

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Summer 2022 | VOLUME 4, ISSUE 1

Feature Story

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Community collaborations
strive to make area better

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BEAUTY ON A BIKE

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

OUR MISSION:

The Dane G. Hansen Foundation is committed to providing opportunities for the people of Northwest Kansas to enjoy the highest possible quality of life.

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

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

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

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

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

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Horse hotels throughout the area provide a place to rest for the night for weary travelers and their horses. Two hotel operators share their stories.

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Thirteen-year-old Aria Pearce is running straight toward a future as an elite athlete. The eighth-grade sprinter from Wallace County is already beating college athletes to the finish line.

ON THE COVER: A cyclist takes a photo of the beautiful Holy Cross Catholic Shrine in Pfeifer before heading inside to hear music by violinist and Hays Symphony conductor Brian Buckstead during a stop in the Tour die Kapellen (German for tour of the chapels) in July. (Photo by Betsy Wearing)



Northwest Kansas is a beautiful place to live and work. Our rural communities are set in the plains and gentle hills, the land of amazing sunrises and sunsets. But Northwest Kansas is not a sleepy place. There is a lot happening in our communities and our region. In this issue of *Northwest Kansas Today*, we selected a variety of stories that involve motion.

If you like motorcycles, we feature a gem of a museum in St. Francis and a fun annual ride that starts smack dab in the center of the continental United States. If your two-wheel preference is a bicycle, you'll enjoy reading about a unique bike shop in Miltonvale and a cycling event in Ellis County that provides participants not only exercise, but also music and architecture.

If you prefer wings, like me, you'll love the story of a business in Hays where you can buy kits to build your own airplane. Or you can read about wing-watchers who flock to Northwest Kansas to witness our rare bird species.

If you like horses, also like me, there's a story about horse hotels. And if you just want to be awed by the most basic of motion, read about running phenom Aria Pearce from Sharon Springs.

This issue also takes a deeper dive into movement of communities. Various counties are working on collaboration among agencies and organizations to create cohesive plans to move our rural towns forward. We know people are moving back to our rural area, and communities are coming together to

create welcome spaces for new families and businesses.

And finally, we feature new programs offered through the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center. This organization is making headway regionally – helping to offer incentives and support for individuals and businesses in Northwest Kansas. Know someone who may want to relocate? You'll want to read about why there is no time better to do so.

There is a lot happening in our quiet, but not-so-sleepy communities. We couldn't be prouder to share it with you.

Rhonda S. Goddard

Rhonda Goddard, Trustee

Read more online!



Colby resident Jim Oliver rode around the world on his motorcycle. Read more about his once-in-a-lifetime adventure at danehansenfoundation.org



Rhonda Goddard on her horse Casey at their ranch near Penokee

Moving for

Community collaborations strive to

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY ERIN MATHEWS

A book club in Russell has morphed into a community revitalization effort. In Hays, a group of community leaders and residents are working together to envision the city as far as 25 years in the future, part of a process called *Imagine Ellis County*. In Goodland, the business community and other stakeholders are coming together to share a meal as well as gather and share information to create opportunity and reduce duplication.

Throughout Northwest Kansas, communities are coming together in a variety of ways to take charge of the future.

Russell reads

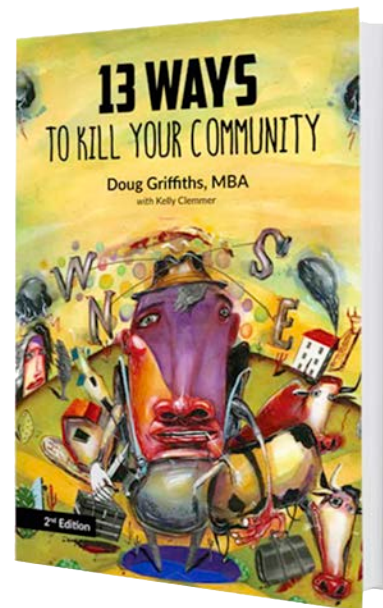
"The initial plan was to simply gather as a group and discuss the book on a deeper level, and of course, to also get as many community members to read the book as possible. What it ended up doing was lighting some fires in people," said Mike Parsons, economic development director for Russell County. "They have plans to do much more than simply discuss the book."

The book drawing so much interest in Russell County is *13 Ways to Kill Your Community* by Doug Griffiths. In May, Russell's Specialty Books and Gifts was selling books from the fourth batch ordered.

Griffiths, a community consultant



MIKE PARSONS



from Alberta, Canada, discussed his 2010 book as keynote speaker at the Dane G. Hansen Foundation's virtual forum in 2021. The book is written as a how-not-to manual for people who want their communities to survive and grow. Although community leaders want their communities to thrive, Griffiths wrote that sometimes they don't realize their actions are counterproductive. His book includes chapters like "Reject Everything New," "Shop Elsewhere," "Live in the Past" and "Don't Paint."

"I'm very optimistic this book and this club and the people involved can slowly make a difference for the better," said Parsons, who found himself becoming a book club coordinator. "It's a mindset and knowledge that's spreading, even if it's one person at a time reading the book and then passing it on. It's not a quick process – usually nothing good ever is."

Three chapters were reviewed each week during lunchtime meetings, which started

ward

make the area better

in March. Seventeen Russell residents participated in the first book club, and eight became involved in a Lucas reading group. More than 10 registrations had been received by July, for a second Russell book club.

"It's started some good conversation," Parsons said. "I just facilitate. I keep them on track."

Two important questions

On May 4, city and county officials were invited to meet with members of the Russell book club as they shared what they learned. Participants at that meeting were asked to make two lists: One answering the question "What do we have that makes our community great?" The other, "What things in our community need to be fixed?"

Among 84 strengths listed for Russell were proximity to Fort Hays State University, location near Interstate 70, community parks and walking trails, infrastructure such as the municipal power plant and hard-working, civic-minded people.

"Russell has a lot of fantastic assets," said the youngest member of the book club, Caden Pfeifer, a Russell native and Kansas State University senior studying planning and design. "They could be set up for a long time if they put those assets in the right place."

Among 109 areas identified as needing improvement were the condition of school facilities, storefronts, and houses, as well as attitudes of some residents, and communication among community groups.

"We have people in the community that speak very loudly saying there's no



Mike Parsons, economic development director for Russell County, leads discussion during a meeting of Russell community leaders in May about community assets.

opportunity here," said Kayla Schneider, assistant city manager. "I lived in D.C. for four years. I lived in Texas. I came back because there was opportunity."

Former Superintendent of Schools Shelly Swayne said there's been a "longstanding need for some real heavy lifting kind of work in our schools."

"We tried two bond issues in 2019 and both of them failed," she said. "With this book study and these conversations that are starting to pop up from it, I believe the school's going to be one of the things looked at. Schools are a heartbeat in every community, and Russell's no different. I do believe that conversation will begin, and it will be welcome."

To improve communication, community leaders were invited to a roundtable discussion in June to share a quick update on completed projects, efforts being considered, and ways collaboration might help.

Free and open discussion

Betty Johnson, a consultant funded by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation to assist area communities with planning and executing projects through a process called Strategic Doing, said lack of communication is a common problem.

"You think all these entities are talking, but what we're finding out is they're not talking at that level," she said. She believes roundtable-style meetings help.

"It's opening the conversation up, and I think that's been the beauty of it. It's good, solid information that we don't always get."

Andrea Krauss, vice president of the Russell Development board, said the June roundtable "went pretty well."

"It was all positive," she said. "It was a fairly free and open discussion."

Krauss had suggested a book club in Russell after reading *13 Ways* in November. The Hansen Foundation awarded a grant to help facilitate the effort.

"I was reading this, and it really made me much more aware or sensitive to positive vs. not-so-positive behavior and policies and things we do locally," she said. "I thought if we could have a frank and open discussion about this, maybe we could all start thinking differently and move the community forward."

Following the May meeting, smaller work groups were being organized to start to tackle projects identified as priorities. Projects mentioned included things like neighborhood cleanup and block parties, adopt-a-park, and adopt-a-hydrant programs.

"We want to set some goals, set some deadlines and hopefully start checking them off the list one or two at a time," Parsons said.

Krauss said she's hopeful the effort will bring about progress.

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Strategic Doing asks four important questions...

What could we do?

What are all the possible opportunities before us, based on the resources that we currently have, that would help us move toward the future we'd like to see?

What should we do? We can't do everything – which opportunities, out of all the possibilities, should we pursue right now?

What will we do? What commitments are we going to make to one another to start pursuing that opportunity that we've identified as the best one?

What's our 30/30? When are we going to get back together (usually about 30 days from now) to talk about what we've learned, to adjust our direction, if needed, based on those lessons, and to set our course for the next 30 days?

Learn more about Strategic Doing in NW Kansas at danehansenfoundation.org; click on Special Initiatives, then Community Education and Planning Opportunities, then Strategic Doing. To learn more about historic and current Strategic Doing work across the globe, visit strategicdoing.net.



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"We've got things we need to do," she said. "My hope is this will lead to more collaboration and more positive interactions so we can actually get some of these things done."

Ellis County taps imagination

Just to the west on I-70, community leaders in Hays, Ellis, Victoria, and other Ellis County communities are also working toward a better future.



DOUG WILLIAMS

"This is a new venture in terms of looking as far down the road as we can," said Doug Williams, executive director of Grow Hays, an economic development organization that

promotes Ellis County. "There's an old saying: If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. We're saying let's plan a road there. What do we want to look like? What things do we need to put in place to make that happen?"

Williams said about 30 people are actively engaged in the process of envisioning and planning for the area's future. The committee, which chose the name *Imagine Ellis County*, includes stakeholders from FHSU, HaysMed, area communities, schools, and businesses.

"*Imagine Ellis County* is an exciting group, and I think it can produce some genuine change and impact in our community on a long-term basis," he said. "We have people who represent large organizations, and we also have just citizens who have an interest in what happens here."

Looking ahead

The committee arose through the Strategic Doing process, again facilitated with the help of Johnson. Strategic Doing meetings are publicly advertised in area media, and then people attending choose projects and form collaborations. They follow a step-by-step process to bring projects to completion.

"The little community of Victoria is already kicking off a couple of major projects. So is Ellis. All three communities

have just really bought in," said Hays City Commissioner Sandy Jacobs, a member of the committee. "They're all looking five, 10, 15 years down the road and appreciate the opportunity to do that."

So far, Williams said *Imagine Ellis County* has sponsored two meetings at which a total of about 25 area business leaders briefly shared their strategic plans, as well as town hall meetings in Hays, Victoria, and Ellis. Close to 40 people attended the meetings in Victoria and Ellis, and about twice that number showed up in Hays. Town hall participants discussed assets

"Imagine Ellis County is an exciting group, and I think it can produce some genuine change and impact in our community on a long-term basis."

DOUG WILLIAMS | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
GROW HAYS

and shortcomings of their communities, as well as aspirations for the future.

In addition, grant funding from the Hansen Foundation, the Schmidt Foundation and the Heartland Community Foundation is underwriting a community survey by the Docking Institute to help further define priorities. The survey was to be mailed countywide this summer.

"What has surprised me is the number of people we've gotten to come to the meetings and the input we've gotten," Williams said. "There are so many positives we have in our county, and we want to build on those, but we do want to identify and address the shortcomings if we can."

Proposed projects so far include a walking trail or community center in Victoria, enhancing a campsite along Big Creek and helping Ellis figure out what to do with downtown buildings that are in the flood zone.

"Those kinds of things I think will percolate up to the top," Williams said. "It isn't always just about money. Everybody thinks it is, but it's not. There's money from lots of different sources out there. It's the ideas and the leadership to make something happen that really need to be in place."

Goals previously left unsaid

Jacobs said she believes the area's future success is dependent on effective collaboration and "that's what's happening with this group."

"We have some big goals. When we first started, we talked about having 40,000 residents in our county by 2030. We have 28,000 now," she said. "It's about setting goals that maybe you would never say, and if you didn't say them, they'd never happen. It's about sustainable economic growth and understanding the value of quality-of-life issues."

