddles and trophies and stuff like that."

## No horsing around

Todd grew up on a farm near Rexford with her siblings Taylor and Tannor, and their parents, Jay and Brandy Todd. Grandparents Joan and Doug Todd live right down the road on land that has been in the family for more than a century. She attended Golden Plains schools through her sophomore year. By then

as I wanted to. I'm a very ambitious person," she said. "I have a lot of goals."

Now Todd stays on the road as much as she likes. She competes in some of the same shows every year, like the Stallion Stakes in Las Vegas, Nev. Each year she tries out a couple of new shows. Last year, she went to Tennessee. The farthest north she's gone is South Dakota. She has begun to drive herself to shows in a Ford pickup hauling a 35-foot horse trailer with living quarters in

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ROGUE, from page 9

and west to Colorado,” Derowitsch said. “We have a company in Marysville we buy from, but otherwise we don’t go east too much.”

The price is \$400 a ton.

### On the turntable

“I have designed every one of the tools we are selling,” Loren said. “My job is design.”

That expertise has also come in handy for equipment needs at Prohoe. The first stop for a used disc is a tool designed by Loren called the turntable. Like a stereo turntable, the disc is attached at the center and rotates while an employee sharpens the blade all the way around.

From there, the blades are sorted by gauge and size. The next step is the plasma cutter. Using a pattern, the tool is cut from the disc. The rough edges are smoothed with a grinder and cleaned using a special vat called a media tumbler. It’s filled with ceramic rocks, water and a little soap that gets rid of any remaining dust or rust.

For the hoes, the pieces are then sent to the bender. Using a tool – also designed by Loren – the neck is heated and bent to the specific shape.

The various pieces are then stored until needed to complete an order.

Next, the metal implement is welded to the ferrule – a metal piece that will connect the implement to the handle.

Once the fabrication is complete, the tools go to the other building where they are attached to handles and painted. The logo is added before a final sharpening. The finished product is then bundled and wrapped for shipping.

### Forestry and firefighting

Prohoe specialized in farm and garden tools for some time before expanding to forestry and firefighting tools.

“We were selling field hoes and garden hoes. Then we heard about wildland firefighters that were using our field hoes,” Loren said. “But they wanted something heavier.”

“So, we started designing for that. We had a hotshot fire crew in Oregon that we were using to test the new designs. We



ABOVE: Amos Batts attaches a hoe to the wooden handle before painting it.

RIGHT: Jeff Frint puts the final sharpening on a hoe before it is wrapped and shipped, or stored for future sales.

would send them things and they offered suggestions.”

Loren said the firefighters challenged him with two specific tool requests. The first was a hoe on one side and a rake on the backside.

“At first, we couldn’t do it because the discs were not big enough. We had 18-, 20- and 22-inch discs. Then we got some that were 24 inches, and we thought we could make it happen.”

Loren went to work on the design, and the results were good.

“I thought, ‘Nobody else is going to want this,’ and we’d sell about a dozen. But the 70HR hoe/rake sells like crazy,” he said, laughing.

### A thicker blade

The other tool the firefighters requested also took some time to figure out. The crew wanted a combination hoe and ax. The issue Loren had was that the disc blades were not thick enough to make an ax.

“Then we got some flat blades from Polansky Seed in Belleville. They were no-till blades, Loren said. “They were a little thicker, and I thought, we might be able to make an ax out of these.”

“We can’t make enough fire tools. They are also popular for trail building and maintenance.”

Judy noted that expanding into the fire and trail industry was good for



business flow.

“The gardening season ends or slows down mid-summer and is slow all winter. But fire season really starts up in late summer and fall,” she said. “So that was a big deal.”

Loren said several years ago their son-in-law, Reinhart Baumann, was riding his bike on a trail in Minnesota when he came across a crew using Prohoe tools.

“He said, ‘I know the guy that builds those.’ So right away they thought he should be able to get them a cheaper price,” he laughed.

His son-in-law declined that deal. Reinhart had worked for Prohoe for about four months before marrying the Kisbys’ daughter. He personally knew the craftsmanship of each product and the history of the company: That every Prohoe tool is made by hand, much like the bedroom built for Jon so many years before. ■





Tylor and Boyd complete a fence turn during the National High School Finals Rodeo in Lincoln, Neb., in July. (Courtesy photo)

**COWGIRL**, from page 11  
the front.

"I go a lot of places by myself now that I'm older, but my family likes to come," she said. "My dad drove me and my sister out to Arizona, then he flew back to work and flew back to drive us home."

She said on the road there aren't a lot of places to stop with the horse trailer, but on long trips, she will find somewhere to walk and water the horses.

"We give them hay inside the trailer, and they're pretty happy if the trip is less than 12 hours," she said. "You have to be conscious of your horse. The horse comes first."

Todd said she learned her love of horses and competition from her father, who as a young man traveled the country tripping steers in Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association rodeos. When his oldest daughter was born, he entered the banking profession to stay home with his family. Now her parents

enjoy traveling to watch Tylor compete in as many shows as they can.

"Last year in the month of July, I was home less than 48 hours," she said. "That was probably the busiest month."

When not on horseback, Todd is using the nearly \$9,000 in NHSRA scholarship money she won to take online classes from Allen County Community College. She plans to move to Lubbock, Texas, in the fall and live on campus while she pursues a degree in ag business at Texas Tech University. Her eventual goal is to be a real estate agent for ranches and equine property and possibly run a horse boarding facility. She also plans to continue competing in the nonprofessional division for people who ride their own horses and do not work as trainers.

"Inside the show pen, I want to be a million-dollar earning nonpro," she said. How close is she? Last year, she got almost a 10th of the way there.

"I think we'll hit the \$100,000 mark this year," she said.

### Time in Texas

In Texas, she will be closer to older sister Taylor, who had been a member of the horse-judging and equestrian teams at Kansas State University and now works as membership and affiliate show manager for the National Reined Cow Horse Association in Pilot Point. She will also be closer to her horses, who are often boarded with their trainer in Amarillo.

"Kansas weather isn't very productive for training horses in the winter," she said. "Sometimes they're here in the winter, but before a big show they are going to go to the trainer and get 'tuned on.'"

Todd said the professional trainer helps get her horses "dialed in mentally."

"Show horses get really show smart," she said. "They have some tricks they can

throw at you. They need to be mentally prepared and know that they're going to do their job when they walk into the pen. If I'm the only person who rides them long enough, they get too used to me and they won't take the correction seriously. They need to have someone else ride them sometimes."

Todd said she enjoys spending time with her horses, including feeding them and cleaning their stalls.

"I really like doing that kind of thing," she said. "I don't like other people doing it because I like it done a certain way. I don't like people loading the trailer or loading my tack. I like to do it myself so that I know everything's there and everything's going to get there."

Todd said she's made a lot of friends on the road.

"There's a lot of people just like me," she said. "We travel everywhere, so we all know each other. It's a little family." ■



# Eat Your *greens*



Above, Dan Buck separates ithaca lettuce seedlings for placement in a plant tray.  
Below, red leaf lettuce adds a dash of color to a salad.

## 4B FARM, LLC

**FACEBOOK:** 4B Farms of Grinnell Kansas

**WEBSITE FOR ONLINE PURCHASES:** [www.4bfarmllc.com](http://www.4bfarmllc.com)

Lettuce can be ordered for \$3.25 a head and picked up at the greenhouse at 12008 W. Road 110 S, Grinnell; the Prairie Museum parking lot in Colby or People's Bank & Trust in Ness City. Notifications for deliveries are posted on Facebook.

## Sheridan County farm fills Northwest Kansas demand for lettuce

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[ANGELUS] Each week, one of the stops on Dan Buck's route is HaysMed, where he pulls back an insulated blanket and starts unloading the 4B Farm's lettuce that will soon be served in salads and sandwiches to patients and staff.

"Every week we see the farmer that grew it himself," said Justin Cline, food service manager for the Hays hospital. "He delivers it. His wife sends out the invoices. They've got a good little operation."

Cline said if a national lettuce recall occurs, he knows he has nothing to worry about. He can be certain 4B lettuce is safe to serve.

"It's really just a good quality lettuce. It doesn't wilt quickly," Cline said. "It's good, clean lettuce. We use it in salads and sandwiches for our patients and our retail operation. We're very satisfied."

Dan Buck and his wife, Carol, launched 4B Farm, located near the tiny town of Angelus about eight miles northwest of Grinnell, in January 2018. Since then, many area restaurants, independently owned grocery stores and schools have become a part of the Bucks' wholesale delivery route. Customers find both nutritional and economic value in locally grown leafy greens, which arrive as a complete lettuce plant with roots still attached.

4B grows five varieties of lettuce – green leaf, romaine, red leaf, butter crunch and ithaca – in a large hydroponic greenhouse. When the greenhouse is full, there are 11,181 plants and 8,000 more seedlings in starter trays. They also grow cilantro, spinach, parsley, rosemary, basil, English cucumbers and three varieties of kale.

The greenhouse has a 44-by-128-foot growing area, but the Bucks increased the space for plants by adding an upper row of plant trays. They installed grow lights underneath and systematically rotate the trays to ensure that plants get an equal amount of light. Last year, to improve the growing environment, they imported and installed a greenhouse dehumidifier designed in Israel.

### Launching into lettuce

The Bucks purchased a relatively small farm and moved to Sheridan County from Nebraska in 2006. They started a goat herd, and Dan Buck was searching for other ways to utilize their 160 acres when he came across the idea of growing produce in a controlled greenhouse environment. He ordered the greenhouse as a kit and erected it with some help from friends and family. The greenhouse is inspected annually, and the Bucks are certified for good agricultural practices by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They meet training requirements for maintaining food safety management systems.



