

HIGHLIGHTING REGIONAL LIFESTYLE, BUSINESS & ARTS

NORTHWEST KANSAS TODAY

Spring 2023 | VOLUME 4, ISSUE 4

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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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he's also a talented painter known for his
portraits and Vietnam War paintings.

ON THE COVER: Stonemason Jon Pancost hand chisels the face of a limestone block in his Lucas shop.
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Welcome to Northwest Kansas – where we have a little bit of everything, and a lot to be proud of. In fact, that was the thought behind starting this magazine. The Trustees of the Dane G. Hansen Foundation believe that there are a lot of amazing people doing amazing things in this corner of the state, which we fondly refer to as the Magic Corner.

There are so many stories to share about life in Northwest Kansas, where families are living “rural by choice,” and prospering.

In this issue you can read about a unique Kansas element – Post Rock limestone. It is a beautiful, historic stone used to build structures all over this part of the country and is still quarried right here in Northwest Kansas.

For more Kansas history, read about a film being made about how the original settlers of Nicodemus arrived at their new home. Historical signs were recently installed along the path they took. You can also read about an upcoming Smithsonian exhibit on democracy in America that will be in Nicodemus and Belleville this year.

In Jewell County, one of our amazing people is painter Jim Nelson. He has been painting portraits and battlefield reenactments for more than 60 years. His work is found in homes, churches, galleries, and on book covers across the country.

Sometimes rural living can present challenges in terms of access to important services. Northwest Kansas rises to the occasion. Our feature story is a hopeful one about a new facility for children dealing with mental health concerns. Thanks to the Camber Children’s Mental Health facility opening in Hays. And in Colby, a group of women who were dealing with Parkinson’s disease took matters into their own hands to get the support they needed and found a pathway to a better future.

You might not think of residents in a state prison as people doing good, but in Norton some of the men stay busy making mats and bags for distribution to the homeless.

However, I think one of our most exciting stories in this issue is about young people in Oakley operating the movie theater there. Access to entertainment is important wherever you live, and learning how to operate a business is a lesson better learned through real-life experiences. For 20 years, Oakley high schoolers have been business operators.

I hope you enjoy these stories, and share them with others who might be encouraged to visit our Magic Corner. They may even decide to stay!

Robert B. Hartman

Robert Hartman
Trustee

You never know when
A HELPING HAND
 will change another person's entire life.

- Zig Ziglar

New mental health facility in Hays
 provides treatment for children, teens

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS



Cause for hope

[HAYS] A tree that grows colorful helping hands instead of leaves spreads its graceful branches in the entrance lobby of the new Camber Children's Mental Health facility in Hays. It's a symbol of hope for the families who come there seeking help.

"In our old building when our clients were discharged, they would paint their hands and leave a print on the wall," said Executive Director Sarah Berens. "Sometimes they'd add a little positive affirmation or a fun quote for the next kiddos who came into treatment. Obviously, we couldn't bring those walls



SARAH BERENS

with us, but this is our way of paying homage to that."

Young people in Northwest Kansas are not immune to mental health problems that are on the rise in teens and pre-teens nationwide. "We've seen a 68 percent increase in Kansas in

youth going to Emergency Departments because of suicidal ideation since the COVID-19 pandemic started," Berens said. "It's definitely an issue, and a huge, huge concern."

Help for area youth

On Feb. 9, the first child to be treated for an acute

mental health crisis arrived at Camber Hays. In its first month of operation the inpatient treatment hospital remained almost at capacity every day, Berens said. The 14-bed unit provides short-term emergency care — typically five to seven days.

Camber Hays' 18-bed psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF) is for youth needing intensive clinical services for a longer period — from 90 to 100 days. That unit also has stayed at or near capacity. Camber Hays accepts Kansas Medicaid and most private insurance.

Both the psychiatric residential treatment facility and inpatient hospital are state of the art, and make

professional care more accessible for area families. Previously those families would have had to travel to Wichita, Kansas City or Topeka — a distance that for many proved to be a barrier to treatment.

"It's scary enough to have to drive your kiddo across town when they're struggling, let alone four, six or eight hours. It's just not feasible," Berens said. "We're very thankful to be able to shorten that windshield time for a lot of families."

Acute care returns

To provide life-saving mental health treatment in an underserved part of the state, KVC Health Systems



CAMBER CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

ADDRESS: 3000 New Way Blvd., Hays

PHONE: (913) 890-7468

WEBSITE: cambermentalhealth.org

types of therapy. Also, it provided separation from the branch of KVC involved in foster care and cleared up confusion for people who would periodically arrive seeking medical care.

The multi-million-dollar renovation of a 27,028-square-foot building owned by HaysMed provided a location that could accommodate both acute and residential treatment. Among donors to the project were the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, the Patterson Family Foundation and the Schmidt Foundation.

Hansen Foundation Trustee Brien Stockman said the foundation made a lead gift for the new facility because it is important for area families.

"Having a place like this in our area is a real breakthrough," he said.

Serene and secure

The new facility provides single- and double-occupancy rooms and a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing space for patients. Therapeutic colors were incorporated into the design of Camber Hays, as were safety and security measures required when caring for youth ages 6 to 18 who arrive experiencing depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, the impacts of trauma, and other mental health conditions. Door handles, furnishings and even ceiling tiles are designed to prevent those everyday items from being used in destructive ways.

"There are a lot of extra

security measures," Berens said. "The donations we received went into the building itself and beautifying it but also safety and protection measures."

Berens said state and local officials worked hard to make the new facility a reality. Long waits have been common for area youth needing mental health treatment, and Camber Hays won't eliminate all wait times. Berens said she's seen the statewide waiting list for PRTF treatment have as many as 200 names and never less than 50. Camber Hays will prioritize western Kansas youth and is expected to serve more than 600 more young people each year, she said.

Berens said the facility maintains state-required ratios of staff to clients. Nurses are always onsite, and the facility is also staffed by psychiatrists, medical doctors and direct care staff. Therapeutic staff is primarily master's level clinical social workers, as well as a marriage and family therapist. Berens said nursing students from Fort Hays State University, NCK Tech and Colby Community College do clinicals at Camber Hays. FHSU therapy students also work at the facility.

Dane G. Hansen Foundation Trustee Doug Albin, who spoke at the facility's grand opening ceremony, recognized the staff for the critical role they play.

"Our region, our country and our world would be much less healthy and whole if the right people were not both willing and able to devote a good share of their time and talent to this challenging and rewarding effort," he said.

Berens said both staff and residential patients have been impressed with the new facility.

"It's exciting and inspiring as well," she said. "We have the space and technology to do the things we've always wanted to do. The pandemic was difficult, and there's a lot of stress that comes from that. I think it is really a good time to recharge our batteries, so to speak, and be more excited every day to come to work."

Mental health challenges

Berens said there are many reasons mental health challenges are becoming more common among young people. Substance abuse is on the rise, but she said in many cases that seems to be an effort to self-medicate, rather than a cause. Environmental factors play a significant role. She said 50 percent or more of the patients in treatment have been removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect as a child in need of care.

"There's a lot of unresolved trauma in this world," she said, "and kids grow up to be adults who haven't processed that trauma, and then they have kids. All these generational things play into it."

Also, social media has significantly increased the impact of bullying.

"In my day, if you got

— which operates Camber Children's Mental Health (previously known as KVC Hospitals) — partnered with the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services to expand psychiatric services in Hays. For 10 years, KVC had provided both acute care and residential treatment at its previous location at the Hadley Center, but acute care had to be discontinued in 2018.

The name change better reflects what the facility provides, Berens said. She said a camber is an arch or bridge, and the facility and staff help patients "bridge a gap," whether it's connecting people to mental health resources or new ideas about

See **HOPE**, page 9

Keep MOVING

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[COLBY] Getting diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease for which there is no cure — such as Parkinson's disease — is a lot to take in, especially when you live hundreds of miles from the specialists who treat it.

Elaine Ptacek and Crystal Berg could have succumbed to the apathy the disease can cause and sat at home waiting for the tremors, sleep and movement difficulties and other symptoms to get worse. Instead, they educated themselves on the challenges that lay ahead and the best courses of treatment, and figured out how to live their best lives despite their diagnosis.

Part of that, the women learned, involved reaching out to others in their community — and eventually a nine-county region — who might feel isolated by Parkinson's and stymied by a lack of local resources to slow its progress. When they couldn't find the support network they wanted, they created it.

In July 2020, while most of the world was sitting at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ptacek, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's with dystonia and tremors in October 2015, and Berg, who found out she had Young Onset Parkinson's in the fall of 2013, got busy. They gathered a small group of people who had Parkinson's and their caregivers for meetings in Colby. In November of that year, Parkinson's Families of NW KS officially received nonprofit status. Then the Parkinson's Foundation, of Miami, Fla., awarded the group a grant for startup funds.