Even though the housing supply is low, Williams said recruitment efforts to bring in new residents are necessary to address workforce needs. *Imagine Ellis County* has produced one-minute videos featuring local residents telling why they enjoy living in the area. The videos are being used in target marketing online to entice retirees and remote workers.

Schools are important, and Williams said he's glad Hays recently passed a \$143.5 million bond issue to build a new high school and address other needs in district facilities.

"We recognize that we have a pretty good story to tell, but that's only good if somebody hears it," he said.

Goodland meets and eats

When Julica Oharah returned to her hometown of Goodland and assumed the position of executive director of Sherman County Community Development, she became engaged in an effort to identify the community's assets. Through the Asset Mapping effort sponsored by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, she found a way to help improve communication about local events and projects.

Oharah organized an event at which community leaders shared projects and plans, as well as workshops where local business owners learned the ins and outs of posting and advertising on social media.

About 15 major employers and community leaders in Goodland ate together at the first Lunch and Learn gathering Oharah organized on Nov. 3, they each had five minutes to summarize opportunities and challenges. She said the goal was to promote collaboration and



Above: James Robben, director of business development and special projects, and Doug Williams, executive director, both with Grow Hays Inc., share a prototype of a new website for the Imagine Ellis County effort at a meeting in July.

Below: Julica Oharah, executive director of Sherman County Community Development, presents information about a Lunch and Learn gathering in Goodland during the Dane G. Hansen Foundation Forum in Hays in March.

decrease duplication.

"What I was finding was that there was a lot of repetition with multiple groups doing the same thing," Oharah said. "Or there was someone with an idea, but they didn't have the resources to do it."

Oharah said she sees her agency's role as supporting increased communication.

"We don't need to be a part of every conversation," she said. "We're more than happy to help in any way, but we don't have to be the starters or the doers. We can

just be the supporters."

She said the Lunch and Learn event was designed to connect people and inform everyone about community projects. She said she hoped to have a second Lunch and Learn this summer.

"There was no agenda, no pressure," she said. "I feel like sometimes people think they have to keep all their ideas in secret in a box, so no one knows about them, but why not share them and have everybody be involved in helping make it a success?" ■



O PPORTUNITIES ABOUND

Northwest Kansas is looking to hire

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Twenty-eight-year-old Lucas Goddard spends his days in a coworking space in Morland, a town of 150, not far from the ranch where he was raised. His full-time job as the programs director for the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center Inc. gives him the opportunity to help other young people find quality employment in or near their hometowns.

One part of his work is the development of the new *ConnectNWK.org* website.

Throughout Northwest Kansas this summer, 140 high school and college students gained work experience through internships offered by area businesses through Nex-Generation Round Up for Youth. Internships expose students to the kinds of jobs they could have if they choose to pursue a career in the area.

Every intern found his or her position at *ConnectNWK.org*.

Goddard was a Nex-Gen intern in 2015. In the not-too-distant future, many of the students who participated in internships this summer could return to *ConnectNWK.org* to find a permanent job in the area.

"I can tell you first-hand it's hugely beneficial, and it's exciting for the area to have something that's pointing people directly back to these communities," said Jacque Beckman, executive director of Nex-Gen. "These students know that ConnectNWK is a tool to do just that – to connect them back to local opportunities when they're ready for employment."

Goddard said at the bottom of each internship listing were full-time career opportunities in the region similar to the internship the student applied for.

"We expose the youth to potential job opportunities long before they're ever actually ready to apply for a job, just to let them know that there are full-time employment opportunities in Northwest Kansas," he said.

Have we got a job for you

Jobs in the area are not in short supply. In fact, many Northwest Kansas counties have a shortage of people to do the work that needs to be done. That means great opportunity for job seekers, Goddard said.

There is more to a job search than just finding a job. ConnectNWK aims to connect job seekers to communities and the services and amenities available there.

Currently, Goddard said that NWKEICI is working on a Coming Home program that will list things such as recreational opportunities and services in various area communities.

"We want to identify assets people wouldn't necessarily be able to find easily," Goddard said. "For example, if the county has an active coworking space – things that are not always easy to find out about unless you are from that town. If people are looking to connect with a specific community or a community that has specific things, ConnectNWK is going to be the facilitator."

NWKEICI, a private operating foundation that provides economic and entrepreneurial assistance to area businesses, has made ConnectNWK available at no charge to job seekers and to employers who post job opportunities in the 26 Northwest Kansas counties served by NWKEICI.

There's a bonus

The 112 job openings listed by 38 employers in early July encompassed a diverse array of positions, including jobs for people qualified to be a registered nurse, early childhood special educator,

Lucas Goddard, programs director for the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc.



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welder, heavy equipment operator or veterinary assistant.

Some of those jobs have sign-on bonuses or other incentives attached. Those incentives are being made available through another NWKEICI program.

Local business leaders provide input to develop each county's recruitment plan and decide how to distribute the funds to successful job applicants. Individual incentives top out at \$10,000.

Stacie Schmidt, executive director of Ellsworth County Economic Development, was among the first in the area to work with local employers to develop an incentive plan to fill 82 positions open in her county, including jobs at the Ellsworth Correctional Facility, Ellsworth County Medical Center, a skilled nursing facility, and other local industries. She said the county has a serious workforce shortage, and some positions have been open for more than a year.

"Ultimately, what we looked at was: What is the critical infrastructure to make our economy continue to run at the very basic level?" she said.

She said about six to eight months ago, the prison had to close its east campus, which housed inmates nearing release, because staffing wasn't sufficient to keep it open. Those inmates were integrated back into the prison's general population, and some went to other locations.

"I'm so grateful for EICI's forward thinking and that they continue to look for ways to help us solve problems, but they also give us the power locally to figure out what that looks like," Schmidt said. "We want to fill jobs. We want to get people

commuting in for jobs to consider living here, and we want to grow our tax base."

Keeping it current

Goddard said when NWKEICI began exploring factors that might be contributing to the area's workforce shortage, staff members found several job boards with outdated job listings.

"We realized in our research that some of the job boards in our area had listings that were 60, 90, even 120 days old," he said. "We felt that wasn't valuable. People were applying for jobs that were over 120 days old. By the time they applied, the positions had already been filled or eliminated because of no applicants."

ConnectNWK's job listings automatically expire after 30 days – unless the employer relists the position. That helps ensure that all opportunities listed are available. Goddard said the site is easy to use, both for job seekers and employers.

The site is designed to offer meaningful employment opportunities. Jobs listed must pay a minimum hourly rate of \$15.50 or serve a critical need in the community. Each job must be posted individually, and each listing is reviewed by NWKEICI staff to ensure that it meets those criteria. Goddard said job postings are generally approved and posted on the site within 24 hours.

"In May, we placed nine people in employment using ConnectNWK," Goddard said. "It averages between five and 10 a month."

Goddard said that figure comes from employer reports that a position is filled. At the beginning of July, the website

showed a total of 61 jobs had been filled. Employers are not required to exclusively post on ConnectNWK and may list jobs in other locations as well.

Whitney Nickelson, human resources manager for Nex-Tech, which operates a fiber-optic network that serves more than 45 area communities, said a website that provides advertising of regional job openings for free is beneficial. She said Nex-Tech, which has listed several positions on ConnectNWK, has not had success advertising on nationwide sites, plus they can be expensive to use as a recruiting tool.

"We have to recruit differently," she said. "LinkedIn did not work at all for us because we're remote. People would apply for something thinking we were in Wichita because the site linked us to the Wichita region. Even if the job was as close as Salina, applicants weren't interested because they thought it was in Wichita."

At the end of June, Nickelson said Nex-Tech, which has a workforce of about 325, had 10 positions open.

"We're a person down in our department – the one who does our recruiting," she said.

Ericka Nicholson, a partner in the Center Pivot Restaurant and Brewery in Quinter, said any new tool to help fill available jobs in Northwest Kansas is welcome. She said recent efforts to fill positions at the restaurant have been successful.

"In the day and age of workforce shortage, any tools we can get are very helpful," she said. "This generation of folks is really technologically advanced, and those web-based interfaces work better for us with this generation of workforce." ■



Flying free

Bird watchers find much to see and hear in Northwest Kansas

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

A glimpse of bright feathers through the leaves. A snatch of bird song. The time and place those were seen and heard can become a lifelong memory for some.

Bird watching is a passion many people have had since they were young — people like Henry Armknecht, of Hays.

“My parents told me that the first time I ever put words together I said, ‘See the bird,’” he said. “They didn’t know if it was a question or a statement.”

For others, it’s something they’ve started enjoying relatively recently. Christopher Frick, of Grinnell, first picked up his binoculars in the summer of 2019.

“I just got No. 226 on my life list,” he said. “Some of us birders keep lots of lists. The two I spend the most time focusing

Bird watching is a hobby that doesn’t require a lot of expensive equipment and can be done by young and old. A pair of binoculars and either a printed guide such as *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Second Edition) or a cell phone app like the Merlin Bird ID can help you identify what you’re seeing or hearing. Helpful information online can be found at ebird.org, ksbirds.org, ksbirdingtrail.com and on the Kansas Birding Facebook page

on are my list for Gove County (currently at 172 species) and my yard list (currently at 96 species).”

First big find

Frick said his first big find was a Blue-winged Warbler, which he spotted in rural southwestern Gove County in April 2020. “I’d just noticed a

yellow flash while driving by a cluster of trees and stopped to see what it was,” he said. “Due to its rarity this far west, I submitted an official report to the Kansas Bird Record Committee, which was reviewed and accepted.”

He said his best find has been a Mountain Chickadee that stayed in his yard in Grinnell from late October 2021 to

April 1 of this year.

“That one was pretty easy to find,” he said. “It sat at my feeder for five months.”

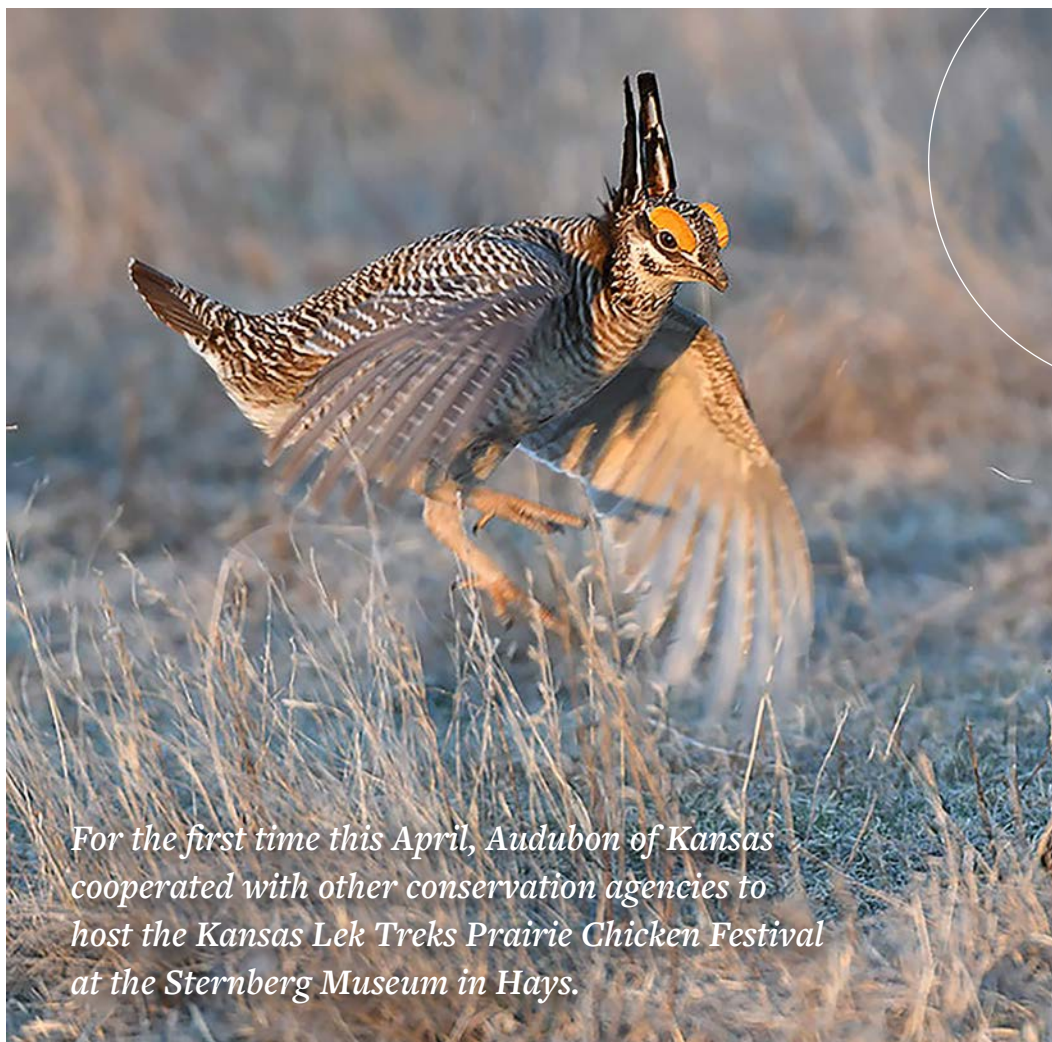
The Kansas Ornithological Society’s official list includes 479 species of birds. One of them is a Wilson’s Snipe. In fact, in Kansas a snipe hunt is not just a practical joke. It’s legal. Frick spotted one in Logan County.