The hydroponic system works well in the dry area. Each head of lettuce, which would require 50 gallons of water to grow in a field, can sprout from its seed and grow to full size with only a gallon and a half of water trickling through the greenhouse trays and into the rock wool growing medium. The medium is made from rock ground into a fine powder and then spun like cotton candy. Any nutrients the plants need are added to the water.

Plants can grow year-round. Even in freezing temperatures, the greenhouse – made of two layers of clear plastic with an air space in between – often allows in enough sun to keep the plants sufficiently warm without the propane heaters. This

summer, Dan hopes to further reduce utility costs by installing drain tile 6 to 8 feet below ground with fans that circulate air for a geothermal heating and cooling system.

“We’ve been watching videos on geothermal greenhouses,” he said. “We should have done that to begin with.”

The greenhouse has proved surprisingly strong. Only the exterior layer of plastic sheeting was shredded after two hailstorms. During the strong windstorm on Dec. 15, the west wall of the greenhouse bowed in about an inch, a problem that Buck was making plans to address in March. The wind rippled through the greenhouse, making a sound like a bass drum when it got to the end.

“We harvested that morning, and when that wind came up, we knew we were not going to be able to stand it in here,” Buck said. “Our nerves were just going to go. The arches were raising up like it was breathing. It bent some of the braces, but it stood here.”

That’s good news for Shaun and Heather Musil, who own The Paisley Pear wine bar, bistro and market in downtown Hays.

“We go through about 25 to 30 heads (of lettuce) a week,” Shaun Musil said. “We get it on Monday, and it looks just as good the following Monday. You can just see the way it presents itself on the plate. It’s just so crisp and fresh.”

### Let us find the way

Commercial lettuce production is not exactly what Northwest Kansas is known for, and the challenges of doing something no one else is doing are real. Dan Buck thinks by now he’s probably discovered all the reasons why he and Carol are the only people in the area trying to make a living growing lettuce.

“It’s been an up and down ride to say the least,” he said.

Over the last couple of years, the struggles have included aphids, downy mildew, algae in the water system and bad seed. They’ve seen the time required to grow a head of lettuce about double from the 45 days it took when they first started.

At one point, they were having so many problems at once that it was hard to sort them all out. But it was the customers who kept them looking for answers.

“They were saying, ‘You can’t quit now! We’re not going back to buying off the truck,’” Carol said.

By mid-2020, the Bucks realized they needed to spend time figuring out why it was becoming so much harder to fill orders.

“We’ve been trying different things,” Dan said. “It’s not an overnight fix when we see issues. I’m hoping after two or three years here of trial and error that we’ve got some things figured out.”

### OPEN HOUSE

Come take a guided tour of the greenhouse between **10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on June 5.** 4B Farm’s produce, as well as food and drink from other area vendors, will be available for sale. Families are welcome.



Dan and Carol Buck, and daughter, Shayna, work together growing 4B Farm lettuce.

Dan said their daughter, Shayna, who comes from Hays to help in the greenhouse three days a week, has been a great help in resolving problems.

“When we were having issues, she said, ‘Dad, what do you need me to research so we can figure out what’s going on here?’” he said. “She really helped us.”

By March, their confidence was building. They had switched seed companies and begun using a food-safe additive in the water that was effective at resolving some of the other issues.

The heads of lettuce they are growing now are consistently

bigger and greener again, he said.

“The leaves are clean clear to the bottom. The plants are darker and healthier, and the roots are nice and white instead of a drab brown,” Dan said with satisfaction. “Hopefully we’ve figured everything out and can get back to where we started. When we started everything was great.”

Dan said that during COVID they lost some of their larger school accounts when students were being instructed online. Some haven’t come back, but since they were having production issues that was just as well. He said soon they should have plenty to accommodate new customers.

“We are still looking for more customers and still doing everything we can to continue to improve,” Carol said.

### Customers ‘super happy’

Dan said school dietary staff have told him they don’t mind paying more for 4B lettuce because the kids prefer it, and it lasts much longer than lettuce that’s been trucked in from elsewhere.

“I’ve been told this is well worth the extra money because they’re not throwing this away,” he said. “The kids are eating it.”

Even during the bad old days, loyal customers told the Bucks their lettuce was better than lettuce available elsewhere.

“The customers are just super happy with the product,” said Mark Joslyn, co-owner of Joslyn Food Center in Hoxie. “They come in, and that’s what they’re looking for in the produce case. It’s very popular.” ■





# Digging Deep

Wilson librarian and amateur sleuth Cherilee Ward is the go-to person for local history

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[WILSON] Cherilee Shiroky Ward is a well-educated, retired teacher and helpful librarian. But mostly, Ward is a digger. She knows her way around newspaper archives, books and internet sites and uses all those tools to dig deeply into the past – whether she is researching a family tree, a historic building or a murder.

Three days a week, Ward manages the efficiently operated and inviting Lang Memorial Library in Wilson. She has a bachelor's degree in home economics from Kansas State, a master's in science with emphasis in library studies from Fort Hays State and a second master's in counseling, also from K-State. She taught school – library and computer science – for 30 years, including 17 at Sylvan

Grove and 11 in Overland Park.

In 2017, Ward retired, and she and her husband, Scott, returned to her family's farm on the north edge of Wilson. She took over the library position in Wilson the same year.

"My family homesteaded here," she said. "The farmhouse was built in 1872 by Civil War veteran Andrew Jackson Crawford, before my family arrived. It is still standing, but when we returned, we built a new house."

## Homework becomes a hobby

Two of her three sons, Joseph and Jordon, live in the area and farm. Her youngest son, Jantzen, lives in Overland Park. All three grew up on the farm and went to school

in Wilson.

It was a class trip for Joseph that ignited Ward's love of research.

"Joseph was a sophomore, and the German class was taking a trip to Germany," Ward said. "They were going to stop in the Czech Republic, and the kids were asked to research family history for the trip. I realized that I did not know anything!"

Today, Ward knows a lot.

"My great-grandparents were from the Czech Republic. My grandfather was born in Ohio. His family was part of a Cleveland colony that immigrated in about 1883," she said. "My father's mother's family immigrated to Wilson in 1875 through New York City – but before Ellis Island.

"Families stopped in New York to earn some money

before moving on. They rolled cigars in their tenement apartments – even the children."

Ward said it is not unusual for families with rich immigration history to be kept in the dark about their past. "After immigration, they didn't want to talk about the old days. I mean, some did, but my family did not. They just wanted to be Americanized and move on. That was not uncommon."

## Start with the news

Her advice to those seeking to start learning more about their ancestors is to start with newspapers.

"Newspapers.com is a good place to start," she said, "especially for obituaries. Obituaries used to have a lot of detailed information."

From the newspaper archives, Ward said she encourages people to follow the trail of information: other names, locations, wedding dates, etc.

She said the popular ancestry websites can be helpful, but they are populated by the users, so sometimes the information is not correct. On the other hand, she said, if photos are on that site, it can be helpful if you are searching for information about an undated, unmarked picture.

"You might have several photos of a family member with another person, but you don't know who it is," she explained. "If you find that person identified in another photo it can be helpful."

Ward also encourages reaching out to other people.

"I've talked to so many people, especially older people. They share memories

Ward and the Wilson library maintain a special section on Czech history.





Cherilee Ward made a vest for her granddaughter, Maddison Ward, to wear at the annual Czech Festival. Inside she embroidered the child's Czech ancestors.

that lead you to other people.”

She said many people find *FamilySearch.org* operated by the Church of Latter-Day Saints in Utah is a good source. “People used to line up at the doors waiting for them to open each day,” she said, “but I am not sure if that is still the case with all the internet options now.”

### More than families

Not only is Ward a tremendous resource for locals or former residents of the area trying to research their own roots, but she also knows a lot about the buildings in the area, and that has been very helpful as well.

“People who buy a historic house or building and are trying to get grants for a new roof need to know who built it,” she said. “And they need to know by tomorrow,” she added laughing.

Pictures are also helpful for the grant-seekers, and often Ward can help with that, too.

Pointing out the windows of the library, she can give you a history lesson on

most of the structures in the Wilson business district, and also the structures that have burned or been torn down. She can tell you that her great uncle, Ed Vancura and Cousin Frank Sibrava, Sr., once ran a Studebaker dealership there, or that the former Schermerhorn & Lang building could provide everything a person needed from birth to death – including a selection of coffins in the basement.

“You could pick out the color of the lining and the coffin would be prepared for use while you waited,” she said.

### Amateur sleuth

More recently, Ward's research skills were put to work on a murder case that is more than 115 years old.

“On January 19, 1905, in the middle of the afternoon, the City Marshall of Wilson walked into the newspaper office and shot the editor in cold blood,” Ward said.

Having occurred in the middle of the day and in front

of at least one witness, there was no mystery about who shot Col. Charles Hutchinson, editor of the *Wilson Echo*. It was Jesse Tillman, former editor of a rival paper, and a man with “a checkered past.”

Ward and some of her regular patrons – the library also serves as a gathering place for friends and families – got interested in the historic murder and whatever might have happened to the gun that was used that day.

“I call us amateur sleuths,” Ward said. “We’re having fun.”

With a slim trail to follow, Ward started digging. Her efforts eventually led to a visit to Wilson in January 2021 from the victim's great-grandson, Gary Klotz of Meriden, Kan., with the infamous gun in hand. A complete story of the murder, the gun search and Klotz's visit ran in the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter* in April 2021.\*

Quite a crowd gathered to greet Klotz and relive the tale. But that's not the end of murder mysteries for Ward.

“Next I want to tackle the Ellsworth axe murders,” she said.