The disease they face is formidable and, sadly, not uncommon. One in 37

people will be diagnosed with it in their lifetime, according to the Parkinson's Foundation. About 10 million people worldwide have Parkinson's. About 90,000 Americans are diagnosed with it each year.

Symptoms start appearing as the result of the death of vital nerve cells in the brain. What causes that is unknown, but researchers are exploring both genetic and environmental factors. As neurons die, the brain's supply of dopamine — a chemical produced by neurons that controls movement — decreases. Over time, movement becomes slow and difficult, and tremors can be severe.

Art, music, movement

However, evidence shows that an active lifestyle can help slow progression of the disease.

Parkinson's Families of NW KS offers Wednesday classes that provide free, evidence-based opportunities for exercise, art, and music, as well as coffee and conversation. Ptacek serves as the group's executive director, and Berg is board secretary.

The exercise portion of the Colby class — held at The Movement Connection fitness facility downtown — is led by the gym's owner, movement facilitator Brenda Mazanec. Mazanec, a certified Parkinson's Wellness Recovery instructor, leads the group in *PWR! Moves*, an exercise program designed to help Parkinson's patients maintain skills.

Art classes are led by Jeanne Cox, and Jerrilee Shuman provides music therapy.

Joining in over Zoom are folks in Sharon Springs, Quinter and Oakley. Ptacek said at present the group's email

10 EARLY SIGNS OF PARKINSON'S DISEASE

1. A slight shaking or tremor in hands or chin
2. A change in handwriting with letters getting smaller
3. Loss of smell
4. Sleep disturbances like thrashing around or acting out dreams
5. Trouble moving and walking
6. Constipation
7. A change to a soft, low voice
8. A facial appearance of being depressed or mad
9. Dizziness or fainting
10. A stooped posture

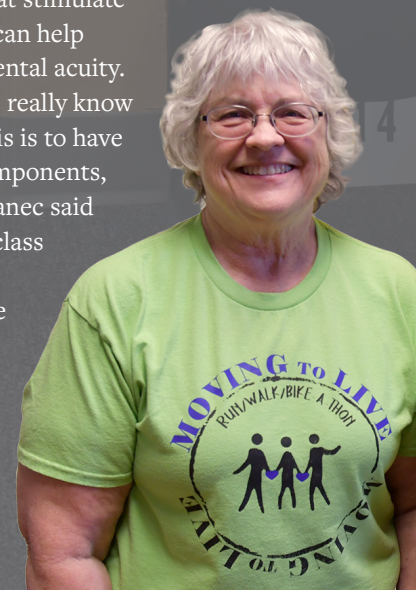
Source: Parkinson's Foundation. Learn more at [Parkinsons.org](https://www.parkinsons.org).

list contains 35 names. She hopes to add additional sites, once some kinks in the technology are worked out, and health professionals are found who can be onsite to assist in those locations.

Mazanec has long been convinced of the health benefits of movements that engage both sides of the brain and help both sides of the body to work together. She said adding exercise with activities that stimulate the senses, can help maintain mental acuity.

"You guys really know how cool this is to have all these components, right?" Mazanec said recently to class members.

"The art, the music, the movement, the speakers



BACKGROUND: Crystal Berg, Colleen Bixenman, Brenda Mazanec and Linda Sowers take turns punching a bag at The Movement Connection.

BELOW: Linda Sowers, Elaine Ptacek and Crystal Berg are the driving forces behind Parkinsons Families of Northwest Kansas.

Support group forms for caregivers, people struggling with Parkinson's Disease

— there are Parkinson's gyms in the Kansas City area that that's all they do. You guys are doing the same thing throughout Northwest Kansas."

Mazanec, whose career included working with infants, toddlers and preschoolers and teaching P.E. to older children, said when young children are learning about the world, multi-sensory activities are introduced.

"Playdoh, cutting, visuals, auditory — everything is presented through a sense," she said. "Over the last few years, I've begun to ask why are we not doing that as a society for our aging population to help maintain that circuitry?"

'You can fight against this.'

Mazanec recently equipped her gym for a new program. The Parkinson's group recently helped pay for her training to become a Rock Steady Boxing coach. Studies have shown boxing and other rigorous exercise can slow the disease's progress. Mazanec said boxing is a new adventure for her. She's learned to throw six different punches.

"I'd never hit anything in my life, but there was a true satisfaction in learning to hit a bag," she said.

"What we're already doing is good, but I've been too easy on you. The Rock Steady boxing will have a little bit more of an intensity that we have not been experiencing."

She said she thinks boxing is important because it's literally proving "you can fight against this."

Elected despite disease

In addition to the weekly class, Parkinson's Families offers peer mentors and monthly support group sessions led by Ptacek. Before retiring, she had

didn't have the support back then," Sowers said. During Byron's final term as commissioner, Sowers became a familiar sight as she assisted her husband at commission meetings.

"That last year was a real challenge," she said.

'A miracle for me'

Ptacek said she reads everything she can find about Parkinson's. She stays up-to-date on new medications and procedures that improve quality of life. Her own quality of life has improved

"You guys really know how cool this is... right?...there are Parkinson's gyms in the Kansas City area that that's all they do. You guys are doing the same thing throughout Northwest Kansas."

BRENDA MAZANEC | OWNER, THE MOVEMENT CONNECTION

served as a licensed clinical professional at Heartland Rural Counseling Services.

In months with a fifth Wednesday, caregiver specialist Linda Sowers gives a presentation on topics of interest to caregivers, such as recommended home improvements, preparing financially, quality nutrition and self-care.

Sowers, the group's vice president, spent 20 years as caretaker for her husband, Byron, after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Byron

Sowers, a farmer and rancher, served three terms on the Thomas County Commission while battling the disease.

He died in May 2021.

"I had to learn on my own. I

remarkably since she had a surgical procedure called Deep Brain Stimulation. Electrodes were implanted in certain areas of her brain. They produce electrical impulses that stimulate the brain and control her symptoms. Ptacek can turn the signal up or down as needed with a remote control device.

Before undergoing the surgery in February 2019, Ptacek said her posture was stooped, and she had "mask face," a serious, even angry look no matter how she felt. Her voice had gotten soft, and she actually avoided speaking for fear her words would come out wrong. She also had balance issues. Her tremors were worse, and her handwriting was so bad she couldn't read it. She was undergoing physical therapy, speech

See **MOVE**, page 8



BACKGROUND: Linda Sowers, right, celebrates hitting the target with a flying disc as Herb Mattson lines up his throw. BELOW: Brenda Mazanec, owner of The Movement Connection, was recently trained to coach Rock Steady Boxing.

MOVE, from page 7

therapy, swallow therapy and voice therapy, and she took 32 pills a day plus six more at night.

“The muscles were so weak in my hands that my husband cut my meat,” she said. “Ken would cut it up for me in real small pieces so I could chew it good until I could swallow.”

The DBS device that Dr. David VanSickle, a Denver neurosurgeon, installed in her head changed all of that. There’s now very little about her appearance or movement that would indicate anything is wrong. She was able to get off most medications and no longer suffers through their side effects.

“It’s been four years, and it has been a miracle for me,” she said. Unfortunately, Ptacek said DBS is not effective for everyone, and there is a narrow window of opportunity for the procedure to be performed.

Staying active helps

She’s grateful she met VanSickle when she did. Her mother had Parkinson’s, and she’d been taking her to doctor’s appointments when she started recognizing some of the same symptoms in herself. However, the neurologist she had been consulting with did not diagnose the disease. That didn’t happen until she went to see VanSickle speak in Colby about improving the quality of life with Parkinson’s. He officially diagnosed her illness in 2015, connected her with a movement specialist and

set the process in motion for her to qualify for Medicare coverage of the DBS procedure four years later.

Ptacek stays active, which helps keep her disease at bay. She’s also learned what her limits are and doesn’t push herself too hard. In addition to her exercise time with Parkinson’s Families, she takes an aquacise class three mornings a week. She also goes for walks and spends volunteer time helping to maintain gardens and planters on the campus of Colby Community College. Currently, she’s working on a fundraising effort to improve the CCC pool where her aquacise class is held.

In addition, she throws herself into her duties with Parkinson’s Families. All of that would be difficult, if not impossible, for her to do by now if not for DBS, she said.

Sharing their knowledge

Last September, Ptacek planned the Parkinson Families’ first fall conference, and 70 people attended. This year, she hopes 100 people will come.

Colleen Bixenman, of Colby, said she has a neurological disorder called Essential Tremors. She said she learned a great deal about her condition, which causes some similar symptoms but is overall less

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

The Parkinson’s “Moving to Live” Fall Conference

9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Sept. 16
City Limits Convention Center, Colby

Admission is free of charge, and lunch will be provided. Speakers include Scott Rider with Parkinson’s Across America; Dr. Amanda Amara on the importance of exercise, diet and socialization; Dr. Michael Korsmo on medications and side effects; and a representative from Boston Scientific on Deep Brain Stimulation.