“A couple years ago I had no idea there were even 40 kinds of bird, and now I regularly find at least that many in a casual day at work,” Frick said.

A birder bucket list destination

Northwest Kansans live in an area that’s on the bucket list for birders’ worldwide. They come for the dancing.

On ranches in several area counties, the rare Lesser Prairie Chicken can be observed doing its mating dance. The male birds transform their appearance during mating season in eye-catching ways,



For the first time this April, Audubon of Kansas cooperated with other conservation agencies to host the Kansas Lek Treks Prairie Chicken Festival at the Sternberg Museum in Hays.

Male Lesser Prairie Chickens during mating season this year in Logan County. (Photo courtesy of Casey Galvin)



erecting long feathers like horns above their heads and puffing out bright orange eyebrows and red air sacs in their throats.

Starting before sunrise and again around sunset from about mid-March to mid-May, they arrive at their dancing ground, known as a lek, and display their fast footwork and booming calls, while occasionally sparring with nearby males.

Also in this area are the Greater Prairie Chickens, which can be distinguished by their slightly larger size and different vocalization.

“Northwest Kansas is the only place where the ranges of the lesser and greater overlap,” said Jackie Augustine, executive director of Audubon of Kansas. “They’re two unique species, but in that area, they do form mixed species leks.”

For the first time this April, Audubon of Kansas cooperated with other conservation agencies to host the Kansas Lek Treks Prairie Chicken Festival at the

Sternberg Museum in Hays. Ninety people from 25 states attended the three-day event to participate in tours of leks on private land in eastern Gove and western Trego counties, observing birds from behind blinds about 60 to 100 feet away, or seeing them from the road in a van tour. Tours also went to other area birding sites, including Castle Rock, Monument Rock, and Smoky Valley Ranch.

“Hays was chosen because that’s about an hour away from some of the best Lesser Prairie Chicken viewing in the state, and there’s also Greater Prairie Chicken viewing nearby,” Augustine said. “A lot of people were coming specifically to see both species.”

Augustine said the event was held in western Oklahoma for about 10 years, but populations there have dwindled. Lesser Prairie Chicken populations remain stable in western Kansas.

33 states and 7 countries

Jim Millensifer, of rural Oakley, owns Prairie Tours and Guide Service. He’s been taking birders to blinds on three different ranches with a total of nine leks since 2019. However, he’s waiting to book tours for 2023 until he finds out if U.S. Fish and Wildlife will change the birds’ status. If the birds are classified as threatened or endangered, restrictions may be imposed on bird tourism.

During the 2022 mating season, 340 birders came on tours, including

people from 33 states and the District of Columbia, as well as the United Kingdom, Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and Sweden. He estimates bird tourism had about \$100,000 impact on the area over a two-month period that is usually slow.

“A lot of the small towns do pretty well during the deer or pheasant hunting seasons, but late winter, early spring is the lull,” he said. “It’s the least busy time for hotels, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, etc.”

He said birders find their trips to Northwest Kansas rewarding. So far, his prairie chicken tours have had “100 percent success.”

“Everybody who’s come here to see Lesser Prairie Chickens has seen them,” he said.

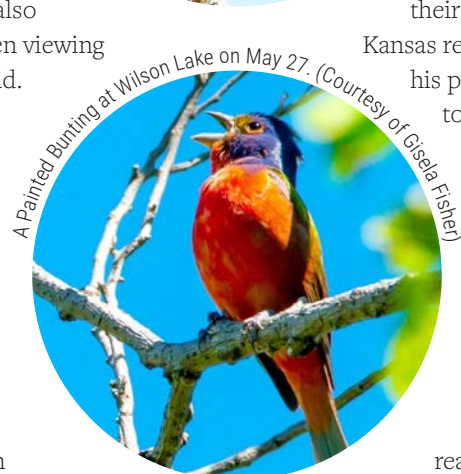
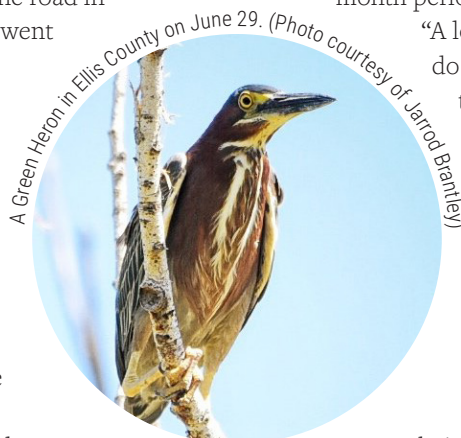
“Most people have seen them within 25 or 30 yards. Birders are really quiet and cautious, and we have zero impact on the birds. They couldn’t care less about us. They have one thing on their mind, and it’s not us.”

While they’re here, birders also enjoy being able to find and observe numerous other species.

“I had four birders from the Denver metro area who were here several years ago to see chickens, and they came in the day before the tour,” he said.

“They stayed at a hotel in Oakley and got permission to do some birding on the little nine-hole golf course there. They counted 25 different birds that were new to them. If you’re a birder, that’s kind of a cool deal.”

See **BIRDS**, page 15



Did you know?

Five species of hummingbirds migrate through Northwest Kansas in the fall. They can be attracted to a feeder between late July and mid-September. Make nectar for hummingbirds by dissolving one part plain, white granulated sugar in four parts hot water. Do not add red dye. Make sure there’s shade and change the nectar often. Once the birds find your feeder, they are likely to return the following year.

Great Planes



Randy and Shelly Schlitter

Hays manufacturer produces airplanes, kits that make pilots' dreams come true

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[HAYS] Randy Schlitter started his career by designing and building a sail trike. He hoped all kinds of people would learn how to angle their sails for a wind-powered trip to the grocery store. Almost 50 years later, his company's customers are navigating winds at higher altitudes.

Schlitter has congratulated thousands of people who successfully built their own experimental aircraft from a kit, or purchased a Federal Aviation Administration-certified plane built by RANS Aircraft's professional staff. While the mode of transportation offered by RANS (and designed by Randy Schlitter) may have evolved, one thing hasn't changed – the joy on his customers' faces.

"We have a very successful company. We've produced close to 6,000 aircraft, and they're in 55 different countries," said Schlitter, founder and CEO of RANS Aircraft. "Our aircraft have done phenomenal things — both humanitarian and just record-setting type things — like flying across oceans and circumnavigating several continents."

RANS planes have been used for everything from patrol work on the coast of New Zealand to naval research.

"We sold a plane with a set up to photograph the Amazon," Schlitter said. "That was before they had the super-duper satellite stuff, and this guy spent three months just flying back and forth over the Amazon."

He said planes built for NASA led to improvements in software for the Predator unmanned aerial vehicle program. RANS was invited to design an autonomous aircraft to fly on Mars before funding for the program was cancelled, he said.

For more than four decades, employees at the Hays manufacturing facility have produced both ready-to-fly planes and kits full of parts that customers can buy. It takes about

Mark Mathis completes any welding necessary so that customers who assemble a RANS aircraft kit don't have to weld.

Michele "Shelly" Schlitter is with Vickie Hicks, who has worked at RANS for more than 30 years.



1,000 hours of work to build a small aircraft, including state-of-the-art instrumentation and choice of engine.

“We ship about eight to 10 kits per month, and (in the shop in Hays) we complete a ready-to-fly airplane about every six and a half weeks,” said Michele “Shelly” Schlitter, Randy’s wife and RANS vice president and sales director. “We have deposits up through 2025 on ready-to-fly aircraft. We have about 130 deposits on kits on order right now, so we’re going to be busy for a long time.”

Economy of design

Randy Schlitter said the innovations in RANS planes are mostly in their economy of design. The latest model, the S-21 Outbound, can cruise at 155 miles per hour, handle 180 pounds of cargo and carry 50 gallons of fuel. That means the S-21 has more speed and about double the cargo and fuel capacity of previous models.

“I always say the first word in airplane is air, so build it mostly out of air, and it will fly better,” he said. “We’re kind of known for real clean and innovative engineering solutions that just make good sense. No frills.”

Some models are good for aerobatics, but the S-21 is more for back-to-nature trips. He said his favorite model is “whichever one’s in the front of the hangar.”

“It’s like your kids. There are some that are more trouble than others,” he said. “Right now, what’s popular is a plane that’s good for flying to the backcountry and landing on non-airfields — like on a field or a riverbed, sandbar or pasture — in undeveloped strips.”

Demand for the \$100,000 to \$130,000 kits is so high that customers wait about a year for the two large wooden crates containing the welded fuselage cage and other parts to arrive. Customers spending around \$200,000 on a professionally built plane have a wait of about four years.

To afford such an investment, buyers have usually been saving for a long time, and Schlitter said he wishes they didn’t have to wait after placing the order. However – in addition to supply chain issues – he doesn’t want his company’s 27-person staff to get much larger.

“Your ego wants you to be this big bad ass company knocking down millions, and yet the practicality and the stress on

FLY-IN & OPEN HOUSE - October 7-8

The RANS Fly-in and Open House is set for Oct. 7-8. The event, which attracts interested buyers and current RANS owners, includes rudder building, flight demonstrations and factory tours. Register at www.rans.com/fly-in-2022.

your life and keeping things in that happy zone is really more important,” he said.

Business and pleasure

RANS customers tend to know about work/life balance. They’ve shared stories with Schlitter about the ways they’ve used their planes for both business and pleasure. There are those who land in a cow pasture or add a light-weight sprayer assembly for treating crops, and those who land on a mountain top.

“We’ve met so many engaging and interesting people from all walks of life,” Schlitter said. “There’s a consistency among them. They’re generally pretty happy people and pretty successful people, and that’s a good crowd to be around every day.”

The customer list includes farmers, astronauts, business owners, retirees and, well, “just people,” he said. To fly the finished aircraft requires a pilot’s license, but building it requires no welding and no credentials other than the ability to read and follow instructions.

“We have first-time builders who say, ‘I’ve never built anything before, but I want to do this.’ We say, ‘OK, follow the instructions, and you got this.’ And they do,” said Shelly Schlitter.

A RANS plane built by an Inuit Eskimo tribe flew from Alaska to the Experimental Aircraft Association’s largest air show in Oshkosh, Wis., a few years ago. Two British high school students once flew a RANS plane that their class built to the Paris Air Show. High school classes in Kansas and Texas have also built RANS planes.

“We’ve inspired some youth here and there,” Schlitter said.