In 1911, William Showman, his wife and three daughters were killed with an axe while they slept. The Ellsworth case is part of a book titled *The Man from the Train* that claims the villain to be Henry Lee Moore, an ex-convict believed to have committed similar murders in several Midwest communities connected by railroads.

## AWFUL DEED AT WILSON.

Editor Hutchinson Shot Down Over a Trivial Matter.

Wilson, Kas., Jan. 20.—Jesse Tillman, city marshal, shot and killed C. S. Hutchinson yesterday afternoon. Later, when a crowd had collected about his rooming house, Tillman shot himself through the head, dying instantly.

Hutchinson was postmaster of the town and editor of the *Echo*. Trouble started one week ago, when the marshal caught Hutchinson's 11-year-old son on the street after the curfew had rung, and ordered the boy home. He emphasized his command with a kick, and when Hutchinson asked why he did it Tillman refused to tell.

Yesterday Hutchinson published an item about the affair, in which he sarcastically referred to the marshal as defending the town against an attack of a bandit 11 years of age, weighing sixty pounds, and said the marshal's bravery deserved the plaudits of the world.

The item so enraged Tillman that, without a word of warning, he walked into the *Echo* office and shot Hutchinson through the heart.

Tillman then ran down the back alley and gained his room. A crowd collected about the house and the mayor of the town knocked at the door and asked Tillman to come out. Tillman said he would be there in a minute, as there was no hurry. As the mayor turned away he stepped out into the hall, saw the crowd waiting for him, and fearing that he would be lynched, shot himself.

Tillman was acting as marshal only temporarily. The sentiment of the town is bitter against him. He had a family here, but his wife secured a divorce from him recently.

Hutchinson was very popular and was serving his second term as postmaster.

Story of the murder of Wilson newspaper editor C. S. Hutchinson from the Great Bend Register, January 26, 1905. Wilson librarian Cherilee Ward recently dug into the historic case to find out what happened to the murder weapon.

But Ward doesn't buy it. “I think it was someone closer,” she said. “I think I can solve it.”

\*Read the complete newspaper story written by Cherilee Ward, courtesy of the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter* online at [DaneHansenFoundation.org](http://DaneHansenFoundation.org). Click on the Northwest Kansas Today magazine on the homepage.





# Creature migration

Raymond "Fox" Still's art was loaded on the trailer and ready for the trip from Sharon Springs to Lucas in 2020. (Photo courtesy of Steven Schultz)

## Sharon Springs man's unique art finds new home in Lucas

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

When Raymond "Fox" Still died in 2017, the 77-year-old Sharon Springs man left behind not only his wife, children and grandchildren, but also the Energizer Bunny, a female cyclops, the Pink Panther, and several other larger-than-life creature creations.

Inspired by pop culture and a love of bow and arrow hunting, Still had turned his backyard into both a tourist attraction and a shooting gallery. People came to Sharon Springs to see the fanciful creatures he'd created from plywood and Styrofoam for friends and family to use as archery targets.

The first to appear, a couple decades ago, was a Sasquatch, which towered over Still's head. The last, created around 2010, was a dinosaur that stood more than 13 feet tall. Various creatures had eyes made of ping pong balls and fangs fashioned from deer antlers.

"He just came up with things in his brain that he wanted to do," said his widow, Sharie Still. "He was an artist, and he liked to create things. He enjoyed it, and I think he enjoyed the attention, too.

"You could see them from the street. We even had some people drive right up in the yard."

But after her husband died, the creatures began to suffer for lack of his careful attention. He had often needed to repair them, squirting insulating foam spray in the holes made by arrows, spreading caulk over that, combing it to look like fur or scales, and repainting.



Raymond "Fox" Still and his first creature, Sasquatch. Unfortunately, Big Foot deteriorated beyond the point of restoration (Courtesy Photo)

### Goodbye to Big Foot

After his death, Big Foot and the Pink Panther stood out in the weather until they could stand no more. Eventually, they were in such bad condition they were hauled off. However, before any more creatures were beyond saving, Sharie Still placed a call to the Grassroots Art Center in Lucas.

"She was just seeing them deteriorate and not feeling happy about that," said the center's executive director, Rosslyn Schultz.





Lacie Austin poses with Raymond "Fox" Still's female cyclops, which lays on the workbench in Austin's Lucas art studio. Austin had nearly completed restoration on the creature.

When Schultz assured her that the center would see to it that the sculptures were repaired, Still told her to come and get them.

Schultz had visited the Still home two or three times when Raymond Still was alive. He was among the many self-taught artists the center has documented in 23 of the 26 counties served by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation. Schultz makes an effort to keep in contact with the artists, in hopes of helping to preserve their work.

Home of the Garden of Eden, a folk-art installation created by Civil War veteran S.P. Dinsmoor in 1907, Lucas has embraced its identity as champion of grassroots artists. Still's creations would be right at home there, Schultz knew.

"We've gotten so many comments on his whimsical sculptures," she said.

In August 2020, Schultz and her husband, Steven, hauled a flatbed trailer to Sharon Springs and retrieved nine of Raymond Still's works, leaving the Geico Gecko for his son. The eye-catching load traveled to Lucas, where the creatures temporarily moved into two sheds.

Soon, Lucas artist Lacie Austin was contracted to do the restoration work. The cost of her time and of necessary supplies has been funded through grants from the Hansen Foundation and the Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission.

### New homes for cyclops and others

During an annual community arts event April 1, Austin was ready to spring the latest surprise on Lucas – Still's spear-toting female cyclops.

"She looks pretty spiffy," Schultz said.

The long-haired cyclops was displayed in the courtyard behind the center, but soon Schultz hoped to move her into the foyer of the Bowl Plaza public restroom building.

"She could be in attack mode there," she said.

Austin said she had to completely rebuild one foot and repair both ears, and the cyclops presented other challenges.

"The neck is like a tree bark texture, and it took me forever to figure out how he did that," she said.

Austin had previously completed restoration of the Coca Cola polar bear, which sits on a bench in front of the center; a saber-tooth tiger, which is attacking a downtown light pole; and a fox, which had actually been a commercially purchased target that Still had used and repaired. Since Still's lifelong nickname was "Fox," the small animal now greets guests in the center's exhibit hall, with a display that gives information about his other works.

### Waiting on T-Rex

Next up are a kangaroo and the Energizer Bunny, which Austin was working on in early April. Yet to come are a silver-backed gorilla, a bobcat and a Tyrannosaurus rex.

Schultz said Lucas residents have volunteered to host various pieces of Still's work in their yards, once they have been restored. She envisions visitors taking an "adventure trip" around town to see them all. People had come from all over to view the creatures when they were in Sharon Springs, Sharie Still said.

"We had some local kids who knew he was building the T-Rex," Sharie Still remembered. "Every time they'd see my husband it was: 'You got that done yet?' They were waiting for him to get it out there so they could see it."

Austin said the T-Rex will probably be the last creature she restores, but she hopes to get it done sometime this year. She said it is so large she will have to work on it in place, unlike the other creatures, which she has repaired in her home studio.

Austin is the co-founder of the Switchgrass Art Cooperative in downtown Lucas. She and her family moved to Lucas from Houston in October 2018. A self-taught abstract painter and textile artist, she aspired to make Lucas her home after she and her husband, Jeff Shirley, made a first anniversary trip to see the Garden of Eden. She has enjoyed restoring Still's creations.

"I kind of go through cycles where I'm like, 'This is so cool! I can't believe I get to do it!' and then I'm like, 'I don't want to do this anymore,'" she said. "Then I get excited again." ■



Lucas artist Lacie Austin poses with Raymond "Fox" Still's polar bear, which hangs out in front of the Grassroots Arts Center in Lucas since Austin repaired and repainted it.





The cotton-top tamarin is critically endangered, with fewer than 6,000 remaining in the world.



One of the first animals at the Zoo, Uzazi is an endangered white rhino.



One of the two lionesses at the zoo basks in the sun. A new lion exhibit is opening this summer.

**Meet a few of the 100+ species at the Rolling Hills Zoo near Salina!**

PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

**Rolling Hills Zoo, Hedville**

Open seven days a week, 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.  
(9 a.m. – 4 p.m. Nov. 6 – Mar. 11)

# ANIMAL EN



Two of the Zoo's six chimpanzees pause from their grooming ritual.



The Grand Cayman iguana can grow to 5 feet in length and live up to 40 years.

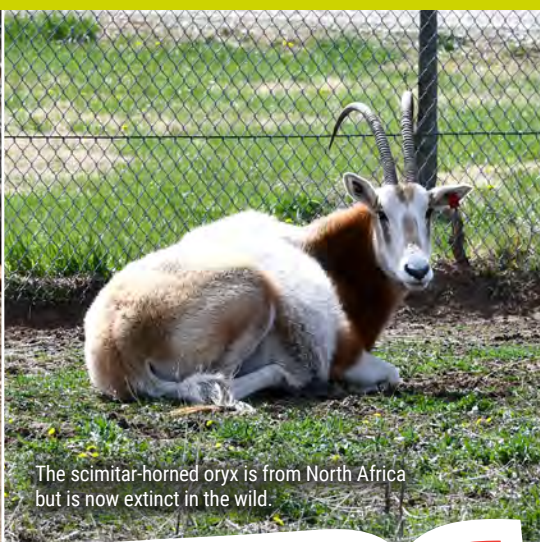


The waxy monkey tree frog is native to South America.



The pancake tortoise from East Africa can live for up to 35 years.





The scimitar-horned oryx is from North Africa but is now extinct in the wild.



Cleopatra is a rare white camel.

# COUNTERS



The green tree python grows up to 5 ft. in length but is not venomous.