Register at movingtolive.org or the Parkinson’s Families of NW KS Facebook page.

serious than Parkinson’s, from the speakers at last year’s conference. She also enjoys attending the weekly meetings.

“It makes me feel better, and it gives me a community where they don’t wonder,” she said. “Some days I’m great and don’t even think about it and don’t have any symptoms at all, and other times I’ll be talking to somebody, and I’ll just have to hold myself to keep myself from shaking.”

In March and April, Ptacek was seeking participants and donors for the third annual Parkinson’s Families fundraiser – the Walk-Run-Bikeathon. She and Berg considered the fundraiser successful the first year, but then they raised more than twice as much the second year.

Ptacek was also busy making contact with doctors and physical therapists and dropping off educational materials at libraries in area communities, trying to let more people know about the group.

“The busier I am, the better it is for my mind,” she said. ■



HOPE, from page 5

bullied at school, you got home and you had relief from it — potentially,” she said. “Nowadays, if you get bullied at school, it follows you home because it’s on social media. Somebody’s taken a video. Somebody’s uploading it. These kids just really don’t get relief in the same way that past generations were able to.”

Acute patients often arrive in a crisis state. Many come directly from a hospital emergency department or juvenile detention facility. The staff work to immediately stabilize those patients.

“We really are always working to get to that point of physical and emotional safety,” she said. “Our goal is not to fix people, it is to provide them with a safe space to come back down — essentially to give you that relief or provide you with tools to manage or to give you that space. Sometimes their medications are ineffective, and our psychiatrist is able to evaluate and adjust medications.”

Healing is work

A typical day for acute patients starts with an 8 a.m. breakfast and then group and individual therapy sessions on emotional regulation drills. Clients will learn about how their bodies work and ways to improve their brain’s capacity for executive functioning skills, such as self-control. They will meet with a psychiatrist and therapist and call their parents in the afternoon, if they desire. Bedtime comes at 8 p.m.

“We try to keep them

busy,” she said. “They need that rest because they’re doing a lot of emotional work, and that’s just as exhausting as doing physical work.”

“Our staff is highly trained to manage behaviors,” she said. “We really try to get them out of the state of being in extreme emotion so they can use reasoning skills. Our goal is to teach them regulation skills — emotional and physical — so they can transition to those providers in or near their home communities. That’s our main goal — to get them back to their home communities.”

Taking the slow journey

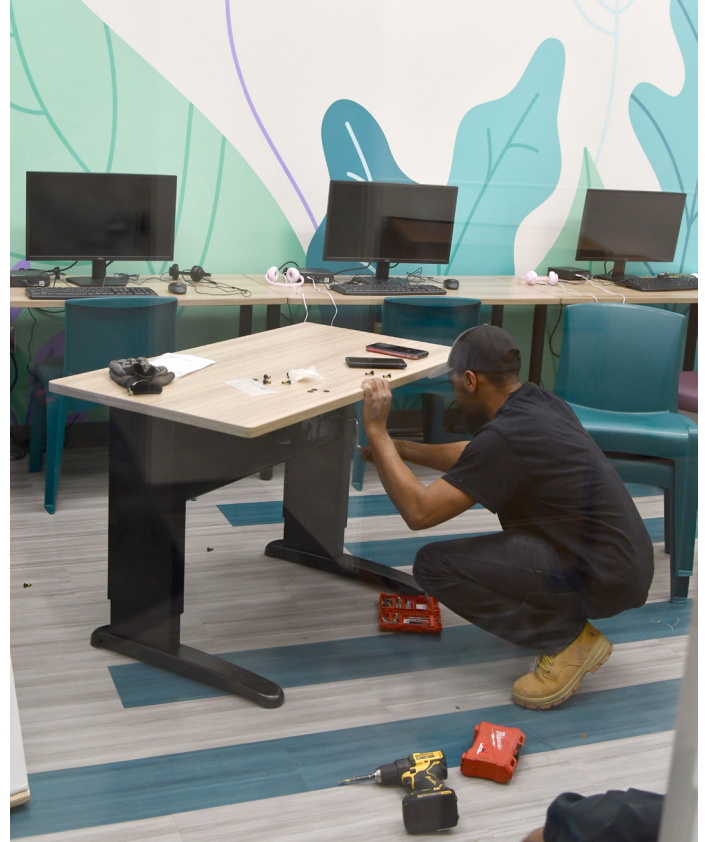
Youth in residential care wear their own clothing and attend school during a normal day. High school classes are completed online, and USD 489 teachers come to the facility to instruct grade school children. For some patients, just being in a classroom is a struggle.

“Sometimes it’s a win for us just to get them to be in the classroom for an hour or two,” she said.

There are group therapy sessions three times a week. Individual and family therapy sessions are also part of the weekly routine.

After the work is done, cafeteria tables can be pushed together to function as a ping pong table or cleared out of the way as an overhead projector beams virtual racetracks and other activities onto the floor. There is also an outdoor recreation area.

Berens said staff learn to measure success in small increments. Mental illness is a chronic condition for some patients, who are likely to



A worker constructs a table in a classroom at Camber Children’s Mental Health facility.

keep returning to the facility until they reach adulthood.

“We have those kiddos who start coming to us at 6, and when they turn 18, they go to adult services,” she said. “The success is if you don’t see them as often as you did at one point. We all know you’re not going to go to the top on the escalator. You have to take those steps. You have to take the slow journey.”

“Some of these kids have the most resilience and the kindest hearts that you will ever meet. That’s what makes you come back every day.”

Berens said her wish for Camber Hays clients is that they will be able to define themselves — not by other people’s standards, but by their own.

“I want them to really find ways to process emotions and traumas in a sustainable way,” she said. “We can’t control the things that are going to happen to us. All we can learn to control is how

HAVE THE CONVERSATION

Suicide should be a topic of conversation at the family dinner table, said Camber Hays Executive Director Sarah Berens.

“Ask ‘Have you ever felt this way?’ Help them understand that it’s OK to sometimes ask questions like, ‘Do I belong here? Should I be here?’ It’s how you react to those thoughts that makes the difference.

“The more that you build a relationship with your child past that surface level, so you are utilizing conversation to get them to critically think about things, is always going to be helpful. If you’ve created an environment where it’s OK to explore those feelings, they’re going to be more likely to come to you if they are experiencing those feelings as opposed to if you make it feel taboo. Then it becomes something that you can’t ever get a pulse on.”

we react to those things. It’s really about finding a road to resiliency. I hope they do find it. They deserve it. Everyone deserves it.” ■



Words of Wisdom...

[HAYS] Best-selling author and community strategist, Doug Griffiths from Alberta Province in Canada was the keynote speaker at the Dane G. Hansen Foundation Community Forum in March. Griffiths was happy to be in Kansas in person, having his travel plans thwarted twice before, once by a winter storm, and then by COVID-19 restrictions.

However, perseverance paid off and participants at the forum in Hays overwhelmingly responded positively to Griffiths' messages about growing rural communities. In turn, Griffiths responded with equal enthusiasm to the crowd.

"There's something special here," he said before presenting to close out the event. "Last year I did 522 speaking events in 522 communities in 365 days, and I'm not doing that again. But out of all the presentations I've done for all the years I've been doing this; I've never quite felt the energy

in the room that you guys have. You're very fortunate to have something like the Dane Hansen Foundation, but the Dane Hansen Foundation is very fortunate to have a room full of people who can help actualize what the visions for your communities are."

Griffiths knows rural

"I got an honors degree in philosophy, thought I wanted to go to law school, then decided I did not want to be a lawyer," Griffiths told the gathering of about 160. "So, I came home to ranch. We had 200 head of pure-bred Black Angus, 200 commercial cows and some horses, and we did some dryland farming, too. It was good, then I realized I needed to get a job to subsidize my ranching habit."

He got a degree in education and taught junior high.

"Life was great, I actually lived in one community, ranched in another, and taught in another, all half an hour from each other. I thought life was perfect. I got to teach kids all day – which is what I loved to do, ride my horses in the evening and work cattle on

the weekend. Who wouldn't want that? Then I realized all three of these communities were dying."

His desire to help these rural communities thrive led him into politics. His first job was to write a rural community development strategy. He visited more than 200 small communities all over Alberta doing research. Once his report was done, at the request of the premier (similar to our governor), he traveled all over the province to share 72 recommendations covering health, education, community infrastructure, economic development, tourism, arts and culture, water, wastewater, and housing. The response was positive, one person even referred to it as "The rural bible."

But the desired transformation was not happening.

"I watched people do the exact opposite of what they said they would do," Griffiths said. "I talked to all these communities that had these hopes and plans. Every community has all those plans, but I watched people trade



Doug Griffiths, author of *13 Ways to Kill Your Community*, entertained and enlightened the audience at the Dane G. Hansen Community Forum in March.