A local customer

Kelly Crain, of Hays, has had help from his father and his 19-year-old daughter since he began assembling his S-21 in August 2020. He said RANS provides clear instructions and a

See **PLANES**, page 14

Hays businessmen Marty Patterson and Gary Shorman became friends while taking instrument flight training. Now they are building an experimental aircraft together.



RANS employee Ryan Hillman, in front, and a co-worker assemble what will be a certified S-21 Outbound aircraft at the manufacturing facility in Hays



PLANES, from page 13

customer support line that “takes a lot of the scariness out of it.”

In May, Crain was also finishing up final requirements for his pilot’s license. He expected to have the plane fully built by mid-summer, long before he and wife, Sharon, become empty nesters looking for new adventures.

“If I was buying a plane in my price range, it would have been something from the 1970s,” he said. “One of the reasons I decided to build is because I can make a safer aircraft than I could afford to buy.”

Flying back through time

Schlitter’s fascination with planes goes back to his youth. When he was growing up, his father – a flight instructor, pilot, and mechanic – operated the Russell and Hays airports.

“My lifestyle and my childhood pretty much directed me toward this,” he said. “I’ve been tinkering and building stuff for as long as I can remember, and I always liked airplanes.”

He had his first solo flight at age 16, and he became a licensed pilot about four years later. He had a year of aviation school in Tulsa, Okla., and a year in Wichita, where he took night classes and studied machining.

By the mid-1970s he was back in Hays, and in 1973 he launched RANS after designing and building a low-to-the-ground, three-wheel bike with a sail. His sail trike became a common sight in the area.

“I’ve got about 35,000 miles sailing highways – that’s one of my only distinctions in life,” Schlitter said.

However, the income from sail trikes, and then recumbent bikes, wasn’t steady. As Schlitter’s family grew, “things started getting real,” he said. “The children were inspirational in requiring me to actually have to make a living.”

So, Schlitter branched into designing and manufacturing aircraft. In 1983, his first attempt, the Coyote Ultralight, “kind of put us on the map,” he said. In 1985, a two-seat S-7 Courier brought RANS into light sport aircraft production. It became the first RANS plane to receive FAA certification in 2001, just a week



Top, a fully assembled kit for building an experimental aircraft is ready to be shipped from the manufacturing facility in Hays. Below, Kelly Crain works on his aircraft at a hangar at the Hays airport. (COURTESY PHOTO)

after Sept. 11.

“We couldn’t go fly to celebrate the certification, so we rolled the plane into the building to a crowd,” Schlitter said. “From then on, we’ve developed and put into production at least 15 models, and we’ve probably done prototypes of 21 different models.”

In 2015, the bike production part of the company was sold to Jerrell and Kara Nichols, of Montezuma. They continue to build bikes under the name Phoenix Bike Wrx.

A global presence

With airplanes as the focus, RANS has had “a lot of tentacles into a lot of interesting things,” Schlitter said. “It’s taught us a lot about our abilities as a company, and it really has shown that the world’s a small place.”

RANS has dealers in 18 countries and frequently ships kits overseas. The Schlitters enjoy traveling to air shows

and visiting customers. Once, when they delivered a plane to Bangor, Maine, they got to experience a lobster feast.

Shelly Schlitter said RANS frequently offers a class on building a rudder, the part that controls the airplane’s movement.

“You have to bend something. You have to rivet something. You have to cut on it. You have to sand it. Everything is done in the rudder, but you can do a rudder in about two and a half hours,” she said. “The class is not required, but people sure do learn a lot, and it really builds their confidence.”

‘What’s holding us back?’

By May, Hays businessmen and pilots Gary Shorman and Marty Patterson had completed their rudder and the rest of the tail section without going to the class. They were constructing a wing for the S-21 they hope to be flying in a couple of years - by the time Patterson turns 60. The two friends have been licensed

pilots since the 1980s and have years of experience working with their hands.

Shorman and Patterson ordered their kit after touring the RANS factory about a year and a half ago during a meeting for area pilots.

"We saw what they were doing, how you put it together, how strong it is," Shorman said. "I was just really impressed with the engineering that went behind it."

Patterson said when Shorman turned to him and said, "Let's buy one," he responded, "What's holding us back?"

After receiving the kit around Christmas last year, they organized the larger aluminum parts and the labeled baggies full of small parts. They started dedicating about 10 hours a week to building one section of the plane at a time. Shorman compared the project to a 100,000-piece jigsaw puzzle and said it's been more fun than he expected. Patterson said to build a plane, a person needs to be "pretty handy."

"You need to be a 7 or 8 on a scale of 1 to 10," he said.

If they mess something up, "we label it and put it in the pile of shame. When you're this close to the factory you can go get new. If we were in Australia, it wouldn't be quite so easy," said Patterson.

"I've had three mess-ups, and Marty's only had one – not that we're counting," Shorman said.

They said occasionally RANS employees drop by Shorman's hangar at the Hays Municipal Airport to see how the build is going. Both men look forward to being able to fly the plane they are making, and they already have a trip planned.

"It will be fun to pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and go to both our farms – fly out to my farmland, fly out to Gary's and come back to Hays all in one day," Patterson said. "It would take too long driving, but we'll be able to fly it in four hours and have fun while we're doing it."

Shorman described any day he gets to fly somewhere as a good day.

"Now we're going to get to do it in a plane we actually built," he said. ■

BIRDS, from page 11

Rare bird spotting

Former biology teacher and lifelong observer of the natural world, Henry Armknecht grew up in Cheyenne County before becoming a teacher in Cawker City, then a principal in Osborne, then a retiree in Hays. He's seen 700 of the more than 1,100 bird species identified in the United States, and he's seen more than 400 of them in Kansas. He drove to Carlsbad, N.M., with a couple birding friends in December to see a Blue Mockingbird rarely sighted in the United States, and in January they flew to south Texas to see a Bat Falcon, which had been spotted in the U.S. for the first time in December 2021.

"Kansas is an interesting place to bird because there are birds that were traditionally found only in the west and birds that were traditionally found in the east, and we're kind of where they meet because we're right in the heart of the central flyway with Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area being major stopovers," he said. "Ninety percent of the entire world population of some species of shorebirds comes through Kansas. Kansas is a very important place for birds."

He said Kansas is along the migratory route for endangered Whooping Cranes. A few years back four of them spent a week in Ellis County. Whooping Cranes have been sighted in 18 of the 26 counties served by the Hansen Foundation, according to the species map on ksbird.org.

The Bald Eagle, once a rare sight in Kansas, has made a recovery from population decline. Nesting eagles can

now be found near most reservoirs in the area.

Sometimes a strong wind takes birds off course to unexpected places. One such vagrant bird was an American Flamingo documented in Mitchell County in 1972.

"Sometimes the real rare birds in Kansas are brought here by hurricanes," he said.

Armknecht brought groups of students to his feeders in Cawker City to watch hummingbirds. He had them calculate how far a hummingbird moved with each wingbeat, but he said he didn't really get serious about bird watching until

about 20 years ago.

That's when his name started appearing on bird sighting lists and maps at ebird.org and ksbirds.org.

"When I started 20 years ago, there were a lot more gaps in those maps, and at one time I had turned in about 800 species in certain counties that had not been reported, so they added dots to those maps," he said. "When I started birding, I was amazed at how much I didn't know about the common birds around us."

Armknecht, who birds from public roads and on public lands, has spotted 165 species in every county in the state, including 50-some types of birds he's seen in every single county. Most recently, he saw a Spotted Sandpiper in his 105th county.

"Fairly often when I'm in rural areas, people stop and see if I need help," he said. "When they find out what I'm doing, they'll say, 'I've got this pond over the hill,' or 'I've got an owl in my barn. Do you want to come and see it?'"

"People in Kansas are really friendly, and every county in the state has its beauty. The important part to me is to get outdoors and explore Kansas and get some fresh air and sunshine." ■

Want more birds in your yard?

Birds often prefer seedy plant heads to feeders. Plant more native plants and leave areas near tree lines as "natural" as possible. Once they're established, native plants require less water, and they support native insects. Ninety-six percent of land birds feed insects to their offspring, said Jackie Augustine, executive director of Audubon of Kansas. Check with a local greenhouse about native plants for your area.

A burrowing owl spotted in Logan County in March. (Courtesy of Christopher Fick)



HAYS

LOVEWELL

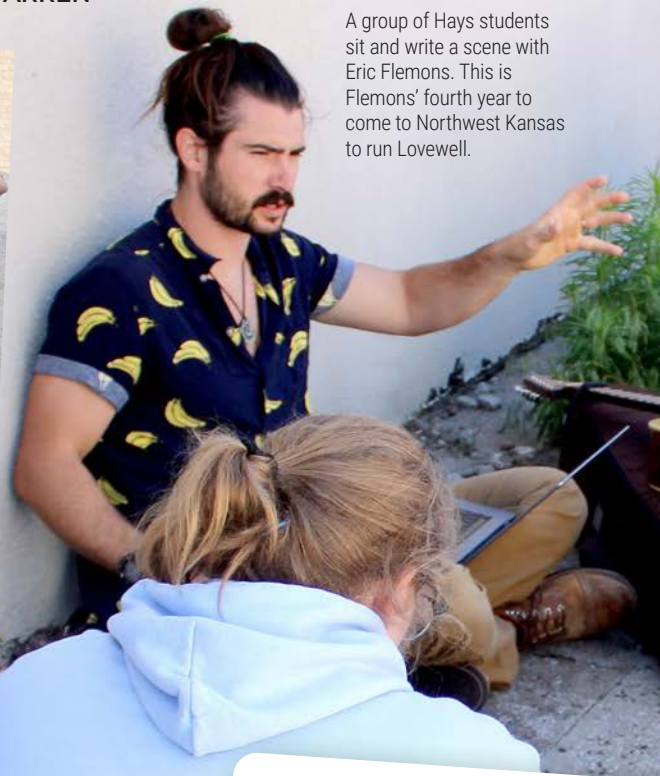
Northwest Kansas high school students took a deep dive into creativity this summer with Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts. In just one week (a few days more in Salina), students wrote and performed original works of musical theater with guidance from professional artists, sponsored by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation.

PHOTOS BY KAYLEE WARREN

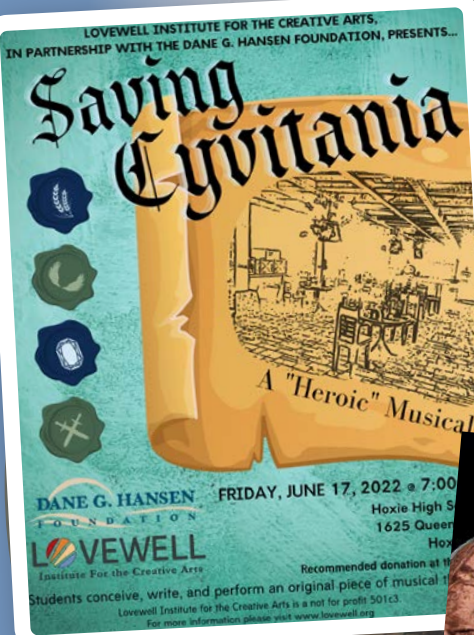
A group of Hays students sit and write a scene with Eric Flemons. This is Flemons' fourth year to come to Northwest Kansas to run Lovewell.



Lovewell Hays students perform their opening number during Murder on Tour: A Bloody Rockin' Musical.



HOXIE



Music Director Eric Flemons sits with Lovewell student Maddy Snyder as she plays chords on her keyboard.



PHILLIPSBURG



Brandon Zaffuto and Caxton Smyth hit a pose while rehearsing the opening number for *De-Railed: A Rootin' Tootin' Cowboy Shootin' Musical*, during Lovewell Phillipsburg



CONCORDIA



Above, Lovewell Concordia student Brady Strait portrays Bob Ross' ghost during *The Art of Persevering: A Musical Journey*.



Right, Jacob Underwood portrays a dean who wanted to destroy the art department of his university.