The endangered ring-tailed lemur can live up to 19 years.



Zuri is one of three giraffes at the Zoo.



SPECIAL CHILD CARE SECTION

# NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Spring 2022 | VOLUME 3, ISSUE 4

Feature Story

## CARING FOR (THE YOUNGER) KIDS

Schools get involved in finding solutions for child care shortage

See Page 4

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# Child Care Special Section

## Caring for (the Younger) Kids 4

Addressing the need for childcare is more than keeping children warm and safe and fed – it's about starting their learning journey off right. That's just one reason many schools are finding they need to be a part of the solution.

## It's All About the Brain 10

Babies' brains are ripe for learning from the moment they are born. Quality early childhood experiences at home and in child care settings are critical to brain development in the first 5 years.

## Want Young Families? 12 Provide Child Care

The need for available high quality child care is not just a parent issue, it's a community issue. And it's an issue that needs to be solved to attract young families to rural communities.

## Child Care is Home-Made 14

Establishing a good location for quality child care is an important part of the process. With a lack of available housing in Northwest Kansas, the Hansen Foundation stepped up to help.

## Quality, Not Just Quantity, 18 is Important When it Comes to Child Care

The importance of early childhood education is well documented. Multiple studies, including long-term research, make it clear that providing quality child care and preschool to our children offers them a path to a better life.

Brexlynn Williams crawls through the tunnel in one of the toddler classrooms at Salina Child Care Center.



**ON THE COVER:** Little Paws Daycare Director Brandy Spreser builds colorful ice cream cones with her daughters, Maggie and Ellie, at the Selden child care facility.



# Why child care needs our help... *and our dollars*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

Young children are our most vulnerable, and valuable, resource. They are our future workforce, neighbors, and caregivers. Providing high-quality care for them should be a top priority in any community.

And yet, historically, child care workers are among the lowest paid of essential workers. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank, nationally, child care workers' families are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as other workers' families (11.8% are in poverty compared with 5.8%).

Besides low wages, most child care centers cannot afford to offer benefits such as vacation, sick leave, health insurance or retirement plans. That helps the budget but makes recruiting staff even more difficult.

For child care workers who are also trying to pay for child care, the issue is compounded by the high cost of that care. Again, from the EPI, a median wage child care worker in Kansas would have to spend 57.6% of her earnings to put her own child in infant care.

## Capacity vs. reality

Unlike most businesses, child care is difficult to cashflow due to the child-to-staff ratio requirements in state safety regulations.

Child care group homes can serve up to 10 children with one provider, or 12 with two providers. The number of children is determined by their ages. The younger the children being cared for, the fewer children overall that can be enrolled. Overhead costs are less, but there are fewer families paying for those expenses.

In a licensed child care center, infants, toddlers and preschool children are all required to be in separate rooms. As children "graduate" to different classrooms based on their age, centers often are holding a spot in, for example, a toddler room for a child that will be moving up from the infant room in a few weeks or months. This means there are periods of time where classrooms have open slots that aren't bringing in revenue.

Learn more about grant opportunities in support of child care from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation at [danehansenfoundation.org](https://danehansenfoundation.org). Click on NWKansas CARES for Kids.

Learn more about support for new and existing child care providers as well as state grants at [ks.childcareaware.org](https://ks.childcareaware.org).

## Affordability is an issue

Most of a center's revenue rests on the backs of parents, but parents can afford to pay only so much. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is affordable if it costs no more than 7% of a family's income. By this standard, only 8% of Kansas families can afford infant care.

In urban communities, wages are often higher, and centers can charge more. A larger enrollment also helps to spread the operational costs over more families, which makes it somewhat easier for the numbers to work.

Most Northwest Kansas communities are classified as rural or frontier, based on population. These families are typically not able or willing to pay the same rates as urban centers charge. And rural centers are smaller, so fewer families are covering the operational costs.

If we think of child care centers as similar to schools for older children, the fact that quality child care centers require budgetary support beyond tuition makes sense. Public schools receive funding from the state. Private schools operate on tuition combined with donor and grant support.

Without help from area businesses, individual donors and grants, it's difficult if not impossible to cashflow a quality nonprofit child care center.

## Empty classrooms

Salina Child Care Association (SCCA) is a long-established center, operating in Salina since 1967. In 1999, the center transitioned into a brand-new building provided by the Salina Regional Health Foundation. The center has no mortgage or rent but is responsible for some utilities.

See **CHILD CARE**, page 8



# Caring for (the younger) Kids

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY ERIN MATHEWS

Little Paws Daycare Director Brandy Spreser researched state regulations and wrote grant applications to establish the school-operated child care facility in Selden.

Schools get involved in finding solutions for child care shortage

School officials in both large and small districts in Northwest Kansas are finding reasons to become involved in the education of children at an earlier age.

The benefits to the schools that are part of the early childhood education system are rich.

As employers, schools often have staff who are young parents.







Care provider Brianna Stoll helps Krayton and Archer Minium manipulate some of the learning toys at Little Paws Daycare in Selden.

Without child care openings, these staff must choose between leaving for another community or staying home with their children. Neither option is good for the school.

Research repeatedly has proven that children who have good early education opportunities are more prepared when they enter kindergarten. Better prepared children means higher graduation rates down the road. In addition, little ones with special needs often can be identified early, and learning issues can be addressed before the child begins elementary school.

Economically, when schools are part of the early childhood education system, families become familiar with the district staff and facilities, and are more likely to keep their children enrolled in the district when the time comes. If families have to leave the community for child care, those children are more likely to become part of another school system.

Here's a look at several Northwest Kansas schools working on solutions to a lack of child care in their district.

## Selden: A teacher takes on child care

Brandy Spreser, of rural Selden, wanted to know that her two daughters would be well cared for. She also wanted to continue

to teach at the Selden elementary school they one day would attend.

Now, when she looks out of the window of her Golden Plains first-grade classroom, she is thankful to see the Little Paws Daycare that she helped create to make both things possible.

"It's been such a huge blessing," she said of the facility that opened in August 2020. "It has done amazing things for our families, and our community, and our kids. It's wonderful."

Spreser said she was pregnant with her 4-year old in 2018 when the school district surveyed parents and found "a desperate need" for child care. The provider Spreser had been using was quitting, and at least two other teachers out of the district's certified staff of 25 couldn't find child care. At the time, Spreser had her unborn child on waiting lists with seven providers in area towns, but she had little hope of rising to the top of any of those lists.

She began thinking the solution would be a new facility and started researching state regulations for group home licensure and fee structures at other child care facilities.

"I picked as many brains as I could possibly find," she said. Then, in 2019, she made a presentation asking the school board to consider launching a district-operated child care facility. With the board's support, she began writing grant applications.

"It was one of those things where I felt like I just couldn't give up on my community," she said. "I want my kids to go to school here. I want our school to thrive."

## Keeping children and families in the district

A Dane G. Hansen Foundation grant more than covered the cost of the mobile home from Countryside Homes in Hays. Additional funding came from the Sheridan County Community Foundation, the Pete Henry Foundation and Midwest Energy.

With facility and equipment costs covered, the school district budgeted for operational costs beyond what could be covered through parent fees, including salary and benefits for three full-time, certified child care providers. Spreser wrote a grant for salary support from the Patterson Family Foundation.

"What we're really doing is providing a service for the community," said Golden Plains Superintendent Mary Ellen Welshon. "It's more than teachers' kids, and it's open year round."

Pre K-12 Principal Ashley Arnberger said school officials are hopeful of breaking even on child care expenses, but if school funds have to be invested it will be worth doing. She said Spreser deserves all the credit.

"It's important to staff retention. It's important to getting kids to stay in our district and not go to neighboring

See **DISTRICT**, page 6



*"We think we need about four or five more providers, and we currently have six in the county. It's affecting everything and everyone. A committee has been working*

*on it since this past summer."*

**Karl Pratt** | Executive Director, Sheridan County Community Foundation and Economic Development Corp.





Waylon Beckman plays at a workbench at Thunderhawk Daycare in Grinnell.



Maggie Spreser stands in the kitchen play area at Little Paws Daycare in Selden.

**DISTRICT**, from page 5

districts,” Arnberger said. “It’s absolutely important.”

At one point after the facility opened at the start of the 2020-21 school year, Spreser said there were 21 children on the waiting list. In December, only four of 11 children at the center were from district staff families.

“In the next five years we have at least five teachers retiring,” Spreser said. “If we want to bring young people in who want families, we have to be able to sustain this.”

Care providers Brianna Stoll and Katie Koercherich said they love working at Little Paws. Stoll said she had previous experience at a child care facility in Ellis while she was a student at Fort Hays State University. She jumped at the chance to care for children in her hometown while living with her grandmother.

“I walk to work every day,” she said. “I couldn’t ask for a better setup.”

Koercherich is an experienced child care provider who had been working as a paraprofessional for the district.

“I moved over here when it opened up because I missed the little kids so much,” she said. “They warm my heart.”

## Concordia: Child care becomes a crisis

In Concordia, Superintendent Quentin Breese said he’d heard in April from about seven staff members who couldn’t find child care for the 2021-22 school year. Many of them were contemplating becoming stay-at-home parents. Suddenly the child care shortage the district’s leadership team had been exploring for long-term solutions had become a short-term crisis – at a time when the impacts of COVID-19 have made it hard to find teachers.

“Some pretty fantastic teachers were just going to become stay-at-home moms for the next year, and that was really going to limit us,” Breese said. “While we would encourage staying home with your kiddo, superintendents aren’t encouraging that right now.”