Three Years Coming

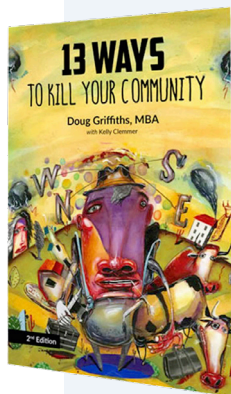
STORY BY BETSY WEARING,
PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

away what they want most for what they want now — what's easy and convenient or what feeds their ego."

That experience led Griffiths to write the book, *13 Ways to Kill Your Community*. The title is a tongue-in-cheek reference to how community behaviors can reverse the outcomes communities say they really want.

Throughout Northwest Kansas, communities have been forming book clubs to read Griffiths' book together and do a deep dive into how they can avoid the traps communities lay for themselves as they face their future.

Here are some of the snippets of wisdom from Griffiths' two presentations: *13 Ways to Kill Your Community* and *13 Pathways to Success*, both can be viewed in full at danehansenfoundation.org. Click on the NWKansas Serves logo on the home page. ■



About our youth

"How do we keep young people in our community? The nature of youth is to go explore, to meet new people, to try new things, to learn new ideas, to make new connections, to experiment with stuff. You hope it's not bad stuff, but that's the nature of youth. Your key to success is not to keep them, it's to let them go and explore, then give them a reason to come home after they are done exploring."

"But not only do we not spend time giving youth a reason to come home, we spend half our time chasing them out of town by being negative. You are the architect of your own destiny. Stop being so negative. Our communities are wonderful, and we need them (youth) to come back with new ideas."

The cooperation plague

"The plague of the 21st century is the lack of cooperation. The reason why we don't cooperate is because of our egos. Why do we do those things? Because of lines in the sand. Municipal boundaries that were drawn here 120 to 130 years ago. Our boundaries were drawn because that's how far we could walk or ride on a horse to go see people. The world has changed significantly, and yet I see people fight about this constantly. If you want to kill your community, don't cooperate."

"What a community really is, is a group of people that have a common goal, a common agenda, and they support each other in achieving the same goals. That's a community."

That's what you want your small-town community neighborhood to feel. A place where people belong."

Who are we?

"About 54% of communities have the same slogan — 'The best place to live, work and raise a family.' How is that valuable? Besides, it's a lie. There is no perfect community. Why would you want to be like everybody else? What makes you unique is what makes you amazing."

"We are interested in aesthetically pleasing things. We are attracted to interesting things. So, I tell people, the look of your community is not superficial. It actually is an outward indication of whether or not you appreciate your own community. Does it look like people take care of it? Does it look like people care about it? Does it look like people invest their time and energy to make it a nice, beautiful place? Does it? If it looks like it is run down and deteriorated and dying, people will believe that's the story without ever finding out more, because it will show that projection."

"I am frustrated and shocked by how many communities don't know themselves. The end goal is to attract new people, new businesses. What really does make us stand out and make us strong? When you know who you are, you know what you are selling to someone."

Fighting the status quo and anger

"A lot of communities grow complacent. ... Communities want a sustainability strategy. I don't have an issue with sustainability. But every person I have ever interviewed that

See **WISDOM**, page 13

Dana Jo Stanton, child care program director for the Innovation Center, presents at the Western Kansas Rural Economic Development Alliance conference in Goodland in March.

An Advocate for Child Care

Stanton provides professional support for community efforts to tackle child care challenges

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Dana Jo Stanton arrives at meetings about child care with her yellow notepad in hand. When she leaves, she's filled several pages with notes. Anything marked with a star is something she's going to follow up on. There are usually a lot of stars.

"Follow-up could be information on grant funding, a sample start-up budget or even a link to a valuable online child care resource," she said. "Whether it is meeting with a community group, a school board or a potential child care provider, it is my job to make sure they have the best information and support for their particular needs."

In July, Stanton marks her first anniversary as Child Care Program Director at the Innovation Center, a private operating foundation that serves 26 counties in Northwest Kansas. Her position was created to provide support for communities trying to address child care needs and for professionals working in the field.

"The Innovation board asked child care providers how we could support them as they are caring for our most precious resource — the children of Northwest Kansas," said Scott Sproul, executive director of the Innovation Center. "Dana



Jo Stanton was hired as a result.

"Her work building community coalitions is especially helpful so the community as a whole can help address issues regarding child care."

funding is available on the state and federal levels, Stanton is working to position area communities to capture those dollars for local projects.

"There is no community in Northwest

"There is no community in Northwest Kansas that has an excess of child care. There is a need everywhere. That's probably true of the state and the country."

DANA JO STANTON | CHILD CARE PROGRAM DIRECTOR, THE INNOVATION CENTER

Stanton said community volunteers deserve professional support in their efforts. Whether it's writing a mission statement or designing a job advertisement, Stanton is ready to assist.

"I'm able to help those community coalitions push forward," she said. "It's been a pleasure to do that."

During a time when additional grant

Kansas that has an excess of child care," she said. "There is a need everywhere. That's probably true of the state and the country."

The lack of child care is impacting young families in many ways.

"The saddest story I've heard is a young couple who said, 'We have delayed having a family because we know there are no

Crisis

childcare openings



child care options in our community,” she said. “I’ve also been in a meeting where a teacher who was visibly pregnant stood up and said, ‘My baby is due in four months. There are no child care options for infants in this community. If I can’t find child care, I will have to quit my job.’ ”

Stanton has already been diving in to assist in several communities.

“Probably the project I’m identifying very closely with currently is Hill City,” she said. “They have established a child care coalition, and they’ve started the paperwork to become a nonprofit organization.”

She said similar efforts are moving forward in St. Francis, Atwood, Stockton, Concordia and, hopefully, Ellis. Other communities were well on their way toward providing additional child care slots before Stanton came on board.

See **ADVOCATE**, page 14

WISDOM, from page 11

wants a sustainability strategy doesn’t mean sustainable, they mean status quo. They want things to stay just the way they are. Except that is not the way it goes. ... So, I tell people, don’t use sustainable. Use words like vibrant, dynamic, enterprising, anything that says you are going to do something when describing your community.”

“There is no such thing as status quo because the world is ever-changing.”

“Anger is the most evil of all human traits. I’ve never seen a person make a good decision when they are angry. And anger begets more anger. And we don’t make smart decisions when we are angry. When those people look at you and say it won’t work, it can’t be done, it can’t happen. Don’t get mad, look at them and smile, and say, ‘Those who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those of us that are doing it.’ And then carry on.”

Attracting new neighbors downtown

“Why not start attracting people who are looking for a different type of life? Maybe semi-retirees, or young professionals before they meet someone? Before they get married? Before they have kids? ... There’s plenty of opportunities. The pandemic proved again that we can work not just from home, but from anywhere. We need diversity in our housing if we are going to address that. ... condos, rentals, etc. We need mixed use space in our cores, so bring housing back downtown. It creates a feeling of life, a feeling of energy.”

“If you are going to help your community find a pathway to success, reinvesting in Main Street and having a rebirth is incredibly important.”

Economic development is a base hit

“Find out what business is missing in your community. You don’t need a home run with every at bat. What you need is a lot of first base hits and that will win you the game. ... The research I’ve done so far, shows between 11 and 23% of every local economy is home-based businesses. They are absolutely remarkable opportunities.”

“Instead of trying to go for the home run and attract a business that everyone is competing for, local entrepreneurship, local small businesses are the perfect pathway to help grow your community.”

“We all think lowering taxes is the best way to do economic development ... There are five factors that determine where investment goes in a community or which communities it goes to. The fifth one, the bottom of the list is taxes. Number four is infrastructure. Number three is housing and workforce. My parents moved to where the jobs were. Now the jobs are moving to where people want to live. Number two is quality of life ... amenities and services and also the businesses in the community. The number one is collaboration and cooperation.”

“It turns out that lower taxes is not the cause of business investment, it’s the result of business investment. If you grow your economy by dealing with those first four factors, you can lower taxes. But if you try to lower taxes to begin with without a quality of life, you are not going to have a workforce, you are not going to have housing. You need economic growth, and then you can lower taxes — not the other way around.”

“You don’t need to reinvent the wheel; you just need to try something you haven’t done before.”

“Money is the last step in the solution. You need to decide that you are going to do something different, and you need to start small. I don’t care what it is, pick one thing to do right, to do well, and the rest will start to come.”

“The only ones responsible for your community and its future and its success is you — all of you.” ■

Taking a tour

Ellis School District Superintendent Janice Wilson was participating in a tour in February that Stanton arranged. Leaders from Ellis and Concordia trying to meet their own community's child care needs toured facilities in Hays and Plainville to see some possibilities.

"I have never advertised for child care, and I can tell you we were full before we opened the door," Plainville Superintendent Lisa Ghering said as she led the tour of a new child care facility and a preschool on school grounds. "My director just told me today she's getting two calls a day. It has just taken off. Our school district in K-12 grew 51 kiddos this school year across the board. We attribute a lot of that to what we're doing with our early childhood expansion."