SALINA

Lovewell Salina students (L-R) Sherida Johnson and Mara Mondt workshop the opening number for *Pleasantville: A Not-so-Perfect Musical*. After each song is written, the next morning is dedicated to workshopping the song to perfect it.



Biketember Fest!

A meet and greet with collectors Mike Bahnmaier and Wayne Laing will be part of the annual Biketember Fest on Sept. 17.

Between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., events planned will also include a poker run, burnouts, and veterans' recognition.

Motorcycle Mania

Motorcycle Museum 110 E. Washington

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

Museum provides visitors with a chance to see rare bikes

[ST. FRANCIS] When they were young, both Kent Kechter's and Eddy Schultz's fathers were of one mind when it came to their son owning a motorcycle.

"I wanted one as a kid so bad, and my dad would not hear of it. Period. End of

discussion," Schultz said.

Kechter said, "My dad said, 'I got along without a motorcycle, and you will too.'"

But good things come to those who wait. In their retirement, both men get to spend a lot of their time around some outstandingly

cool motorcycles.

Both have been board members and volunteers for the St. Francis Motorcycle Museum since before it opened on April 2, 2016. The museum displays include an amazing assortment of vintage bikes, including a 1912 Flanders, a 1914 Flying Merkel and a 1915 Emblem. As volunteers, Schultz and Kechter make sure the chrome gleams on the "Captain America" replica that Peter Fonda himself called the most accurate representation of the original chopper he rode in *Easy Rider*.

The idea of a museum first made front-page news in *The St. Francis Herald* in March 2014, when it was proposed as something that would make downtown St. Francis a "destination." It seems to have worked. Early this summer, more than 20,750 signatures appeared in the museum's guestbooks.

This is what riders want to do

"When we started talking about this museum, most

St. Francis Motorcycle Museum

ADDRESS: 110 E. Washington, St. Francis

PHONE: (785) 332-2400

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

CST daily, closed Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas
WEBSITE: stfrancismotorcyclemuseum.org

FACEBOOK: St. Francis Motorcycle Museum

The museum is staffed entirely by volunteers, and volunteers are needed. No motorcycle knowledge required.

people were saying, 'Oh, that will never fly. You need to be on the interstate.' But I started thinking that when I go riding, this is what I want to do," Kechter said. "I want to go see a national park, or I plan my route looking for car museums, motorcycle museums – just stuff I want to see."

Thanks to many generous donors and a Dane G. Hansen Foundation grant, the \$300,000 building constructed to house the museum is fully paid for. Operating costs are covered by suggested donations at the door.

Every year since it opened, the museum has, on average, attracted at least 2½ times the number of people who live in St. Francis. Counting people



Kent Kechter and Eddy Schultz, board members of the St. Francis Motorcycle Museum



This 1927 Indian Scout was designed to run in the horizontal position as part of a "Wall of Death" carnival attraction.



Found in a barn in Osborne County, this 1920 Harley Davidson Model J has several special features, including extra lights, wheel spoke covers, a buddy seat and an owner-built exhaust whistle.



A replica of the Captain America chopper Peter Fonda rode in Easy Rider is displayed with a helmet signed by Fonda.



Flying Merkel motorcycles had good design, a relatively low price and good marketing. Produced until 1917, they were only available in signature orange paint.



The Boss Hog was museum donor Mike Bahnmaier's first drag bike. He built the bike in 1979 and raced it until 1988.

who don't sign in, Kechter estimated between 5,000 and 6,000 people have walked through the doors each year.

There's a reason people have shown up – often on their own motorcycles – from all 50 states and 56 countries.

"There's stuff in here you just won't see any other place in the world," Kechter said. "We have some items the largest motorcycle museums in the world don't have."

Sharing their collections

About 145 motorcycles representing roughly 40 brands are displayed, with manufacture dates ranging from 1902 to 2016. Many of the bikes, which mostly are being shared from the collections of Mike Bahnmaier, of Wichita, and Wayne Laing, of Aurora, Colo., can be counted among the first, the fastest or the finest ever built.

Bahnmaier is a professional drag bike builder, tuner, and rider, who is also an avid collector of vintage motorcycles. He has motorcycles displayed at the Kansas Motorcycle Museum in Marquette and was looking for another location when his son, Brett Poling, of St. Francis, suggested the town where he lives.

"He brought us just under 30 to start with, and he keeps bringing us more," Schultz said. "Collectors like Mike know what hundreds of other collectors have and what potentially might come up for sale as people age and children sell things off. They always get their little toe in the door."

For the people who raced the vintage motorcycles in Bahnmaier's collection, the speed he races on the bikes he builds now would be

unimaginable. Bahnmaier's personal best is 6.34 seconds at 225 mph in the quarter mile, Kechter said.

"There are certain safety rules they have to follow, but overall they are engineering and designing as they see fit," Kechter said of the drag bikes built by Bahnmaier. Schultz added that just to get the fuel mixture right requires someone who is "part scientist, part chemist."

A couple of Bahnmaier's drag bikes and a small sampling of



Mike Bahnmaier's National Hot Rod Association Wally trophies are displayed in a glass case.

trophies he and his team have won – including four National Hot Rod Association Wally trophies – are on display, but Schultz and Kechter said the museum has nowhere near enough room for them all.

"These guys are not just fly-by-night racers – they're the top of the heap," Kechter said.

Schultz has also been integral to the project from the start. He and his wife, Sherry, donated the land on which the museum sits. Eddy Schultz, Kechter and others helped tear down an old granary that provided rustic board siding and metal sheeting used to decorate the walls (along with more than

See **MANIA**, page 22

Smackdab in

Motorcycle ride draws people from across the nation to Smith County

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[LEBANON] Pete Zilliox thought he'd come up with a fun motorcycle ride for him, his wife, and a friend in the summer of 2015. In the years since, he's awarded patches to hundreds of people who have also decided to do the 675-mile ride.

For the past eight years, Zilliox and his wife, Sarah, of Lee's Summit, Mo., have come to Lebanon to launch the Smackdab Run, America's Center-to-Center, Dawn-to-Dusk Summer Solstice Motorcycle Adventure.

This year, the Smackdab officially revved up at 5:34 a.m. June 18 from the geographic center of the 48 contiguous states (about two and a half miles northwest of Lebanon) and powered down at 10:23 p.m. at the monument designating the geographic center of North America in Rugby, N.D.

There were 101 people on 88 motorcycles who made the full ride during the approximately 16 hours of daylight. In addition to Kansas, they came from Nebraska, Texas, Missouri, North

and South Dakota, Iowa, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Virginia. More than 450 people from 20 states have completed the run since it started in 2015.

Pete and Sarah weren't among them this year. They've now ridden it three times, establishing a pattern of completing the ride every third year. With the heat in the forecast, Sarah said she was glad they were sitting this one out.

When Pete first proposed the idea, Sarah was skeptical. She pointed out that she didn't want to be "out after dark dodging

wildlife out in the middle of nowhere." Pete solved that problem by planning the trip around the summer solstice. On the Saturday closest to the longest day of the year, they could finish the ride in daylight.

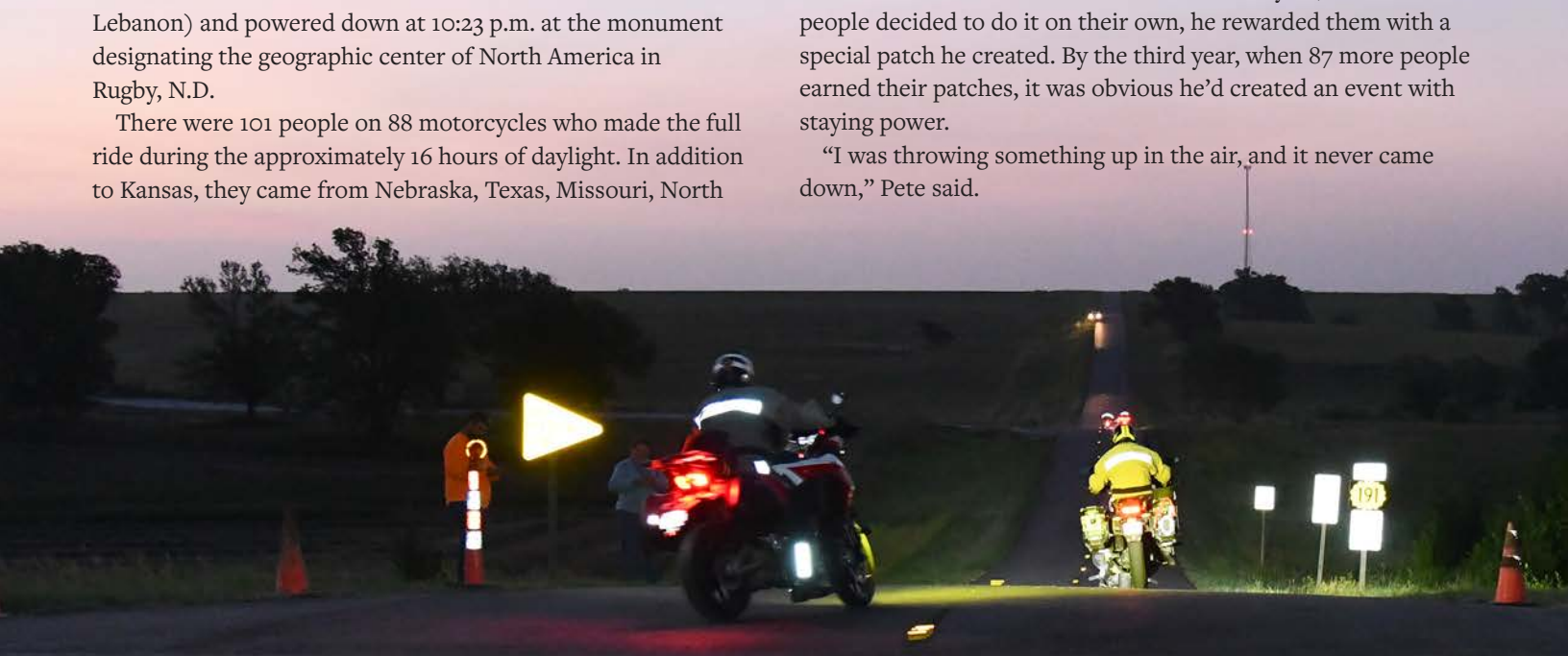
That first year, 12 strangers — one guy all the way from Tennessee — showed up to join them after Pete posted the plan in an online motorcycle forum. The next year, when five

people decided to do it on their own, he rewarded them with a special patch he created. By the third year, when 87 more people earned their patches, it was obvious he'd created an event with staying power.

"I was throwing something up in the air, and it never came down," Pete said.



Sarah and Pete Zilliox, of Lee's Summit, Mo., came up with the idea for the Smackdab Run and have come to Lebanon to start the event each year.



Shortly after dawn, the first riders began to leave for their long day's journey to North Dakota. Riders didn't all leave at once. The Smackdab Run is not a race.

the center

The event is not a race. There's time for participants to make stops and side trips to tourist attractions such as the Corn Palace in Mitchell, S.D.

"If you go the speed limit, the actual driving time's about 11 hours, so even with gas stops and stuff like that you can make it in by 7 or 7:30 without pushing hard," Pete said.

The route is mostly straight north on U.S. Highway 281. Afterward, many stay long enough to visit the International Peace Garden 45 miles further north at the Canadian border. Several have even extended the ride to include a stop at a third monument – the center of the U.S., factoring in Alaska and Hawaii, near Belle Fourche, S.D.

Going the distance

Pete said there are a lot of motorcycle riding distance challenges, but usually the rider can choose when and where to do them. To earn the Smackdab patch, registered riders submit timestamped photos of themselves at the monuments near Lebanon and Rugby on the event day.

"One of the things that makes this event kind of unique is you do it on this Saturday. Whatever the weather is, whatever the road conditions are, you've got to deal with it," he said. "One year there was a bridge out. Literally, the highway washed away, and they had to take a 30-mile detour to get to the next bridge."