The school district



*“I love small-town life, and luckily everything has been able to work out – I have a wonderful provider who treats my children as her own – but the process of finding a daycare provider definitely has been stressful. Within the year of 2020, my son was in three different daycares. I have a college degree, and I want to use it, but if I don’t have daycare, how do I work? It’s a struggle. It’s a balance. It’s a juggling act. It’s a lot. It’s well worth it though because I absolutely love my job. I love the people I work for. I love what I do. To have all that is very rare.”*

**Charley Nelson** | Purchasing Manager, Wellhead Systems, Hill City

CHARLEY AND TANNER NELSON  
WITH THANE AND TILLY, PLAINVILLE







Thunderhawk Daycare Director Julie Schwarz reads a lunchtime story to children at the Grinnell facility.

owned two houses across from the high school that were purchased when a bond campaign was being proposed, but the bond issue got voted down in November. Instead of demolishing the houses for more parking, Breese said, using a grant from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation they did some updating and sought a group home license. Two experienced providers were hired to staff the facility, which opened at the beginning of this school year.

"We have two very, very gifted young ladies that just are tremendous with

those little ones," he

said. "Obviously, we're full and have a waiting list. Right now, it's limited to our staff – and it filled up in a hurry."

### Benefits are worth the cost

Breese said the school district probably won't break even on the cost of providing child care for staff, but he sees the investment as worthwhile just on the basis of it being a recruiting tool. Teachers pay \$110 to \$125 per week for district child care.

"If we can run it in a systematic way so that it's a minimal loss, I think the benefits are great," he said.

Krystal Breese, assistant principal of the elementary school who specializes in early childhood education, headed up the effort to establish a child care facility. She had the group home ready to go in about four months.

"She worked really hard this summer, bugging people to get us licensed and everything in between," Quentin Breese said.

With the school's immediate need met, discussion has returned to what action needs to be taken in the community to address child care for the long term.

"We do have the right people at the table trying to figure it out," Quentin Breese said.

Kim Reynolds, former executive director of CloudCorp, organized a committee of community representatives from across Cloud County that will develop plans moving forward.

"It is a communitywide effort to make sure we can fill the demand that is out there," she said in January.

Krystal Breese said the state Board of Education has identified kindergarten readiness as a main goal, and the school district is "most definitely" a natural partner in seeking a solution to a child care shortage.

"We do want to be a good community partner and see the need," she said.

Quentin Breese said he believes there would be benefit from school professionals becoming involved with children at a younger age.

"If we can catch some of the needs early, I think it will pay dividends and cost less later," he said.

See **QUINTER**, page 9

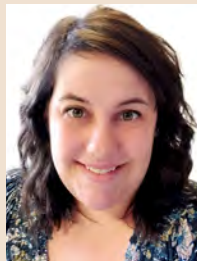


Jade Eggleston plays in a busy chair at Thunderhawk Daycare in Grinnell.



## CHILD CARE, from page 3

SCCA has 10 classrooms. Although the community's need for child care was great, the center has operated at about 50% capacity for the last three years because it could not find staff. Five classrooms remained empty, even though the waiting list was so long the center would no longer offer tours and when adding names to the list, encouraged families to seek alternative care solutions.



LINDSEY ROJAS

But things are looking up. In May, the center will open its 10th classroom and operate at full capacity.

"We have never had all 10 rooms open," said Lindsey Rojas, who transitioned from assistant director to become the director in December.

In early 2020, before COVID-19, an outside source, Salina Regional Health Foundation, stepped in to offer a grant of \$150,000 per year for three years to help get the center's classrooms opened. SCCA increased starting wages to \$11 an hour for assistant teachers and \$14 an hour for lead teachers, hoping to draw more interest. But because Salina is a larger city, sought-after employees have a lot of options for positions that paid similar wages.

"It really didn't make a difference at all," Rojas said. "We just weren't competitive. For early childhood positions we were – others were hiring at minimum wage up to about \$10 an hour – but it wasn't enough."



Madison Bowers and Brekyn Letourneau practice their climbing skills at Salina Child Care Center.

## COVID effects

The pandemic hit child care hard. Families needed to stay home and pulled their children from child care. Providers closed their doors. With communities opening back up, the need for child care is even greater.

As a response, federal and state government dollars are now being offered to support child care providers. Grants are being offered through Child Care Aware of Kansas to help sustain existing centers.

Private organizations such as the Dane G. Hansen Foundation are helping with grants for existing centers and to help communities establish new child care options.

In addition to the support from Salina Regional, Rojas said SCCA applied for and received the sustainability grants offered

through Child Care Aware, as well as grants offered by the Hansen Foundation and other local foundations.

Now more money was available, but there was hesitancy on the part of the SCCA board to raise wages too high based on grant funding that was not promised in the future. Then in December, the board took a bold step.

## Lit on fire

"The board said that in order to bring in new employees and run the center at full capacity, where the community needs it to be, they had to make a decision," Rojas recalled. "The past board president stated, 'If we can show the community we are successfully running at full capacity, the community will step in and help to sustain us later, if needed.' The board then unanimously voted to raise starting and current wages."

Starting wages were raised to \$15 an hour for assistants and \$18 an hour for lead teachers. Wages for existing staff were increased as well. The staff was thrilled, and word spread quickly.

"We were lit on fire after that," Rojas said. "It has been so nice to actually be able to sort through applications and choose to interview people with experience in early childhood education – to finally have options."

In the three years since she started, Rojas said she can recall the previous director having the opportunity to conduct only about five or six employee interviews,



*"I can't stay home, nor do I want to. I love my child, and I would love any future children we might have, but I went to law school because I wanted to be an attorney. I want to have a career. If you take four or five years out of a career, that's very hard to come back from and relearn everything. This is really stressing out families behind closed doors. You have no idea." Her son, Calvin, was cared for by a different relative or friend each day for a few months until a care provider had a slot for him.*

**Ashley Comeau** | Hays attorney and Brant's Meat Market co-owner, Lucas

ASHLEY, CALVIN AND ADAM COMEAU, PLAINVILLE



even though they were constantly advertising for help.

Since the change, Rojas has hired 15 new staff members, opened four of the closed classrooms, and more than 20 new families are being served. The final classroom was scheduled to open in May.

Many of the new families were Salina Regional Health Center employees who were on a priority list due to the grant assistance.

"We wiped that list out," Rojas said. In early April, she had two toddler openings and was preparing to open the last preschool classroom in May. Then the facility will be fully staffed, and likely full.

More families mean more tuition revenue. Rates were increased in October 2020 to help with the budget issues, but Rojas said it is the outside funding that has made it possible for the center to prosper.

### Options for parents and communities

Rural communities are looking at all the options: centers, group homes and in-home providers.

Costs for home providers or smaller group homes are less expensive to open or operate than a child care center, due in part to far fewer regulations (about 200 compared to about 600 for a center). Several Northwest Kansas communities are working to encourage and support new home-based providers and also different models for child care group homes.

The placement of a child in out-of-home care is ultimately the decision of the parent. For communities, it is helpful for parents to have options.

Whatever solution a community pursues to solve its child care deficits, additional local support will need to play a part to ensure that providers can earn a decent living, and that the children they care for have a quality environment.

"We could not do this relying only on tuition," SCCA's Rojas said. "We needed the outside support. That's how all child care centers work." ■

**QUITNER**, from page 7

## Quinter: Grants solve immediate need

Superintendent Kurt Brown in Quinter said his school board addressed a child care shortage by offering \$10,000 grants – \$5,000 startup and 10 monthly payments of \$500 through May – to two local people to create in-home child care facilities. In return, the providers agreed to give the children of school district employees priority.

"We had employees we were probably going to lose simply because they could not find child care, and it alleviated that," Brown said. "There was a good possibility we might lose at least two to three teachers. This grant has impacted at least six staff members who did not have adequate child care and were able to secure it. For a little school like this, it was a big deal. We have about 32 teachers, so it was nearly a fourth of our teachers who were impacted by it."

Brown said representatives of the community at large and the hospital continue to work on long-term solutions for child care in Quinter.

"That's ongoing, but for the moment we've managed to at least create a

system we view as a win-win," he said. "It helped establish two new daycares in the community and fill a need that the school definitely had. Anything we can do that helps recruit or retain people is huge for us."

### Pirate Pete's kids in Brewster

A grant from the Pete Henry Foundation originally provided the resources to repurpose a classroom in Brewster's school for a child care facility. Pirate Pete's Daycare began! Today, 14 children are cared for at Pirate Pete's.

"We teach manners to all, and we teach sign language to our little ones who don't talk yet," said Elizabeth Craig, director of Pirate Pete's. She said having the child care facility at the school allows children to be fed through the school lunch program, and if it's too hot or cold outside, there's the school gym.

"We love it. The kids love it. The parents love it. We love the fact that the school does this," Craig said.

Brewster School Superintendent Shelly Angelos said the school provides the one-room facility and covers utility costs. A daycare board works with Craig to oversee operations of the daycare, which has a separate entrance and is

See **BREWSTER**, page 10



"We got the ball rolling because we have some young techs with kids, but road and bridge, courthouse employees – there's a need for daycare for everybody. There are 12 to 15 kids that have to be watched, and they're getting watched whether it's by a licensed daycare or friend or family or an unlicensed daycare. They're being watched because people have to work." The possibility of establishing a child care group home for county employees is being pursued.

**Gaylen Huntley** | EMS Director, Decatur County



**BREWSTER**, from page 9

open five days a week all year. Angelos said lower overhead allows Craig to set her rates lower. Infants are \$125 a week, and children 19 months and older are \$110.

“It’s really a great partnership between the school, the daycare board and the Pirate Pete’s provider,” Angelos said. “We have a great child care model and a team that works well together.”