Wilson said Stanton had visited with the Ellis school board, and she was hopeful Ellis would also be taking steps toward a child care project. She described Stanton as "very helpful and supportive."

"I know we're going to get it done with her help," Wilson said. "I'm super stoked because we need it."

Each project is structured differently – some are nonprofit and others are for-profit. Some are affiliated with a school district, hospital or another major employer that can provide benefits to the child care staff such as health insurance and vacation time; others stand alone. All have a goal of providing quality care, recognizing that the first three years of a child's life is when the most critical brain development occurs.

"One community might say, 'We want to buy a modular home and the nursing home is willing to give us a place on their property.' Or another one might say, 'We're going to renovate space inside our school building,'" Stanton said. "It's very exciting, and it's always a little different every time."

"There are several efforts under way, and it's a process. When I came, some of them had already done most of the work. Hoxie was almost a done deal. Plainville – that was a done deal, and I just got to go in and see it after it happened."



People working on child care projects in Ellis and Concordia toured a facility in Hays with Dana Jo Stanton, right.

She said she looks forward to seeing communities she's been working with complete their projects. In February, she said she'd begun working with tiny Luray in Russell County.

"They have some property they think could be used," she said. "They've had local people tell them there's a need. So,

There she compiled annual reports, produced newsletters, planned events and handled social media posts.

"I firmly believe that everything I learned at my previous jobs provided me with the perfect skills to come in and attack this new job," she said. "I did lots of presentations and talking to

"I know we are going to get it done with her help. I'm super stoked because we need it."

JANICE WILSON | SUPERINTENDENT, ELLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

they're doing those initial research steps to see if they could support a child care facility in Luray."

Well qualified

Stanton came to the position with decades of relevant experience and a passion for early childhood education. For the previous 17 years, she served as outreach and grants coordinator for USD 489 Early Childhood Connections, which covers Ellis, Rooks, Rush and Russell counties.

During her tenure there, she wrote grants that brought in nearly \$8 million for early childhood programs and projects. She also has worked in public relations for Dodge City Public Schools.

community groups, so all of those things came together for this position."

Stanton holds a degree in business from Northwestern Oklahoma State University.

"Past board members have told me I have a way of presenting budget information that is easy for people without an accounting degree to understand," she said.

Stanton said a child care plan needs to be sustainable. She said she thinks adequate pay and access to health insurance are key to sustainability and attracting and retaining quality staff.

"I think sometimes people say, 'Child care can't be fixed. It's just not going to work,'" she said. "But there's lots of



Dana Jo Stanton, second from left, talks to participants in a child care facilities tour in Plainville in February.

support out there.”

It’s her goal to connect people with resources and methods of operation that could reduce costs and achieve better pay for staff without pricing the service too high for families.

“I have found that there’s no set formula. It’s different for every community,” she said. “There’s a sweet spot where we find a budget that will work.”

‘One project at a time’

Stanton said in small communities, a group day care home (which is a specific Kansas Department of Health and Environment licensing designation) is sometimes easier to establish than a child care center because staffing requirements and other regulations are less stringent.

“Tonight, I’m talking to a community that is short about 100 child care slots, and I’m talking about a group home serving 12,” she said in February. “This is a model that’s worked in other communities, and for 12 families it’s going to be a big deal. If it’s successful and we see we can sustain it, then we’ll do another one and another one. That’s the way we’ll make progress and chip away at this very big problem. One project at a time.”

She said getting a child care facility licensed can be a challenging process, but she reminds people that the KDHE

requirements are there to keep kids safe.

She said she’s not just focused on quantity of care, but quality. She said a good child care experience helps a child be ready for kindergarten.

“If a kiddo shows up at kindergarten and they can’t sit quietly for five minutes while the teacher talks, that’s a big issue. If the child isn’t potty trained, that’s a big issue. If a child hasn’t ever interacted with other kids their own age and they’re either really shy or they’re inappropriate, that’s an issue that affects every child in that kindergarten classroom,” she said.

“If a child shows up and they have some basic self-care skills; they know a little bit about the beginnings of their ABCs, numbers, things like that; they know how to play with others, and they understand how to kind of follow directions, that’s a huge step forward for that kindergarten classroom.”

To help ensure quality care, the Innovation Center is partnering with Child Care Aware and Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities to sponsor a Northwest Kansas child care provider professional development conference in July. Participants will receive the 16 hours of required annual training at no cost. She said 140 providers have signed up to attend and another 30 are on a waiting list.

NEED HELP WITH A CHILD CARE PROJECT?

Dana Jo Stanton can be reached at danajstanton@nwkeici.org or by calling (785) 874-5150.

“We’re going to provide them a chance to get together and network,” she said. “I have found that child care providers – especially in the homes – are very isolated. I think it’s going to be so valuable for them to sit in a room with other providers that are going through the same struggles.”

In the meantime, Stanton keeps informed of announcements from the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund and other sources about grant opportunities. In February, a large amount for child care startup funds was made available.

“They had a webinar after the announcement,” she said. “I watched it and took detailed notes. Then I sent the information to all of our economic development contacts. I like to be part of those big picture solutions. It’s very fulfilling. Most days I’m just tickled pink to be part of the solution.” ■

Prudence Rupp, 5, who attends Early Childhood Connections in Hays joined Dana Jo Stanton during a facility tour.



Keep on Rocking

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Coalition aims to promote, preserve and educate about Post Rock limestone

Early settlers arriving on the windswept, treeless prairie of central and western Kansas could see right away that wood was in short supply. Soon, they discovered a more enduring building material in the rock outcroppings in their pastures.

In an 18-county region from the Nebraska border in Republic and Washington counties angling diagonally southwest nearly to Dodge City, is the uniquely useful Greenhorn Limestone Formation. Kansas pioneers who settled in the area found an eight- to 10-inch strata on top of that formation known as Post Rock limestone.

Post Rock limestone was used to construct beautiful cathedrals, impressive courthouses, and downtown buildings throughout the area. Stories of the sacrifice and work involved in creating those structures abound. But what has come to be particularly iconic – because it is unique to the area – are the miles and miles of limestone fenceposts strung with barbed wire.

Fantastic talent

In 2019, the Kansas Post Rock Limestone Coalition was formed to preserve, promote, and educate people about the region's many limestone structures – from the simple to the sublime.

"You really have to go out and look at some of these churches close up to realize they're just unbelievable," said Bradley Penka, of LaCrosse, who serves as chairman of the coalition.

"These people came out with no equipment other than horses and block and tackle and ropes, and they would go out and hand quarry these stones and then carve them by hand.

"They used limestone for everything – livestock watering troughs, telephone poles, tombstones, sidewalks. If they could make it work out of a piece of stone, it was free; they had the time, and incredibly, they had the talent."



BRADLEY PENKA

Evidence of homesteaders' stone masonry, building and carving skills can be found in graceful structures still standing more than a century later throughout Ellis, Russell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Cloud, Jewell, Ottawa, Ellsworth, and Republic counties. Lincoln County is so full of limestone buildings it has officially been designated the Post Rock Capital of Kansas. Settlers were able to find the rock near the earth's surface, and it was a relatively soft rock, which made it easier to quarry. It hardened once exposed to the elements.

In addition, the Post Rock layer was a consistent thickness, so the only cuts needed to make a building block or fence post were to determine length and width.

Penka said he's been researching who was the first person to make fenceposts out of limestone, but he may never have a conclusive answer.

"I can't tell you how many people have come in and said, 'My



Lincoln County Courthouse (Photo courtesy of Kelly Gourley)



The Hesperian Historical Museum, also known as the old library, in Cawker City (Courtesy photo)

JOIN TODAY!

The Kansas Post Rock Limestone Coalition welcomes new members. Individual memberships are \$25. To get more information or sign up for a newsletter, visit kansaspostrocklimestone.org.

SKYSCRAPERS & STEEPLES TOUR: JUNE 10

The tour will feature an authentic German meal, quarrying demonstration and bus tour of limestone buildings in Ness City, LaCrosse, Liebenthal, Pfeifer and Victoria. Tickets are \$75 and can be purchased at kansaspostrocklimestone.org.

grandpa was the first one who ever set a limestone fence,” he said. “The best guess based on the history is in Russell County on the southwest corner of Wilson Lake. The gentleman who has gotten credit – his land is now under the lake.

“This limestone formation formed as sediment when Kansas was a sea floor back in the Cretaceous Era. That’s the reason it has fossils in it. I thought it was kind of unique that his limestone posts started out under the water, and they ended up under the water too.”

Board member Neil Unrein, of Gorham, refers to the years 1880 to 1920 as the “Kansas Stone Age.” After that, other materials became more widely available in the region for construction and fence building.

“It was an incredible amount of work to make a limestone fencepost. Each one weighs 300 to 600 pounds, so you could just set a few posts a day,” Penka said. “Now you could just go grab a load of steel posts, take your tractor and stab them in the ground in about a minute.”