Another year, he said some Smackdab riders encountered a memorable storm front in North Dakota.

"They had two tornadoes sighted in front of them as they were riding north," he said. "There were tornado warnings with hail and everything. Most people didn't know it ever happened, but a certain number of people were right there when it crossed the highway."

See **SMACKDAB**, page 23



James Carver, of Goodland, and Kevin Plummer, of Oakley, attended a dinner in Smith Center the night before riding the Smackdab Run.



Pete and Sarah Zilliox take photos of the 2022 Smackdab riders just before dawn, when the run started.



Three generations of the Anderson family, of Lee's Summit, Mo., rode in Smackdab on Father's Day weekend. They were Christopher, his grandpa Roger G., and his father Roger C. and wife Janni, who followed in a support vehicle.



At dawn, John Kerger, of Woodbine, Iowa, and Kent Eckhardt, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, prepare to set out for North Dakota.

MANIA, from page 19

30 years of Sturgis T-shirts donated by Randy Knox of Burlington, Colo.)

Schultz also owns an eye-catching 1944 Cushman Model 53, displayed with its parachute just inside the front door. The rugged airborne military scooters were dropped behind enemy lines at Normandy Beach during World War II. Schultz bought pieces of the scooter from a Colby man and had a saddle maker in Scott City duplicate the stitching on the leather seat to military specs. Tom Purvis, of Goodland, restored the bike.

Blast from the past

The wide-ranging display at the museum includes plenty of Harley Davidsons and Indians. But it also features everything from a 1993 Goldwing Honda that looks like it could have been used in a presidential motorcade, to a one-of-a-kind mini scooter hand built by Rich Weigand, of Goodland. Weigand is a Shrine clown who rode it in more than 100 parades in seven states.

There are motorcycles that never had the chance to show what they could do. There is a 1973 Chaparral that is still in pieces in its original shipping container. There is also a 1971 Honda SL175 that arrived from the factory with 1 mile on its odometer and was never sold, only adding .3 miles as it was pushed around the floor of Laing's Aurora, Colo., Honda dealership.

Then there's the trophy-winning, studded-tire 1983 Maico MC490 Spider. It was nicknamed "Sow" by owner Lyle Cook, a 1965 St. Francis High School graduate who moved to North Dakota and raced on ice.

Thanks to Bahnmaier, there are a large number of racing motorcycles that last revved their engines more than a century ago. Many have lights that burned acetylene gas.

Among those is the 1917 Excelsior advertised as the "fastest motorcycle in the world." A rider named Royal Bangs rode it to victory in the 235-mile Tacoma (Wash.) Endurance Race. It is displayed with Bangs' helmet, shin guards, goggles and the trophy he won.

Not far away is the rusted frame of a 1910 Wagner found in Cheyenne County. Clara Marian Wagner, the first documented female motorcyclist, put her family's company on the map by winning a 360-mile endurance race from Chicago to Indianapolis in 1910 at age 18. However, she was denied the trophy because she was a woman.

That kind of historical information is recorded on placards displayed with each motorcycle. Kechter, a former St. Francis school teacher, researched and wrote the descriptions of each bike and now knows an impressive amount about motorcycle lore and mechanics.

"Some of them you can find a lot of information on. Some you can't find anything really," Kechter said. "I'd go through 10 different books and the internet, and sometimes I'd just have a paragraph."

The original motor-cycle

Kechter filled two pages with information about the oldest motorcycle in the collection – a 1902 Orient. It is among a handful of special motorbikes displayed in an actual vault constructed with



The 1902 Orient is the oldest motorcycle on display. It was the first motorcycle produced in America.

On the way...

Stop through Colby to see a new exhibit at 300 N. Franklin downtown featuring Colby resident Jim Oliver's BMW motorcycle, Lucille. At age 60, Oliver rode Lucille for 28 days through Russia while fulfilling his lifelong dream of motorcycling around the world. Oliver has written a book about his experience, *Lucille and the XXX Road*. Arrange to meet him by calling (785) 462-0040.

12-inch concrete walls and a steel roof. The Orient was the first motorcycle manufactured in the United States and the first to be advertised as a "motor-cycle" instead of a motor-bicycle. The Orient, built in Waltham, Mass., made its public debut on July 31, 1900, when French bicycle racer Albert Champion rode it five miles in a little more than seven minutes in a speed performance test.

The Orient on display was sold in Los Angeles in 1903 and is one of only two 1902 models known to exist.

"That bike is basically the only one in the world. There is another partial bike that they've completed as a replica, but this is the real deal. It's been restored, but it's all original parts," Schultz said.

Such rare sights have brought motorcycle enthusiasts from far and wide. One memorable group of visitors was a Mexico City

police team who were headed to Sturgis to perform a riding demonstration on vintage 1940s bikes.

Certain admirers have returned multiple times. Schultz said a man from Munich, Germany, has been to the museum twice to take measurements and photos of the 1915 Emblem as he works on restoring his own. A Wisconsin man who is trying to restore a Feilbach Limited has returned to the museum four times.

"It's not unusual for people to come and lay on the floor and take photos," Kechter said. "They measure from this bolt to that bolt or the frame and write everything down and take photos. We're kind of a reference library."

Kechter and Schultz are enjoying the ride.

"From a dream to this, it's been pretty cool," Kechter said. "It's something to be proud of." ■

SMACKDAB, from page 21

One year it was so cold when the riders got to North Dakota, there were actually snowflakes, said James Carver, of Goodland. Carver, who made the ride for a sixth time this year with his friend Kevin Plummer, of Oakley, has more Smackdab memories than anyone. The only years he has missed were the first two.

“Now I’ve got to go every year because if I don’t, they’ll catch up to me. That’s the only record I ever had in my life,” he said, laughing. “It’s been fun. Truthfully, I do it for the camaraderie.”

This year snow was less a factor than blowing dust and heat. Pete provided each rider with a fluorescent orange streamer to tie on a bike or jacket so Smackdab riders would recognize each other on the road. Many riders were trying the route for their first time.

The event fell on Father’s Day weekend, and several of those riding were fathers and sons or daughters. Three generations of the Anderson family of Lee’s Summit, Mo., rode for the first time, including grandpa Roger G., father Roger C., and son Christopher. Roger C’s wife, Janni, followed in a support vehicle.

Among veteran riders were John Kerger, of Woodbine, Iowa, and Kent Eckhardt, of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The two 83-year-old friends met and began riding together because of Smackdab. Eckhardt was on his way to the event five years ago after reading about it in a letter Pete wrote to *Rider* magazine. Eckhardt met Kerger while stopped at a store in Omaha, Neb.,

and told him about Smackdab. Kerger brought a friend and joined him the next year, and they’ve ridden it together every year since.

“It’s something to do – something to talk about, something to brag about,” Eckhardt said. “Everybody looks at me, and they kind of wonder what do you do this for? I say, ‘Well, a little patch.’ They kind of wonder about us, I’m sure, but that’s OK.”

Smith County hospitality

Pete and Sarah drove their pickup to Smith County this year to give rider instructions and officially start the event. They attended a dinner hosted by the Smith County Historical Society the night before Smackdab.

“You all have the best hospitality,” Pete told historical society members and dinner hosts Brady Peterson, Chris and Sherry Linneman, Brenda McCrary, Libby McDonald, Diane Peterson and Edith McClain.

“It took a while for the people in Rugby to figure out that we weren’t a bunch of kooks – that they actually wanted us in their town,” he said. “Smith Center from the very beginning was like, ‘We’ll roll out the red carpet for you. What can we do to help?’”

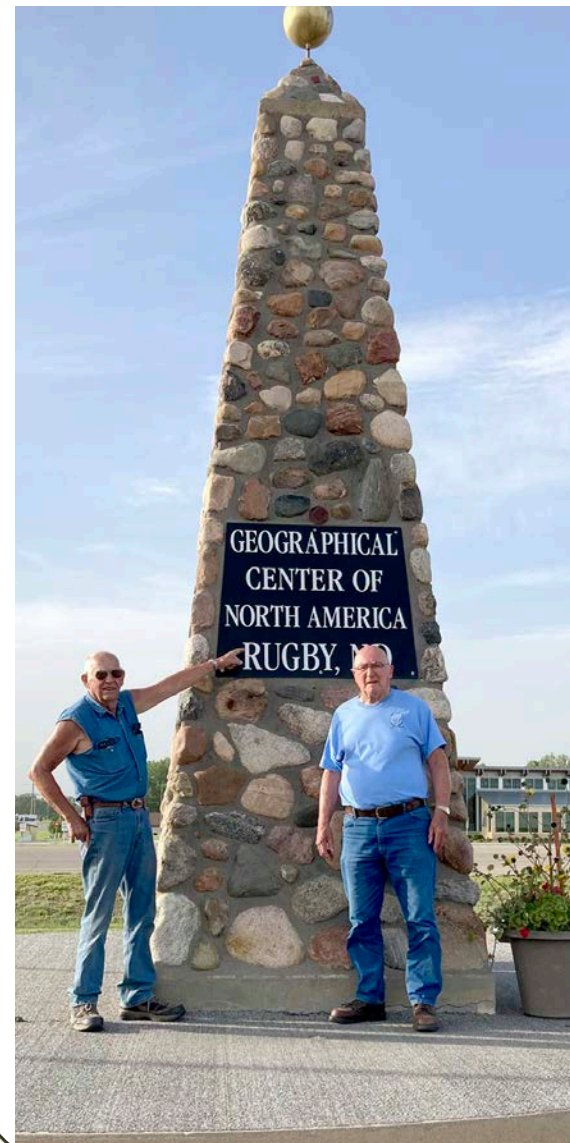
Well before dawn on the day of Smackdab, Denise Marcum, travel advocate for the Smith County Convention and Visitors’ Bureau, and her husband, Kevin, and son, Cody, were among the volunteers who arrived at the geographic center with

breakfast burritos, trail mix and other goodies for the riders to eat before setting off.

“This is a huge event. We love it. It makes it worthwhile getting up early,” Marcum said. “They’re a great group of people too. We’re lucky to be a part of it.”

Pete said he’s gotten attached to the folks in Smith Center.

“I kind of consider it an adopted home now,” he said. “Sarah and I ride Smackdab every third year, but we go to Smith Center every year.” ■



ABOVE: 83-year-olds John Kerger, of Woodbine, Iowa, and Kent Eckhardt, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, at the end of their 675-mile ride to Rugby, N.D. (Photo courtesy of John Kerger)

LEFT: Denise Marcum, travel advocate for the Smith County Convention and Visitors’ Bureau, was up well before dawn to lay out a breakfast spread for Smackdab Run riders.

Beauty

on a bike

Tour die Kapellen in Ellis County includes architectural wonders, classical music, German feast

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS
PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[ELLIS COUNTY] A year ago, Eileen Schmidt and three relatives rode their bikes through tranquil countryside until they spotted the soaring towers of a native stone church. Inside, they heard a live performance of classical chamber music. Afterward, a traditional German feast awaited.

This July, Schmidt, who grew up in Victoria and now lives in Rose Hill, brought eight relatives and friends when she came back to do it again.

The Tour die Kapellen, a German name that means Tour of the Chapels, is an annual bike ride in Ellis County unlike any other. The event was held for the third time July 9.

“Our hope is to create an awareness of the cycling community, to promote fitness, and to showcase our historic limestone structures while capitalizing on the Volga German culture in Ellis County. We collectively appreciate

all those treasures,” said Kay Werth, who is a member of the Hays Area Bicyclists and the Hays Symphony, and one of the creators of Tour die Kapellen.

“We enjoy the solitude of the rural plains and riding out in the country, being outside,” she said. “It’s really about just loving where we are and appreciating the roots of where we grew up.”

More than 230 riders signed up for one of the seven routes ranging in length from 15 to 100 miles. While most follow paved roads, the 54-mile option includes 27 miles of gravel surface, an increasingly popular choice among cyclists.

“This year we have people coming from Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, Florida and Texas so far,” Werth said in May. “The word’s getting out. This is a unique event for western Kansas.”