An effort is under way to obtain grant funding to construct a separate facility for child care on the school grounds. The one-room space currently used is bursting at the seams, Angelos said, and additional space would better accommodate the community’s child care needs.

### Meeting the child care challenge in Grinnell

It’s been eight years since kindergarten teacher Samantha Goetz and several other school staff were left without care for their children when a local provider decided to close her business.

“I definitely was in a pickle,” she said. “I didn’t know where we were going to go or what we were going to do.”

A child care committee was formed to explore options.

“We needed to fill that void,” Goetz said.

“We needed something that would be more stable – something that would draw teachers to our school, something that would keep kids coming to our community.”

The elementary school’s large music room was chosen as the

best location for a new facility, and music classes were relocated. A Hansen Foundation grant paid to remodel the main room and four attached practice rooms. One became a closet, one a bathroom and the remaining two were joined into a kitchenette.

Since Thunderhawk Daycare opened, a number of different providers have run the facility, which in the beginning mostly just served teachers’ children. In the years since, more community children have come. Goetz said her third child is now one of only three staff kids being served.

Julie Schwarz is the contracted provider. At present, she has no other staff.

“It’s great. It’s hard work, and it’s long hours, but I’m very lucky that I walked into this wonderful facility fully furnished and full,” Schwarz said.

Goetz said the facility has offered stability to parents seeking child care.

“Even when a provider decides to quit, there is the peace of mind knowing the space is there, we just need to move a new person in,” she said.

The children have their own outdoor play area, but they also have access to the school playground and the gym. Goetz said having the child care facility as part

of the school also offers easy access to the school’s preschool classes and occasional interaction with teachers and older students.

“We write them Valentine cards, and I invite them to our kindergarten class to listen to our kids read,” Goetz said. “I think that’s a wonderful thing.” ■

Ziad Vargas enjoys time at Little Paws Daycare in Selden.



# It’s all about the brain

## Why early childhood education matters

Quality early childhood experiences are critically important. Long before a child enters school, his learning years are well underway and 90% of the brain is already developed. Parents are a child’s first and most important teacher. But when parents are at work, their children should be with a caregiver who provides the greatest opportunity to build their young brains.

Communities that invest in quality early childhood education and child care options are investing in the future.

To provide the science behind this early brain development, the following article is reprinted with permission from the blog: [GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://GoodDaysWithKids.com).

## Brain Development

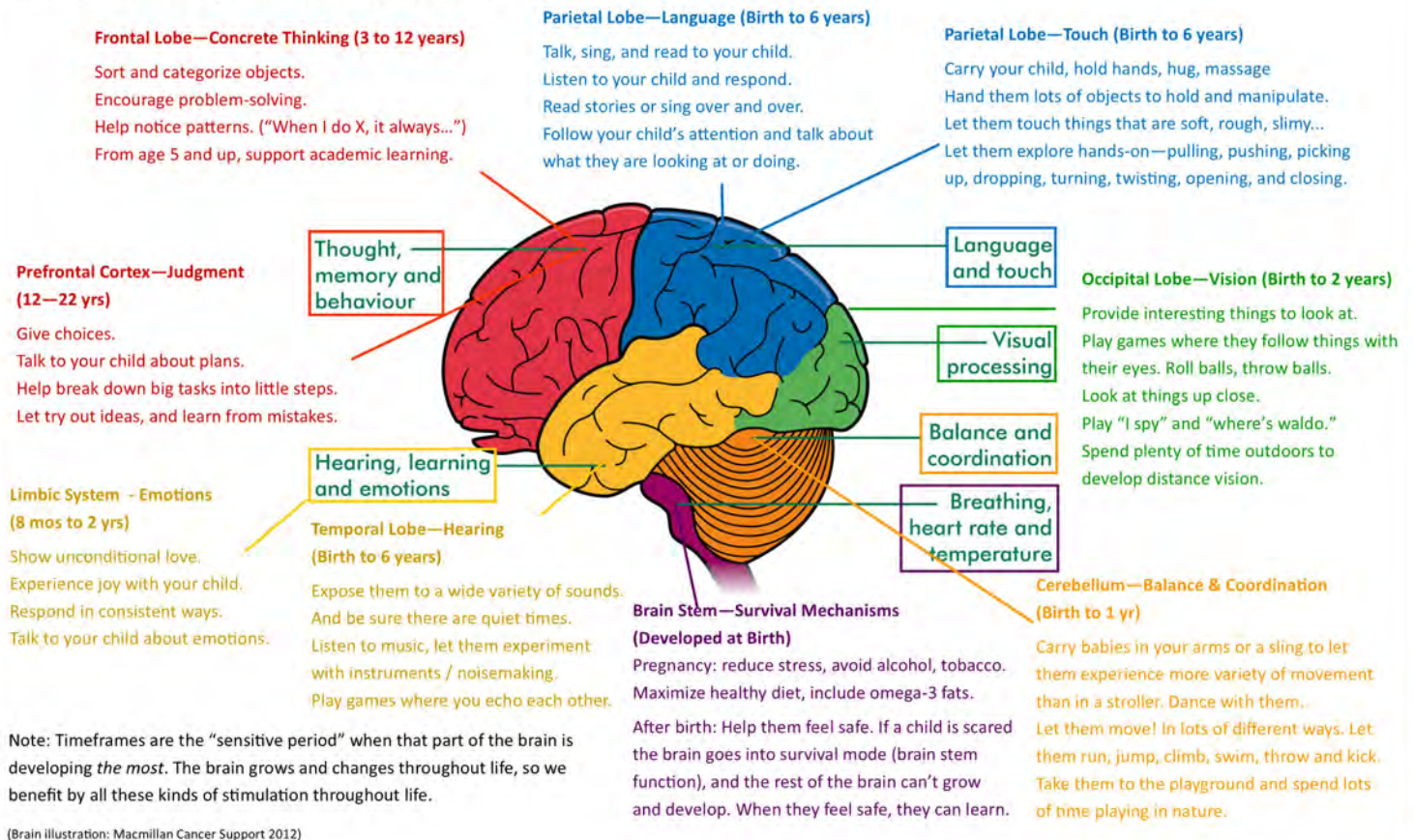
BY JANELLE DURHAM, MSW

### The Big Picture: Five Important Things to Remember

1. Babies build connections through day-to-day experiences, interacting with their world. The more times they repeat something, the stronger the connections.
2. As a child grows, a process called myelination enables nerve cells to transmit information faster and allows for more complex brain processes. Good nutrition helps with the myelination process.
3. Children prune connections they don’t use, so continue to practice and reinforce things you want them to master.
4. Children learn best when they are happy and feel safe.



## Brain Development—How you can help.



- There are sensitive periods when the brain is especially primed for learning certain skills, but parents shouldn't worry that "if I don't do everything right when he's two, he'll never learn to..." There will always be more opportunities to learn.

### The Details, starting with the basics

First, some vocabulary: Neurons are brain cells that regulate thinking and regulate the work of the body.

Synapses are the connections between neurons that help them do that well.

When a baby is born, his brain is just  $\frac{1}{4}$  the size of an adult's brain. But he's got a huge number of neurons – as many as an adult. That's as many as 100 billion neurons. In the nature vs. nurture debate, this is the nature – the raw material a child has to work with.

But, at birth, those neurons don't have many connections to other neurons. Connections are strongest in the brain stem, which is responsible for things like breathing, digesting, and eliminating. This ensures that at birth, a

baby has the reflexes necessary to keep her airway clear and to seek food. The connections are weaker in the parts of the brain responsible for balance, spatial understanding, hearing, language (the occipital, parietal, and temporal lobes). The brain is especially immature in areas related to control of emotions (the limbic system), concrete thinking and decision-making (frontal lobe.)

A baby's job in the first 3 years is to build lots and lots of connections.

### Building Connections

When cells communicate with each other, the axons send messages (electrical impulses), and the dendrites receive. The cells start to build connections: the synapses. Over time, there get to be more and more complex connections, branching like roots on a tree. Each neuron may have thousands of synapses. These connections help the brain process information more efficiently and take action more quickly.

By the time a child reaches three years old, she has 500-1000 trillion synapses. To give you an idea of the numbers here,

in one human brain, there are 100 billion neurons – that's how many trees there are in the Amazon rain forest. In that same brain, there are as many synapses as there are leaves on trees in the Amazon rain forest.

How do those connections build? Through experience. Through hands-on, in-person, multi-sensory experience where sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are all activated.

A young baby is making connections all the time: up to 700 connections a second! Every sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch is being filed away for future reference. This is why children can be so over-stimulated at the end of a busy day. They need time to rest quietly and process all that new information. ■

**About the author:** Janelle Durham, MSW, lives in Washington State. She is a childbirth educator for *Parent Trust for Washington Children* and a parent educator for the *Bellevue College Parent Education Program*.

She is the co-author of *Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Newborn*, and the author of these websites: *Transition to Parenthood* (about pregnancy and birth), *More Good Days with Kids* (about parenting birth to age 7), and *Inventors of Tomorrow* (STEM learning for ages 3 – 7).



# Want young families? Provide child care

It's the little things – or, more accurately, the little people – that matter.

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

For communities that hope to attract and retain young families, affordable, high quality child care is a “bedrock” requirement, said Kelly Davydov, executive director of Child Care Aware of Kansas.

Child care may only *directly* impact families with children, but *indirectly*, people of all ages benefit when quality child care is available in a community. Those benefits are both immediate and long term.

“The ripple effects extend to employers that are hoping to hire those parents,” Davydov said, “or offer services for multiple generations of the community – including grandparents, folks that didn’t have kids, and families that have older kids. Child care impacts everything from grocery stores to restaurants to retail, to whatever you need to function on a day-to-day basis, let alone industries that require additional skills and expertise.