Getting started

Penka credited Rosslyn Schultz and Jeannie Stramel, both of Lucas, with getting the coalition started. Schultz said the inspiration came from the late Duane Vonada, who operated the Vonada Stone Co. with family members on his farm near Sylvan Grove.

“Every summer you’d see Duane dragging this trailer of Post Rock limestone to a festival, and he’d sit there in 105-degree weather and show how you’d do it at the quarry,” Schultz said. “He said, ‘We need to form a group, and we need to publicize what we have here. It’s unique. It’s one of a kind.’ ”

Schultz said the group received \$25,000 in startup money from a Russell County Area Community Foundation Big Idea grant, and in June 2019, incorporated and formalized the coalition. They also utilized a process called Strategic Doing, which is designed to help people form collaborations and takes steps to bring projects to completion.

“I’m so proud of this board,” said Schultz, an ex-officio board member. “Everybody works together, and we’re really making the budget stretch as far as we can.”

The group has already taken on some impressive projects,

and they dream of doing more. Shortly after the coalition was formed, the board was contacted by a representative of the state historical society, who asked them to work with preservationists to document Post Rock architecture. That documentation simplifies the application process for anyone seeking designation on the National Register of Historic Places for a Post Rock limestone structure. Designated structures are eligible to apply for state and national preservation funding.

Board member Kris Heinze, of Lincoln, developed a full-color field guide and map showing what each of the 18 counties involved offers for “architecture and history buffs, rockhounds, fossil finders, educators, and tourists and travelers.” Other board members researched and provided photos for the map, which is available at travel kiosks throughout the region.

The board is also working on a database of limestone structures in the area, as well as gathering information about stonemasons and other resources for people hoping to restore a stone structure. They’ve put together educational kits that

See **POST ROCK**, page 19



Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul's Church in Ellsworth County (Photo courtesy of Lincoln Byerley)

Set in STONE

BLUESTEM QUARRY AND STONEWORKS

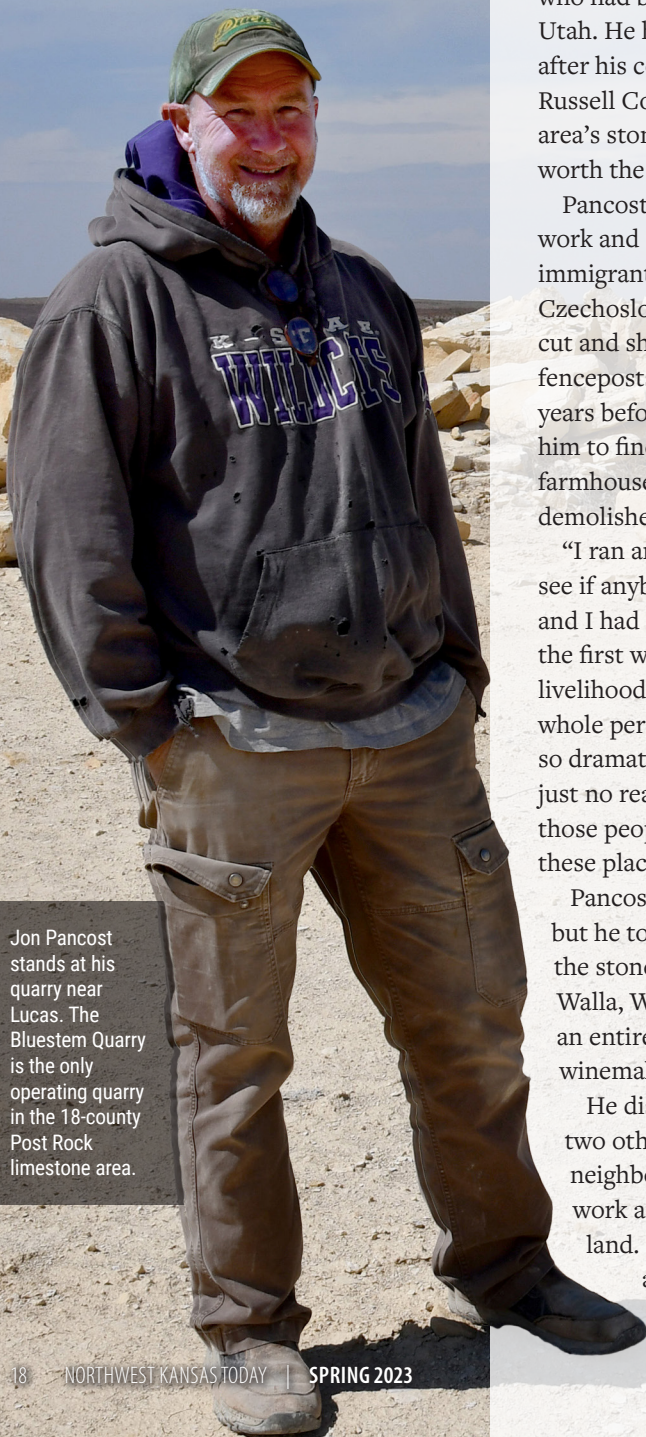
ADDRESS: 115 W. 2nd, Lucas

PHONE: (866) 567-3110

EMAIL: jon.stonecottagefarm@gmail.com

WEBSITE: bluestemstoneworks.com

FACEBOOK: Bluestem Quarry and Stoneworks



Jon Pancost stands at his quarry near Lucas. The Bluestem Quarry is the only operating quarry in the 18-county Post Rock limestone area.

Post Rock limestone brings stonemason to Kansas

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN MATHEWS

[LUCAS] When Jon Pancost arrived in October 2004, the central and western Kansas prairie was dotted with century-old Post Rock limestone houses, barns and fences. Many of those structures were needing someone's attention. He decided to stay and give it to them.

"I moved out here in 2004. It was unintentional, but it happened," said the quarry worker and stonemason who had been working in Springdale, Utah. He had stopped to see Kansas after his cousin married a native of Russell County, and she told him the area's stone buildings and fences were worth the trip.

Pancost knew exactly how much work and skill was involved when immigrants from Germany, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, and other countries cut and shaped building blocks and fenceposts by hand more than 100 years before. It was upsetting for him to find out about limestone farmhouses that were being demolished.

"I ran an ad in the *Plains Trader* to see if anybody would give me one, and I had about 15 people call me in the first week," he said. "The whole livelihood, the whole economy, the whole perception of value has changed so dramatically over the years. There's just no real appreciation for what those people went through to build these places."

Pancost couldn't take all 15 houses, but he took apart a barn and sold the stone to a winemaker in Walla Walla, Wash. Then he disassembled an entire stone house for the winemaker, who repurposed it.

He disassembled and reassembled two other houses before his neighbor asked him if he'd like to work an abandoned quarry on his land. He bought some equipment and bid on his first project

— an addition to the Carnegie Library in Lincoln.

"I wanted it bad enough that I underbid the other guy pretty substantially and got the project," he said. "We've just been going from there."

Pancost, who has 32 years of stone-working experience, now owns and operates Bluestem Quarry and Stoneworks. His shop is in downtown Lucas. The quarry, where about one to two acres is being worked, is west of Lucas and north of Wilson Lake. He's pretty sure his is the only working quarry in the 18 counties where Post Rock limestone can be found. That wasn't always the case.

"If you knew what you're looking for and you flew over Kansas, you'd be amazed at how many quarries there were out there," he said. "There were a lot of quarries."

From climbing rocks to quarrying

Pancost grew up in Hiram, Ohio, and left there to attend the University of Montana. He lived in Montana, Utah and New Mexico pursuing opportunities to ski, rock climb, raft and kayak. He learned to quarry and cut architectural stone while living in Utah. The skill enabled him to support himself while enjoying his outdoor passions. Despite the lack of ski slopes, he put down roots in Kansas because here he found opportunity — and love.

He said before he met his wife, Becky, a "beautiful woman with this radiant smile," she had renovated an old stone house near Wilson Lake and was operating it as a bed and breakfast.

"We had so much in common, and we enjoyed each other's company. We still run a bed and breakfast, but hopefully in another six years they'll all be off to college," he said with a smile, referring to the couple's three children.

Bluestem has provided stone for major new construction projects

in Kansas and Missouri, as well as completing smaller renovations and additions to stone churches, courthouses, and other buildings. Pancost and three employees quarry and dress the stones.

'Kind of old school'

He said they occasionally use the traditional "plug and feather" method that pioneers used. A line of metal "plugs," or wedges, are hammered into the stone between metal "feathers," or shims, to split off a piece of rock. The process is labor intensive, so it costs more. Mostly, they use electric saws to cut uniform blocks.

However, Pancost said the side of a block that will be forward facing is hand chiseled.

"I'm kind of old school that way," he said.

Once the stone is quarried, it is loaded on a flatbed semi and hauled nine miles to the shop in Lucas. Slabs of quarry stone weigh anywhere from 1,500 to 3,500 pounds. Finished stone blocks weigh between 30 and 90 pounds, but unlike the early settlers, Pancost has machinery to move the stone.