Every one of the routes includes at least one stop at a historic Catholic church erected more than a century ago by the area’s Volga German settlers. Cyclists could tour the facilities or simply sit in a pew, while listening to a harpist, a brass choir, a violin duet or a woodwind ensemble.

This year for the first time, the Kansas Post Rock

Mark your calendar!

The fourth annual Tour die Kapellen is set to kick off July 8, 2023, at the Municipal Park in Hays. Starting time will depend on the length of ride. For more information or to register, visit tourdiekapellen.com.

Limestone Coalition helped organize a bus tour of the churches for people who weren’t riding bikes. The bus took a different route so as not to encounter bikes on the road.

First occurring in 2019, the Tour die Kapellen is organized by the Hays Area Bicyclists. The nonprofit event is a collaboration between rural communities in Ellis County, the Hays Symphony and the Hays Convention and Visitors Bureau. This year more than \$12,000 from registration fees and other money raised went to the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Munjor, which was dedicated in 1890 and rebuilt after being destroyed by fire in 1932. The proceeds will be used to clean the limestone on the church.

In the first year of the tour, \$8,000 was raised for a remodeling project at the Basilica of St. Fidelis in Victoria. The event was not held in 2020. Then last year, \$12,000 was raised for interior painting at the St. Catherine Catholic Church in Catharine.

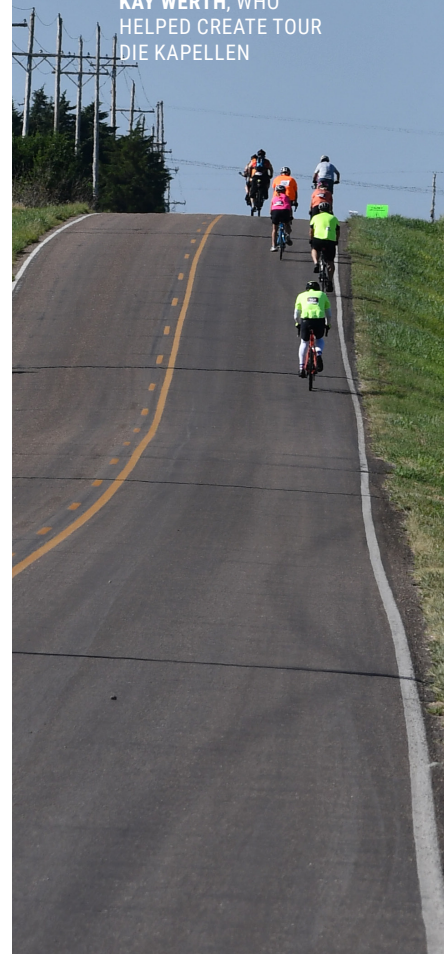
“What’s nice about the tour

“Our hope is to create an awareness of the cycling community, to promote fitness, and to showcase our historic limestone structures while capitalizing on the Volga German culture in Ellis County.”

KAY WERTH, WHO HELPED CREATE TOUR DIE KAPELLEN



KAY WERTH





Cyclists climb a hill between Victoria and Pfeifer.

Top and Center: Cyclists gather at the Basilica of the Plains in Victoria during a tour stop. There, members of the St. Fidelis Brass Quintet played in the balcony for the visiting cyclists.

Bottom: Following the tour, riders were treated to an authentic German meal and music from the Joe Dolezal Polka Band.

Right: Kenneth Derrington (left), Lenexa, and Curt Kornhaus, McPherson, consult the tour map during a stop in Victoria. Derrington was riding the 75-mile route and Kornhaus was riding the 50-mile route.

is it gets people out into the country to these little churches to see what we actually have,” said Glenda Schuetz, parish life coordinator for St. Catherine. She said she’s looking forward to having people see the repainted church, which is beautiful shades of baby blue with red accents.

Next year, the money raised will go to the Gothic-style Holy Cross Shrine in Pfeifer, which was voted one of the

Eight Wonders of Kansas Architecture. In the year following, funds raised will go to the Hays Symphony, which was founded in 1914 and is the longest continuously running orchestra in the state.

“I grew up in Victoria, so I have such a great appreciation of what our forefathers went through to build these structures,” Werth said. She said the massive church named the Cathedral of the Plains by William Jennings Bryant was a landmark of her childhood. Over the years, the populations tasked with maintaining it and other magnificent churches in the area have dwindled. At the same time, the price of repairs has gone up.

She and her bicycling group were inspired to create Tour die Kapellen when they heard about the cost of a set of bronze doors that were initially planned for the cathedral in Victoria.

“The Victoria church is a national monument and the only basilica in the state of Kansas,” Werth said. She said the biking group had been participating in rides organized to raise money for a variety of causes, so she suggested they come

up with their own event to showcase the area and provide funds to help maintain the structures. Soon they were organizing a truly unique bicycling event.

“We’re getting all geared up and ready to go,” rider Eileen Schmidt said in June. “It’s nice riding out in that area because there’s not as much traffic. It’s just a very pleasant ride. The people are wonderful. It’s very well organized. They make sure nobody is left behind.” ■





Top: The Ride On Bike shop in Miltonvale sells refurbished bikes and new accessories.

Bottom: Shop owner Ron Foster helps prepare a bike for a community ride in July.

Ride On over

Miltonvale bike shop gives new life to old bikes and a new career to owner Ron Foster

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BETSY WEARING

[MILTONVALE] After 30 years in the classroom, Ron Foster was not ready to ride off into the sunset, but he was ready to ride on. Foster owns and operates Ride On Bike Shop in Miltonvale.

"I opened full time when I retired from teaching three years ago," Foster said. "Two summers before that I tried it out during the summer to see how it might work. It worked."



RON FOSTER

The shop is a good second career because it combines two things Foster is passionate about — cycling and visiting with people about cycling.

Customers come from all over, but mostly about a 30-mile radius.

"A lot of people are surprised that we are here," Foster said. "You don't think of having a bike shop in a town of 500. I like to talk about bikes, share experiences."

Other than Bike Tek in Salina, the closest shop is Blue Hills Bikes in Osborne. Foster said owner John McClure helped him quite a bit when he was starting out, and they still work together on some charity events.

Ride On is open Monday through Friday from 1-5 p.m., but Foster says, "I'm usually here all day long. It's fairly casual."

"If a guy called in about bringing a bike in tomorrow, (a Saturday), I can hop on my bike and get here without pedaling."

Kind of like forever

Such is the beauty of living and working in a community the size of Miltonvale. Foster was born in Indiana. His family moved to Montana, where he graduated from high school. He headed to Miltonvale for college.

"Miltonvale had a two-year college connected to the Wesleyan Church. Miltonvale Wesleyan College," Foster said. The school closed in 1972. He was there for a summer and met his wife, Linda, at the drugstore where she worked.





Miltonvale residents set out for a ride on a hot day in July. The Ride On Bike Shop hosts weekly community rides.



In the shop, a refurbished bike sits under a map that outlines cycle-friendly routes across the United States.

Early on, bikes were part of life for the Fosters.

“My wife and I got married in Miltonvale and bought twin Schwinn Varsities at Burgess Cycle Shop in Salina. So, kind of like forever,” he said of how long they have been riding.

The couple lived in a number of places, including a long stint on the west coast.

“I taught for 21 years in California,” Foster said. “We moved back in 2010 so Linda could be closer to her family. I taught for nine years at Clay Center and then retired.”

Foster worked in bike shops along the way, including three years in a Santa Barbara, Calif. shop. “I learned to do repair work there and also managed it for a year. That was probably about 1985.”

New homes for old bikes

His skills at bike repair are the bread and butter of Ride On. Foster does not sell new bikes. His inventory includes used bikes that he purchases, goes through to clean and repair, then sells to a new owner. The shop does carry new accessories such as helmets, tubes, and tires.

He likes to purchase the name brands, such as Raleigh, Trek or Specialized for resale, but he’s happy to work on any bike.

“To carry new bikes, you have to commit to carry a full line. The cost of the inventory can be overwhelming,” Foster said. “This is a retirement activity, so I want room in my life for other things. If you carry new bikes you have to be committed to moving merchandise. The limitation if you are selling used bikes though, is that I can only sell what I can find. It goes both ways.”

He said he finds bikes at yard sales, thrift stores in Kansas City, Facebook Marketplace and word of mouth. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been harder to come by.

“You have to consider how far you want to drive to get a bike,” he said. “Certainly, Manhattan and Salina are doable. We have family in KC so that works as well.”

Time for a tour

One of Foster’s regular customers is local insurance agent Caryn McAdams, who works in the office two doors to the east of Ride On.

“I started cycling in 2012 when a friend and I decided to do Bike Across Kansas,” McAdams said. “That was before I knew Ron and

Linda. They were also doing BAK that year, so that’s how we met.”

McAdams lives on a farm about 10 miles north and east of Miltonvale. Her cycling friend lives and works in Clay Center. McAdams said they both use Ron for their bike needs and repairs.

“We use him for a little bit of everything. When I decided to switch to a recumbent, he took the time to research the bike and learn all about it so he could work on it.”

McAdams and her friend look for a long-distance ride to do every year. This year they did the Pedal Across Lower Michigan. Next spring, they plan to do a four-day tour in Moab, Utah. She knows Foster will have her equipment ready to go.

“I started on a regular bike, then switched to a two-wheel recumbent, and now I ride a recumbent trike,” McAdams said. “It’s always fun to tell Ron that I got a different bike,” she laughed. “He does a great job.”



CARYN McADAMS

Ron and Linda also enjoy cross country cycling. Last summer they planned to start in Seattle, Wash., and end up in Maine. But Mother Nature cut the ride short.

“We were going across Montana, and they were experiencing extreme heat. It was the middle of a drought, so we encountered grasshoppers, mosquitoes, you name it,” Foster said. “The heart said, ‘Keep riding. You can do this.’ The brain said, ‘Probably should stop.’ We stopped.”

It’s about the people

The shorter journey did not eliminate the fun.

“We rode about 700 miles, but the real joy of the whole thing was the people we met,” he recalled. “On a bike you are more accessible, so when you stop, people approach you and ask where you have been, etc. We really enjoyed the people.”

The sentiment is the same back home.

“My favorite part of owning the shop is the people, of course,” Foster said. Ride On hosts weekly rides for families and friends in Miltonvale, and occasionally they organize a ride across the county.

“The first time we started from the south and headed north,” Foster said. “The next year we started from the north and headed south, because that was the direction the wind was blowing. That’s how you do it in Kansas.” ■

Horse & rider

Travelers with horses find cozy stays in Northwest Kansas

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

A pet-friendly hotel isn't hard to come by. But what if your four-footed traveling companion is a horse?

That's where Terri Kelley Anderson, who operates the SlideonInn Horse Hotel near Edson, or Jane Johnson, who owns Tin Acres Quarter Horse Farm and Home on the Range Bed and Breakfast near Colby, can offer a nice bed of straw. Theirs are two of at least six horse boarding facilities in Northwest Kansas, with others near Oakley, Hays and Salina.

Anderson's barn, which opened in June 2016, contains five rubber-matted stalls, five adjacent runs, large exterior pens and three climate-controlled bunkrooms overlooking the stalls. There are hookups for four recreational vehicles. Nearly 2,300 horses have spent the night at

her horse hotel, and every year she sees more, she said.

Some of the horses are of rare varieties – including a Norwegian Fjord horse, an Icelandic horse, Suffolk Punch draft horses, Gypsy Vanner horses and a mustang mule.

"I get to see all kinds of amazing horses – all kinds of breeds of horses that I would have lived the rest of my life and never been able to see in person," she said. "I sometimes have \$1 million racehorses here in the fall."

Some of the animals she's hosted aren't horses at all. She's also had goats, a zebra and a baby camel named George.

Barn, bed, and breakfast

Johnson's facility is larger, with 10 box stalls in the show barn — each decorated in the colors of a different professional football team — nine additional stalls and runs in the back barn, as well as several paddocks. Guests can hook up RVs or reserve one of three bed and breakfast rooms in her home.