“If you’re trying to draw in a particular talent base to your community, you’ve got to have child care.”

## Ahead of the curve

Stacie Schmidt, Ellsworth County Economic Development director, said her community invested in a nonprofit child care center more than 10 years ago when it became apparent that employees at the prison, local industry, schools and the hospital were having a problem finding care for their kids.

“We are not in that much of a crisis now,” Schmidt said. “I think we were ahead of the curve because we were already feeling the



*“We have some really good daycare in our community, but the waiting list is a mile long. And there are a lot of young people in Hill City who are pregnant. I know of eight women who will be having a baby soon.”*

**Kay Mitchell** | Head Start Mentor and former preschool teacher, Hill City



Cougar Cub Daycare Director Elysia Bolio reads to children at the Bird City facility.

crunch that others are feeling now.”

However, from time to time, spread of COVID-19 has forced temporary closures of the center, as well as schools, so it hasn’t been all smooth sailing. Also, the center has had struggles with hiring sufficient staff, similar to other area employers, and licensed care isn’t available for parents who work nights and weekends. Still, Schmidt said despite the challenges, the community is better off because of Ellsworth Childcare and Learning Center.

“I do think communities that invested in child care are better off in various ways,” she said.



STACIE SCHMIDT

## Quality of life choice

Davydov said the current labor market favors employees, not employers, so if a community doesn’t offer child care, young parents wouldn’t have trouble finding a job someplace that does.

“Communities have to stay competitive,” she said. “Part of that goes beyond salary and benefits. It’s what does your community offer? What is the quality of life? Is that young family going to be able to find high quality care for their kids?”

She said parents, children and employers are not well served when children are “passed between family, friends and neighbors in a cobbled together patchwork situation.”

“That doesn’t do much to promote employer stability or families being able to count on dependable, reliable child care, let alone nurturing the growth and development of young children in the ways we want to see,” she said.





Bolio, right, and child care provider Naomi Reeh dance with children during movement and music time.

## Meeting the need

Teryn Carmichael, executive director of the Bird City Century II Development Foundation, said in 2016, the foundation paid for construction of a licensed group home near the school in Bird City. The facility is rented to Cougar Cub Daycare, and the foundation continues to provide quarterly grants to support the facility's operation.

"I definitely think it's changed the community," Carmichael said of the child care facility. "The foundation board created an economic development plan, and one of the things they pinpointed was daycare. It's had a huge impact on our community."

However, she said the need at present is greater than the facility can accommodate.

"Does it meet the needs of our community? Absolutely," she said. "Do we need more daycare? Absolutely."



David Hendricks, Century II board member, said school district officials were worried about being able to retain teachers when the board voted to construct the child care facility.

Hendricks, a Bird City area farmer, had memories of seeking child care to draw on. About 15 years ago, he helped run a for-profit group home that he and other area parents got started when their own children were needing care.

Before the group home was opened, Hendricks said his daughter, Kaylynn, had been cared for by different friends and family members while he worked on the farm and his wife, Amy, taught school.

He said once their baby had reliable day-to-day care, they felt they could expand their family further. They had two more children. Now, their kids are ages 12 to 18.

"It worked so much better, and she was able to get a lot better routine," he said of Kaylynn. "They did a lot of preschool learning that she didn't get when she was bouncing around between other homes. Knowing she was going to the same place right here in town was a big relief for us." ■

Left: Casen Zweygardt was all smiles at Cougar Cub Daycare in Bird City.

*"Child care actually at times was more of a disruption than COVID because when they close the daycare or schools, then we have a large number of our employees who can't come to work."*

**Jim Kirkbride** | Chief Executive Officer, Ellsworth County Medical Center





# Child care is Home-Made

Foundation offers four newly constructed houses for community child care

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

On the edge of Logan, one newly constructed house and two others, nearly completed, wait on blocks. Soon they will become an integral part of community efforts to care for children.

One new 1,508-square-foot house was already moved in mid-April to Plainville, where plans are to open it in August as a school-operated child care group home. A second will be heading to Hoxie, also for a school-operated child care home, and the third will go to Grainfield. Brothers Linn and Jim McDonald have started constructing a fourth house, which will likely be committed by May.

Brien Stockman, a member of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation Board of Trustees, said the Foundation committed to ensuring payment to long-time home builder McDonald Enterprises for four houses that will ultimately be used as child care facilities in Northwest Kansas.

“Our Foundation wanted to jump start the homebuilder by placing orders for at least four of these homes because of the immediate need for child care facilities, but we likewise wanted to increase visibility to the public that a local homebuilder can provide these movable houses to any community for any purpose,” Stockman said. “It was our way of ‘priming the pump’ to get some houses being built.”

He said the cost of constructing each home would be different, based on the fluctuating costs of building materials, but he estimated overall it would cost a

total of about \$150,000 to \$175,000 to build each house, prepare a site for it, move it and establish utilities.

“We now have this beautiful problem of people wanting to move to rural Northwest Kansas, and we don’t have a house or child care slot to offer them,” Stockman said. “As we grappled with this two-fold problem, we thought some of these smaller communities may need to start with a group home to get some child care available until they have a bigger space to expand to a child care center.

“It’s a way for them to have a starter home, so to speak, for a group child care home. Then if they ever did make that leap to a center, this home could then be repurposed for a single-family residence.”

Stockman said public funding for child care is mostly only available to established facilities. The Foundation board saw a need for startup funding and other support for communities exploring the issue, and for a contractor that could complete new facilities in a short amount of time.

“They had seen other cabins we’d done, so when they were trying to figure out solutions to the problem they came to us,” said Jim McDonald.

The McDonald brothers had started a construction business together in 1993, after Linn McDonald had already worked in construction for 18 years. Houses they’ve built can be found throughout Phillips, Norton, Rooks, Smith, and Graham counties.

Linn McDonald said the layout, color scheme and finishing materials used in the 26- by 58-foot houses the brothers and their crew are building can be selected by the buyer. The structure is





Brothers Jim and Linn McDonald, co-owners of McDonald Enterprises Inc., stand in front of two houses they constructed in Logan. The houses will be moved to communities in the area for use as child care facilities.

*"It's a way for them to have a starter home, so to speak, for a group child care home. Then if they ever did make that leap to a center, this could be repurposed for a single-family residence."*

BRIEN STOCKMAN | DANE G. HANSEN FOUNDATION BOARD OF TRUSTEES

For more information about grants for child care support, go to [danehansenfoundation.org](https://danehansenfoundation.org) and click on NWKansas CARES for Kids.

McDonald Enterprises can be reached at [jimmc@ruraltel.net](mailto:jimmc@ruraltel.net) or (785) 543-4254.

reinforced for moving, and the pitch of the roof is low enough to go under powerlines.

"We want it to have a good, homey feel for the kids," Jim McDonald said.

Stockman said trustees turned to the McDonald brothers because "they are local, homegrown, long-time builders that everybody knows and trusts."

"To me, it's amazing with supply chain issues and labor shortages that they've been able to call in favors and find all the materials they need to finish one of these and start another in about 10 weeks," Stockman said.

### Getting settled in Plainville

That first three-bedroom, two-bath house, which features an earth-tone paint scheme, oak trim and vinyl plank flooring, was moved to a foundation poured just to the west of the Plainville

elementary school. According to Kelli Hansen, board member of the Plainville Community Foundation, the house was moved after site preparation was completed and an alley was improved for an entrance road. Hansen helped write a successful grant application to the Dane G. Hansen Foundation to help with the costs of buying and moving the house.

"Child care has just been such a big struggle for our community, and it affects everything – families, school, economic development and just the overall growth of our community," said Hansen. "It's an essential service, just like having quality education and quality hospitals and quality housing. You can't have a growing community without child care."

Hansen said Plainville has committed to a collaborative effort to operate the facility. The school will own, maintain and operate the group home – hiring staff and providing food service, utilities and insurance. The Rooks County Health Center committed match money for the project. Plainville Wellness Coalition has committed to

See **PLAINVILLE**, page 16



*"There are a lot more infants in Hill City, and I know another group of five more people who are expecting. But the thing that kind of breaks my heart about the community is that I know multiple other friends who want to have more kids, but their jobs don't have flexible hours, and they don't have anywhere to take an infant or family that can help. So, they just aren't having more kids. It makes me so sad for them that they don't have the ability to make it work, or they can't afford to live on one income."* Courtney cut back to weekend hours and stays home with her son, during the week because she couldn't find child care.

**Courtney Born** | Registered Nurse, Hill City  
COURTNEY AND BOSTON BORN





On April 20, a house that would soon become a child care facility started its more than 40-mile journey from Logan to Plainville.

#### PLAINVILLE, from page 15

securing outdoor play equipment, and the Plainville Community Foundation has purchased indoor furnishings and equipment.

Hansen said Plainville has a critical need for child care, and the new group home will be just the beginning of what is

Plainville schools, said the district plans to employ three to four people to work at the group home. Plans are for it to be open weekdays for 12 hours a day. She said the facility will be able to serve 10 to 12 children at one time, but the hope is that, with rotating schedules, 20 families could be assisted. She said the school

*“It really struck me when I was talking with young families in our community who have basically decided they can’t expand their family and have children because they have no daycare.”*

KELLI HANSEN | BOARD MEMEBER, PLAINVILLE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

required to fill the demand.

“It really struck me when I was talking with young families in our community who have basically decided they can’t expand their family and have children because they have no daycare,” Hansen said. “That just really spoke to me as a mother and a community leader. We try all these different things to grow our community and enhance the quality of life for residents, but when we can’t provide child care for families that are already here and wanting to grow, that’s the beginning of an initiative that needs to take place.”