"We process it while it is what we refer to as 'green' because it hasn't hardened up," he said. "When air gets to it, there's a chemical process that it goes through, and it really hardens up just like concrete. It takes on carbon dioxide from the air."

Pancost said he doesn't try to compete pricewise with big commercial quarries, but he's found his market as a custom cut shop.

"I don't try to keep my prices down to keep competitive with these bigger companies — U.S. Stone in Herington comes to mind," he said. "They produce hundreds of thousands of square feet every year, where we might produce 10,000 or 15,000 square feet."

"We're not getting rich, but we're somehow surviving out here. That's all I ask. I just want to do what I like to do." ■

POST ROCK, from page 17

are available for teachers interested in teaching about Post Rock Country, and they are developing a traveling museum display. Board members attend community festivals throughout the area to recruit new members and publicize their efforts.

In March, tickets for a June 10 bus tour called Skyscrapers & Steeples were selling well at kansaspostracklimestone.org. Unrein said during the one-day tour he would be setting up a faux limestone outcropping on one of his trailers, and he would demonstrate the traditional method of cutting a stone post.

'It's in my blood.'

Unrein said his grandfather on his mother's side of the family was the foreman of the quarry that produced rock for construction of the courthouse in Hays. His great-grandfather on his father's side worked for the Rev. Father Emmeram Kausler, a priest that was a talented church builder.

"There are 10 of these churches within a 15-mile radius of each other, and he was instrumental in just about all of them," Unrein said. He said he enjoys educating the public about the area's limestone architectural heritage.

"I feel obligated to take care of my great-grandfather's and my grandfather's efforts," he said. "It's in my blood."

Some of the people who came to settle in Kansas had knowledge and experience in building houses, churches, and other buildings out of other forms of limestone. Others soon figured it out.

"If you wanted to have a barn, a bridge, a church, a school — somebody in your community had to learn how to quarry the stone," Schultz said. "And somebody built it."

Schultz said a person living in a dugout or sod house probably had good motivation to learn stone masonry.

"If you're in a dugout, and snakes are coming down through the ceiling, I'm thinking I'd be saying, 'Honey, we're

going to get that house started,' " she said.

Churches came first

Penka said usually churches, and even barns, took priority over house construction. Most churches expected their parishioners to donate a certain amount of stone toward construction of the building. Volga German, Danish and Czech congregations in the region all glorified God with limestone.

"Part of your obligation to the church would be to go out to the quarry and chop out some of these stones," he said. "You were asked to bring a wagonload of stone into the church and also to pay. Pfeifer was nicknamed the 'Two-Cent Church' because they asked every farmer to donate two cents a bushel of wheat to help pay for the cost of building it."

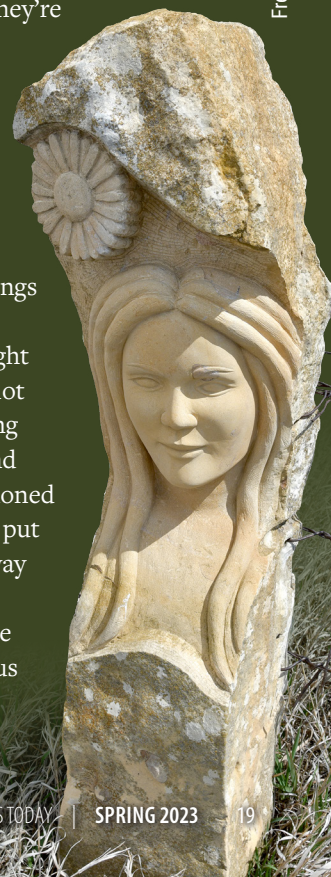
Over the years as limestone fenceposts are damaged or broken, Penka said many have been replaced or supplemented with steel posts.

"We're trying to make sure all of these stone fences aren't lost, even though there are easier ways of doing it," he said. "Thankfully, there are a lot of people out there who are restoring them just because they're attractive, and they're very sturdy."

Penka said it seems to him there is increased interest in preserving limestone buildings and houses.

"I hope I'm right that there are a lot of people wanting to go out and find these old, abandoned farmhouses and put them back the way they used to be or better because they're marvelous structures," he said. ■

Fred Whitman, a sculptor from Ojai, Calif., carved several fenceposts near Wilson Lake.



RIGHT: Angela Bates, right, gives directions to Nicodemus descendants who reenacted their ancestors' journey.

BELOW: Wagon teams and individuals on foot made their way to Nicodemus.

(Photos Courtesy of Leroy Walz)

LEAVING THEIR MARK

Documentary to explore arrival of early settlers in Nicodemus

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[NICODEMUS] Angela Bates will never forget the first time she saw the ruts made by wagons that brought early settlers and their possessions to Nicodemus in the late 1800s. Looking at those tracks left in a pasture northwest



ANGELA BATES

of Ellis, she could envision her ancestors making that journey.

"That's probably been the most impactful thing that I've

experienced here – to be there and know this is it. This is where it actually happened," said the Nicodemus historian.

In September, Bates directed the filming of 14 descendants of those early travelers as they crossed some of the same land their ancestors had 145 years earlier on their way to a new life. Nicodemus is the only remaining and oldest all-Black town west of the Mississippi River that was started at the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction. It has been the subject of several documentaries over the years.

Bates has assisted with and appeared

in many of those documentaries, but this time is different. This time, she is making all the decisions about content, and the film is being made without professional actors – only people whose own lives were molded by the decisions of those being portrayed. Bates wrote the script, acquired grant funds and is directing the filming and editing.

"This is a personal story. It's going to be the story of a family coming out, as opposed to a group of people," she said. "I wanted to personalize it, and I really wanted to make sure we got a chance to showcase the descendants."

Last leg of a long journey

Ellis Trail to Nicodemus: The End of the Journey to the Promised Land will provide an account of the final leg of the long journey made by Emma Williams; her sister, Ella Johnson, and other family members, who in September 1877 were among the first group from Kentucky to arrive at the Nicodemus townsite. They had heard Graham County described as "the finest country we ever saw" with soil that is a "rich, black, sandy loam" and "numerous springs of living water abounding." They likely

also knew that Kansas had joined the union as a free state and was home to abolitionist John Brown. They made the bold choice to join a group that was coming to Kansas by train to seek new opportunity. The film picks up after they disembark in Ellis and make their way for the last 35 miles by wagon and on foot.

Bates, who is Emma's great-granddaughter, said final editing is expected to be completed by July 1. Plans are to premier the film at the Visitor Center in Nicodemus in late summer or early fall.

Bates is hopeful the film will also be aired on PBS stations, in libraries or other places where an interest in area history is expressed. The project's initial funding came from the National Park Foundation and Sony Pictures, via the Trust for Public Lands. The Dane G. Hansen Foundation provided additional funds for final editing and filming.

Bates, founder and executive director of the Nicodemus Historical Society, has long been fascinated by her community's past. She spent seven years working



"I think the thing that makes it so interesting to all of

WALK IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS

Signs sharing historical information about points of interest were recently installed along the 35-mile Ellis Trail to Nicodemus and along a 30-mile Nicodemus Township History Trail. Maps of the trails are available at the Nicodemus Visitor Center, and all sites can be reached by biking, walking, or driving.

to get five original Nicodemus buildings designated as a National Historic Site. Each year, more than 5,000 people from across the country and around the world visit.

'A different world'

Now she hopes that through the film she can share the connection she feels with the people who built Nicodemus. Working on the project, Bates said she learned that "when you're on the other side of the camera, it's a different world."

She made arrangements for descendants no longer living in Nicodemus to come from Atlanta, Ga.; Cincinnati, Ohio; Houston, Texas, and Sacramento, Calif. She inspected everyone's period attire and watched as filmmaker Nick Abt, of Abt Films, experimented with flying his camera-equipped drone around the horses. She devised a new plan when it looked like they'd only have three wagons instead of four. She worried about someone getting injured when one reenactor stepped in a badger hole and one of the horses got its head caught under a wagon bar. Then she watched as things started going right.

"After that, everything ran smoothly," she said.

Originally, she said the plan was to shoot the reenactors walking as much of the trail as possible "but that got axed real quick." As it turned out, they walked about a mile. The Solomon River crossing presented a problem. There was no way to know how deep the water would be on the day of filming, and the embankment was steep.

Portraying Emma and Ella in the film are their descendants, Heather Alexander, of Wichita, and LueCreasea Horne, who lives and works as a park ranger at Nicodemus. Horne said walking in the hot sun wearing a long skirt gave her a new appreciation for what her ancestors went through to help found Nicodemus and "the courage they had to have."

"Hearing and reading and listening to the stories about Nicodemus and how they traveled out here, I had that in my brain, but experiencing it – we didn't walk anywhere close to 35 miles, but it felt like we did," she said. "It was more emotional to me being out there experiencing it."