She mentioned the fun of hosting the



Terri Anderson and Easter Sunday

Budweiser Clydesdales, but mostly she focused on the people she's had the opportunity to meet.

"I've met concert pianists, world famous ballerinas – all of them traveling with horses," she said. "I've had college kids moving to university, some rodeo people, a lot of professional show people, horse trainer Pat Parelli, a driftwood artist who's becoming internationally famous, you name it. It beats television, let me tell you, because the entertainment I get is amazing."

"The most I've ever had is 27. That was a drill team on their way to Colorado to perform at a fair. They arrived the opening night of our fair. I told them if they'd perform here, I wouldn't charge them to stay, and they did. That was about 20 years ago."

At their convenience, Johnson's guests sit down to an old-fashioned, country breakfast.

"I've had people from two or three different groups, and they're just sitting around chatting about the horse wrecks we've all been in," she said. "It's kind of like a family. It is. It's a wonderful thing."

Horse hospitality

Anderson came into the horse hotel business at the suggestion of friends who were using her barn as a stop on their way to Arizona with their horses.

"I didn't know there was such a thing," she said. "When I started to do this, I thought this is what I'm supposed to



Jane Johnson and a horse in her care.



SlideonInn Horse Hotel

ADDRESS: 2675 Old Highway 24, Edson
EMAIL: terri.reins@gmail.com

Home on the Range

ADDRESS: 2626 N. K-25, Colby
EMAIL: tinacres@st-tel.net

be doing. Everything I needed just fell into place.”

Anderson owns two horses – a palomino gelding registered as Wimpy’s Easter Sunday and an American Paint quarter horse with the registered name Gunnin’ Hombre, known around the barn as Buzz. Anderson worked with a trainer and competed and won in reined horse competitions for about three years. Her trophies are displayed in the front room.

However, in 2016, both she and her horses started having health issues.

“Horses can have a million things wrong with them,” she said. “My horses had some soundness issues when I was into reining. I ended up becoming a certified equine sports massage therapist, and I do red light acupoint therapy on horses to release trauma and bad energy and soreness out of muscles.”

She also learned about horse nutrition and a procedure called Equine Endo-Tapping. Anderson uses her knowledge to help area horse owners. She’s also brought in health professionals, such as a horse dentist.

“She is willing to show up to help any

time and, in any weather, and has given me advice on whether to get to a vet or try something at home first,” said horse owner Lorna Thorpe, of Goodland. “In the short time I have known her, she has helped several people with basic how-to advice all the way up to serious medical issues.”

A call from the sheriff

Johnson owns nine horses. Her career as a horse hostess launched in 1999 with a desperate call from the Thomas County sheriff.

“He called me one evening hyperventilating. He said, ‘I have these eight ladies, and they have high-dollar Arabian horses, and their semi is broken down out on I-70,’” said Johnson. She agreed to help with their demand for a barn and ended up playing hostess for a week before the semi was repaired.

That was only the beginning. Calls started coming from travelers needing a place to board their horses because the women had listed her in a book of horse hotels.

“I’ve had a blast doing it,” she said. “I’ve met lifetime friends from literally all over the world. Sometimes when people come it’s like, ‘Are the margaritas ready?’”

There are lots of reasons people travel with horses. They’re on the way to see a vet or a trainer, or they’re headed to a show ring, a trailhead, a fair, an elk hunting trip or a new home. People headed to Oklahoma to compete in one of the variety of national horse shows there often stop in this area on the way. Horse owners from southern and East Coast states come through on their way to trails in the Rockies, where they can avoid horse fly season.

“When you travel with horses, you have to give them a place to get off the trailer at night. That’s why horse hotels are important,” Johnson said. “People who have horses aren’t afraid to get dirty. Most of them are just salt of the earth kind of people. We have a connection. I have lots of professional show people. We did that world. We understand the importance of having a safe facility where you can offload your horses.”

Back in the saddle

Many of the people Anderson has seen lately are professional horse transporters, who are delivering a horse someone purchased after viewing a broker’s video. She said that last year, January was her only slow month.

Horses make Anderson happy. They’ve long been a part of her life. The walls of the front room in her barn are decorated with large black-and-white photos of her parents performing as members of the Decatur County Drill Team. In 1953, her father rode in President Dwight Eisenhower’s inauguration parade.

In 1960, her father sold the livestock sale barn he owned in Decatur County and moved the family to a small ranch near Longmont, Colo., where he planned to work with cutting horses. When she was 3, he was killed in a silage packing accident. The family returned to Oberlin.

“One of my dad’s friends had us out to his farm, and I could ride his old mare,” she said. He gave her mother one of the horse’s colts.

“For my 11th birthday, I got a two-year-old horse and a book called *How to Break a Horse*,” she said. “I should be dead, but it was divine. The angels were watching over me because I don’t remember having an unsafe moment with that horse ever. I just used the book and did all that stuff. I had a really good 4-H leader, and horse breeder J.R. Ginther out by Gem helped me from time to time.”

As an adult, Anderson wanted to own a horse again, but she couldn’t afford one as a single parent. She worked long hours at the U.S. postal service in Colby, Oberlin, and Goodland, which also made horse ownership impractical.

When she remarried, she told her husband, Eddie, she planned to have horses again when she retired. As it turned out, she didn’t wait that long. In 2010, she purchased a couple horses and 20 acres near Edson, where they erected a shell building for a barn in 2013. Eddie, a carpenter, completed the finish work inside over the next several years.

“I went 25 years without touching a horse,” she said. “I just wanted a horse so bad I didn’t care if it was in the backyard. It was something I wanted to get back to.” ■



Fleet

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[SHARON SPRINGS] Aria Pearce's future stretches before her with the finish line not even in sight.

The 13-year-old Sharon Springs sprinter doesn't just rely on her natural talent. She is serious about training and taking care of herself, as she works to shave fractions of a second off her personal records.

Aria may very well have the skill, determination and support she needs to be an elite athlete. For now, she's a soon-to-be eighth grader – one of a class of 14 at Wallace County Junior High – who gathers her blond hair into her lucky race day ponytail holder and breezes past most of the competition in high school and even college meets. She's broken all of her high school's records, although she's not yet old enough to officially set new ones.

"I don't really notice anything as I run," Aria said when asked what it's like for her to be on the track. "When I get in the blocks I'm just focused, but if I have a wind at my back, it feels like I'm floating."

Aria's favorite event is the 100-meter dash, and her personal best time as of this writing was 11.79 seconds, which she hit both on April 23 when she placed first at the Tabor College Invitational Track & Field Meet and on June 19 coming in first among emerging elite runners at the Nike Outdoor Nationals in Eugene, Ore. The national record for the 14-year-old age group is 11.48.

Aria's best time in the 200-meter is 24.40 seconds, also set when she won the Nike event for emerging elite women.

She also competes in the long jump. Her longest jump of 18 feet 8 inches was at the Running Warehouse Middle School Championships in Arroyo Grande, Calif., on May 22.

At the Missouri Valley Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) District Qualifier in Hays on June 4, she easily secured a spot at regionals for all three events. Later that month, she won all three at

regionals in Joplin, Mo.

National finals, also known as the Junior Olympic Games, took place the first week of August in Greensboro, N.C. Last year, she missed qualifying for the 100 m finals by .01 of a second, but this year she was far more prepared.

"Her peak speed in the 100 is somewhere in the 22 to 23 mph range," said Nathan Pearce, her dad and coach. "She has a really good top end speed, and this year she also has enough strength that she's moved from top 10 to – in my opinion – she's the one to beat right now in the whole nation."

Still, winning is by no means a sure thing, he added. Because of when her birthday falls, Aria competes against 14 year olds. The competition will be tough among the nation's top 14-year-old girls, and weather conditions are always an X factor.

"It's extremely difficult because you run Monday through Saturday," he said. "You have to get through multiple races."

Fast forward

Olympic competition and a spot on a top college team are future possibilities that Aria might run toward.

"Even just getting to the Olympic trials would be a really, really neat experience just to see how that works," Nathan Pearce said.

But there's still a year before she enters high school, and a lot can change. A lot already has. This past year, she learned so much from coaches and competition that her times and her jumps noticeably improved.

Nathan said when Aria competed for the first time at the Kansas District Qualifier in 2021 "it was the biggest thing that ever happened to her in her life."

"She came to it this year, and she's fairly relaxed," he said. "She always gets nervous, but I can tell it's different for her. It's good that she's learning how to deal with all that."

of foot

Young Sharon Springs sprinter set to go the distance

The “fast one”

It's hard to say where Aria's speed came from. Neither Nathan nor her mother, Joni, are aware of first-to-the-finish-line genes in the family tree. Nathan is a fourth-generation farmer in Wallace County, and Joni is the school counselor.

“I seriously think she may have run before she walked when she was a baby,” Nathan said. “I don't remember her ever doing anything slow.”

By third or fourth grade, Aria said she was “the fast one” on her flag football team.

“They would pass me the ball, and I would get a touchdown every time,” she said.

Nathan, who is in his fourth year as Sharon Springs junior high track coach, began to really get a sense that his daughter's speed was extraordinary when she was in sixth grade. He set about exploring options for her. He knew she would need

to be challenged
to keep
improving,
and

other runners her age just couldn't keep up.

“I said the only way you're ever going to be able run with those top girls at the national level is by finding competition,” he said. “She said OK, so I started entering her in college meets. She does really well, and they've been really good for her. She's really enjoyed them. She's put in a position where she has to prove herself.”

Some college meets allow unattached athletes to compete. Others invite runners who submit a qualifying time.

After Aria nearly qualified for the AAU finals last year in Houston, Texas, she was recruited to join the Whatever It Takes (WIT) youth track club of Kansas City. Nathan Pearce began coaching Aria and her younger brother Creede, who throws shotput and discus and also runs the 100 m, for WIT. He appreciates advice about where Aria should compete and critiques of her form from head coach Najeeb Echols.

Since joining WIT, Nathan has also continued to improve his qualifications to coach. He had to become USA Track and Field certified to accompany Aria at college meets. Now he's continuing schooling so that if she wants to compete in the World Athletics under-20 division when she's 16, he'll have the necessary coaching credentials.

Track meet travel

Aria was excited to compete June 16-19 in the Nike event at the University of Oregon. She said she's really enjoyed traveling to meets in other parts of the country.

“She had an

exceptional meet,” Nathan said of Aria's performance at the Nike Nationals. “She raced some of the top high school girls in the nation and won both the 100 and 200 with personal records in both.”

Nathan said the travel has been part of the learning curve. Making sure she continues to eat a protein-heavy diet and get proper sleep while on the road has been a challenge.

“Sprinting isn't a long distance, but it takes a lot out of your muscles,” he said. “Then you rest, and that's when the muscles grow, and that's how you become faster.”

Aria said her favorite meal the night before she races is cowboy stew, a mixture of ground beef, beans and barbecue sauce. Nathan said Aria makes better dietary choices than most of her peers, but she doesn't keep a strict regimen. On meet day, she likes to crunch on Rice Krispie bars.

During training, Aria sprints short distances about three times a week, and on the days in between she lifts weights and works on running form or starting techniques. The Sharon Springs track has a cinder surface that is slicker than the rubber tracks most larger schools have, Nathan said. Replacing the track would be cost prohibitive, so the school acquired two 110 m rubber mats for Aria and other runners to train on.

Nathan said he and Aria enjoy track meets as something they can do together.

“I try to really focus on finding ways to keep it fun for her and not push her so hard that she burns out,” he said. “There's a lot of pressure at some of those meets, and I try to do what I can to help with that and keep her mind off that.”

He said Aria's learning to stay relaxed while running and trust her speed.

“That's the good thing about sports — you're under pressure, and you learn how to deal with it,” he said. ■



Aria and Nathan Pearce

Left: Aria Pearce blazes across the finish line during the 200-meter race at the Missouri Valley Amateur Athletic Union District Qualifier in Hays in June.

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