Lisa Gehring, superintendent of

district and hospital will each have four reserved child care slots.

“I have a multiple year, multi-phase plan that I want to implement in the community,” Gehring said. “This is phase one, and it is to address some of the child care needs. Phase two is to address our preschool needs. Phase three would be the addition of another child care facility.”

She said currently preschool is provided in the elementary building, but additional space is needed. She said with a new facility, the preschool could provide an after-school program to assist more families with child care as well.

#### Hospital: Child care is critical

Eric Sumearll, director of communications and development for Rooks County Health Center, said the 22-bed critical access hospital just north of Plainville has at least three staff members who have only temporary arrangements for the care of their children.

“It’s outrageous what staff has to do to find daycare,” he said. “Parents are really having to pull on their extended family and community network just to ensure their child is taken care of. It’s the tight-knit family network that makes western Kansas so special but is also taxing and drains a lot of resources.”

Sumearll said the hospital’s respiratory therapist – whose services have been essential during the COVID-19 pandemic – found out last year that she was pregnant with twins. She searched as far as Hays but couldn’t find anyone who could care for her babies. She and her husband were deciding which one of them would quit working, but then a high school student and a college student who was completing classes online agreed to care for the infants and an older sibling, Sumearll said. When the college student returns to campus, the family will again have a child care dilemma.





Homebuilders Jim and Linn McDonald meet with a contingency of educators, administrators and community stakeholders from Plainville in a home built to serve as a new child care facility. (Photo courtesy of Kelli Hansen)

Roger Hrabe, director of Rooks County Economic Development, said if parents opt to stay home with their children, that will exacerbate workforce problems in the county.

“More and more people have just decided between the child care and everything else, we’ll just have a parent stay home,” he said. “With the workforce issues we have, that just makes that situation more difficult to deal with.”

Sumearll said the hospital also has a physical therapist and an LPN who lack a long-term solution to their child care needs.

“We can come up with all kinds of examples of staff that are piecing together child care in order to provide healthcare,” he said. “We don’t want healthcare workers to have to choose between having a family and their professional calling. Due to the generosity of the Hansen Foundation, the hospital, the community foundation and the school, fewer people will be forced to make that choice.”

Sumearll said child care worries come on top of other worries the hospital’s dedicated staff have been facing during the pandemic.

“We have been searching for solutions for years. We know we have missed out

on opportunities with great employees due to child care needs in the region,” he said. “This is a big step in the right direction. It takes dedication to find solutions, but they are out there, and this group is showing what can be accomplished.”

### Care provider encouraged

Tanya Meyers, owner of The Rock Daycare in Plainville, said she is encouraged to see the community effort to open a new child care facility.

“I think it is an absolute wonderful thing and a good start,” she said. She said when she moved to Plainville in 2009, there were about a dozen in-home child care providers in the community. She said by this summer, there will only be four or five left.

“I have a waiting list of five or six families, and another friend of mine who does daycare got six calls just last week,” she said. “There’s not one with an opening right now. The need is insane.”

The houses constructed in Logan are part of Phase II of the Hansen Foundation’s NWKansas CARES for Kids initiative launched in October to help communities tackle the child care challenge. As part of Phase I, the

Foundation began offering longevity bonuses to augment the salaries of child

See **PHASE TWO**, page 18



*“There are days when I think I can’t do this anymore – I’m too tired! Then I go and have a great morning with them and realize how much I would miss that time with them.”* Kris gets up at 5:30 a.m. three days a week and drives to her nephew’s house to get his children ready for daycare and school. The children’s parents go to work before child care is available.

**Kris Taylor** | Great Aunt, Salina

KINLEY AND WYATT ERNZEN AND KRIS TAYLOR



care workers in order to stabilize facility staffing and encourage experienced people to keep working. Grants for new books and curriculum supplies were also introduced.

In Phase II, the Foundation announced early childhood education startup or expansion grants, to support new or expanding child care solutions, including the availability of the houses.

Successful grants must address an identified need for child care; community involvement from businesses, community leaders, educators and parents; location and licensing research; and staffing considerations including workforce availability and a commitment to a livable wage. The last consideration is local financial support.

Hansen Trustee Stockman said construction of the homes began because many communities have a shortage of housing and had no existing facility where child care was feasible.

"We're seeing a lot of smaller communities that were struggling to find a space to put a group daycare home or center," he said. "While you sometimes have vacant office space or older homes that might be suitable, often they were not in a good location, or the renovation costs were going to be too high to be feasible, or they had a design feature that couldn't be approved by the fire marshal.

"There were just a lot of obstacles we were seeing communities continually run up against, and at the same time we're seeing an incredible shortage of housing develop almost overnight."

Stockman said a grant application received from Selden a couple of years ago to purchase a modular home for use as a child care facility inspired construction of the homes.

"Whether they know it or not, Selden was a groundbreaker in pioneering this concept that schools can own and operate a group home and use a manufactured home to do it," he said. "It was an inspiration to our Foundation. I don't think that's an overstatement. We applauded the way that small community started solving its child care problem." ■



*"A couple of years ago we had a younger workforce than we do now, and childcare was needed. When brainstorming options, it was brought up that maybe Osborne Industries should build a facility and open up a child care here on our property and give our employees first priority. There were many obstacles that prevented this from taking place,*

*including finding someone willing and able to run it. It's hard to tell if we are losing potential applicants because of our production hours and their challenges to find daycare during those times. With our current staff, it's less of an issue, but it's never going to completely go away."*

**Kristi Ohnsat** | Human Resource Manager, Osborne Industries

# Quality, not just quantity, is important when it comes to child care

**What is high-quality child care?** A responsive, qualified staff; an effective, age-appropriate curriculum; systematic engagement of parents and ongoing training opportunities and quality improvement efforts, according to experts in the field. Effective early child care providers are respectful, kind and caring in their interactions with children, and a facility's physical setting provides a safe, inviting place for children to explore and learn through imaginative play.

## From an economic standpoint, research shows...

In the short term, if parents are able to rely on affordable, stable, high-quality services from a child care provider:

1. **They have peace of mind while working outside the home. With both parents working, reduced financial stress can benefit family life.**  
"These aren't very good times: Financial uncertainty experienced by romantic partners in the wake of an economic downturn," Lynsey Kluever Romo, 2014.
2. **The community benefits from a larger workforce, and employers benefit from employees who can dependably be on the job. Employee absences caused by child care breakdowns cost U.S. businesses \$3 billion annually.**  
"Child care for employees' kids," D.E. Friedman, 1986.
3. **In the Midwest, about 68 percent of mothers are a family's primary breadwinner or significantly contribute to family income. They are especially likely to be employed at schools, hospitals and in food service, providing much needed services in communities.**

"Breadwinning mothers continue to be the U.S. norm," Sarah Jane Glynn, 2019.



*“Investing in the continuum of learning from birth to age 5 not only impacts each child, but it also strengthens our country’s workforce today and prepares future generations to be competitive in the global economy tomorrow,”*

**NOBEL-WINNING ECONOMIST JAMES HECKMAN** | DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE ECONOMICS OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
AS QUOTED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO NEWS.

In the long term, a safe, nurturing environment in early childhood is important because:

**1. The quality of the early childhood environment is a strong predictor of adult productivity.**

“Economic, neurobiological, and behavioral perspectives on building America’s future workforce,” Eric I. Knudsen, James J. Heckman, Judy L. Cameron and Jack P. Shonkoff, 2006.

**2. Skills learned early in life give a child a foundation for mastery of new skills as the child continues to grow and learn.**

“Schools, skills and synapses,” James J. Heckman, 2008.

**3. Cognitive, social and emotional abilities – which are important to adult economic productivity and responsible citizenship – are shaped by early life experiences.**

“The science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do,” National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007.

**4. At least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult can help a child develop the capacity to overcome serious hardship.**

Kauai Longitudinal Study, Emmy Werner, Ruth Smith, 1955-95.

**5. Disadvantaged children who receive a high-quality preschool education are better prepared for school, more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college, have fewer teen pregnancies, have a higher earning potential as adults, are less likely to receive government assistance and are less likely to commit crimes. Fifty years after they attended preschool, children of their children were still showing intergenerational benefits. Return on investment has been estimated as high as \$14 for every \$1 spent.**

The Perry Preschool Project, David Weikart, 1962-67. HighScope Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study, ongoing, HighScope Educational Research Foundation.

**6. Fewer required educational interventions, greater likelihood of attaining a college degree and better physical health are among additional positive impacts found in long-term studies of a more intensive early childhood education program from infancy through age 5.**

The Carolina Abecedarian Project, Craig Ramey, Joseph Sparling, 1972-77. Abecedarian follow-up studies, Frances Campbell, James Heckman.

**7. Many additional studies of high-quality child care programs have documented positive and lasting results for children. Lasting negative behavioral and emotional impacts have also been observed in children who received care that was of low quality.**

“Measuring the long-term effects of early, extensive daycare,” Janet Erickson, 2018.



“Our baby had to come with me to work for about four months until his spot at daycare opened up. It looked like a daycare center in our office for a little bit, but that was OK. There are some days I miss having him with me, but it’s nice to get back to some normalcy. It could be stressful if he was fussy and the phones were ringing or I had things I needed to get done. The business owners are honestly kind of like an extra set of grandparents to all of my kids, so it was great. They would hold him and love on him if they were free. I am forever grateful to my employer for allowing that for my family.”

**Naomi Wyatt** | Office Manager, World Pest Control, Plainville

HAEZIN, ROWEN, NAOMI (HOLDING RIVEN), CALEB, SARAH AND BREVYN WYATT, PLAINVILLE