Horne said her 9-year-old daughter, Lauren, who was the only child involved in the reenactment, was "a real trouper."

Alexander shopped online for an accessory to wear to make herself appear pregnant.

"She was so proud of that. She'd stand around and show her baby bump," said fellow cast member Leroy Walz, who portrays William P. Tomlinson, editor of the *Ellis Standard* newspaper.

Karla Bates Adams, of Hill City, portrays a character who is interviewed by Tomlinson in the film. Since Bates Adams covers Nicodemus news for *The Hill City Times*, it was a change of pace for her.

"It was exciting, and it just really brought things home – what they experienced while coming out here," she said.

See **MARK**, page 22



Smithsonian exhibit on democracy comes to Nicodemus, Belleville

STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

Two Northwest Kansas communities will host a traveling Smithsonian Institution exhibit called *Voices and Votes: Democracy in America*. Both communities, Belleville and Nicodemus, have a history of working within the political system to bring about change.

Other Kansas communities hosting the exhibit this year are Dodge City, Wichita, Ottawa, and Winfield.

"*Voices and Votes* takes a broad look at the history of American democracy from our founding when we became an independent country all the way up to today," said Abigail Kaup, the statewide coordinator for the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street program. "We did site visits, and we were really impressed with both Belleville and Nicodemus, and we just think that they're going to do awesome work. We're very excited for those two stops."

In Nicodemus, a community established by formerly enslaved African Americans, and Belleville, home of a politically savvy newspaper editor, exhibits are being developed to highlight local achievements in representative government. These stories will be presented along with the exhibit offered through the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street program.

See **VOICES**, page 22

us is it's everybody's story — it's not just our story."

ANGELA BATES | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NICODEMUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MARK, from page 21

Revisiting the trail

Walz and his cousin, Al Longstaff, who portrays the sheriff, invited the film crew and cast to their family's Ellis County homestead, where wagon ruts of the trail from Ellis to Nicodemus remain visible. A Walz family history mentions that people walking toward Nicodemus stopped at their well to ask for water. Walz said the risks Nicodemus settlers took to start a new life were real.

"Can you imagine planting a garden in September and trying to survive through winter?" he asked.

Initial filming was completed over two and a half days in September, much of it on the Walz homestead. Walz said the wagon master and several of the people who brought wagons and horses camped overnight.

"They had campers and trailers and horses and mules and wagons, and it

was amazing," he said. "I went to bed at midnight, and they were still out there visiting. It was a full moon, a beautiful night. They were just loving it."



Heather Alexander of Wichita portrays Emma Williams, mother of the first baby born in Nicodemus. (Photo courtesy of Leroy Walz)



TOP: The cast and wagon teams pose on a day of filming in September. (Photo courtesy of Nick Abt)

BOTTOM: Cousins Leroy Walz and Al Longstaff stand next to a historical sign on their family's homestead in Ellis County. Wagon tracks left by Nicodemus settlers can still be seen in the pasture near the sign.

Bates said several previous documentaries contrasted the lives early settlers had after arriving in Nicodemus with their previous lives as slaves. She said her film is not about slavery and is not "weighted with those kinds of devastating emotions."

"This is about people coming to the West to experience freedom in a way they couldn't in the South," she said. "It's about them being able to participate in Manifest Destiny. I wanted that kind of feel, and I wanted to make sure it was a Western. That's the time period."

"I think the thing that makes it so interesting to all of us is it's everybody's story — it's not just our story."

A yellow rose

Emma, who was pregnant at the time, made the arduous, 800-mile journey from Kentucky prior to her husband, Charles, who promised to join her in the spring. In the film's final scene, sisters Ella and Emma stand side-by-side gazing across the Solomon River. Emma is holding a yellow rose Charles gave her. It's wilted. She wonders aloud if she made the right decision by leaving without him.

"I think about them traveling by train. The eastern part of Kansas still has a lot of trees, but keep coming west, and then you get way out here, and you're seeing forever," Bates said. "If you've seen the old pictures of Ellis, it's dry and dirty, and you can see forever because there is

nothing at all.

“That’s what I wanted to capture with the script. When they’re talking, they’re contrasting the environment and what they are experiencing with what they experienced in Kentucky because it’s drastically different. It’s one thing to move from one place to another place that’s similar, but you’re talking the forest versus the High Plains, which was also called the Great American Desert.”

Charles and Emma’s child, Henry, would be the first baby born in Nicodemus on Oct. 30, 1877. Before Charles could arrive, Emma and Henry would have spent that first harsh winter of 1877 in a dugout under the Kansas prairie. Bates said Emma kept the dried rose in the family Bible, and once, decades ago, Bates saw it while visiting with Emma’s great-granddaughter.

‘The ancestors are smiling’

Bates said the whole experience of making a movie “just made everybody friends for life. Everybody got there, and it was on and clacking. It was so much fun.

“We were talking about what was going on in the world — all of the despair and all the division in the country along racial lines. Here we were out on the High Plains of Kansas reenacting, and it was such a contrast with what was going on in the nation.”

In late April, Bates planned to film interviews with cast members in Old Cowtown in Wichita. The interviews will be added to the reenactment footage already captured.

Bates said she’s thrilled about the positive response from people who have seen early clips of the film — and especially from the people who participated in making it.

“I know how I feel as a descendant, as a historian, writing it, but it’s something totally different for those who actually participated in making it happen, walking for the scenes and saying the lines and really understanding what they’re saying as they’re portraying their great-great-grandparents,” she said. “I just never thought it would have this kind of impact, and it has. I think it’s great. I would say the ancestors are smiling.” ■

VOICES, from page 21

“It’s just really encouraging to see all of these local stories of civic engagement and community involvement all across our state,” said Kaup, who is also a program officer for Humanities Kansas. “I think that’s really hopeful. I hope Kansans are both surprised and energized by those stories.”

Making ballot box history in Nicodemus

In Nicodemus, the local exhibit will feature Edward P. McCabe and other elected officials with ties to the community. Several events are planned leading up to the opening of the *Voices and Votes* exhibit.

On May 4, about 240 fourth graders from as far away as Dodge City are expected for a youth presentation on McCabe. McCabe lived in Nicodemus for two years before becoming one of the first African Americans to hold a major political office. Thirteen years after the 15th Amendment was ratified giving African American men the right to vote, McCabe was elected first as Graham County Clerk and then as Kansas State Auditor. He served two terms from 1883 to 1887.

LueCreasea Horne, park ranger for the Nicodemus National Historic Site, said reenactors portraying McCabe and others will try to convince the fourth graders who is the best candidate, and the students will participate in an election.

“The illustrious career of Edward P. McCabe is indicative of a political dream realized,” said Angela Bates, executive director of the Nicodemus Historical Society. McCabe, the first African American to be elected to state office in Kansas, found Kansas to be a place that “incubated opportunities for African Americans who dare reach for the stars,” she said.

Belleville’s road to success

Ed Glenn, director/curator of the Republic County Historical Society

VOICES AND VOTES: DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

**Nicodemus National Historic Site,
Township Hall
July 1 to Aug. 13**

Several related activities are planned leading up to and during the exhibit. Find more information on the Nicodemus Historical Society Facebook page or nicodemushistoricalsociety.org.

**Republic County Historical
Society Museum, Belleville
Nov. 25 to Jan. 7, 2024**

Additional activities are being planned. Get more information on the Republic County Historical Society & Museum Facebook page.

and Museum, said in March that details of exhibits and events to be held in conjunction with *Voices and Votes* were still being finalized.

A.Q. Miller, who was editor of the *Belleville Telescope* from 1904 until 1959 will be part of the local history featured. He wrote his last editorial on the day he died, Dec. 29, 1959. Miller was integral to the creation of U.S. highways 81 and 36. They cross each other in Belleville, so Miller dubbed Republic County the Crossroads of America.

“He was quite a mover and doer around the turn of the 20th century,” Glenn said. “He did a lot of lobbying efforts with the state and federal government to get funding and simplify access for building roads. Lobbying kind of has a bad name at times, but this was a good thing.”

Miller recognized the need for a central authority and a bigger pot of money for roads.

“He did a lot of lobbying in Topeka and Washington to get some of the rules amended so that some larger pools of money could be used, because obviously highway construction is expensive,” Glenn said. “He did a lot of really good work in getting things changed at a state level so they could use state resources to build highways across Kansas. It was just incredibly valuable.” ■

Roll Credits

Oakley High seniors provide hometown with action, adventure, romance and comedy

PHOTOS AND STORY BY ERIN MATHEWS

[OAKLEY] In Oakley, a high school class is the stuff that movies are made of. While their story may not appear on the big screen anytime soon, they are the reason their local movie theater remains a vital part of downtown.

“Thank goodness for the kids,” said Bruce Campbell, a theater board member and Oakley businessman. “If it weren’t for the kids, we’d be closed.”

Campbell was among a small group of local residents who came together a couple years after the theater did close in 2001 to purchase, renovate and reopen it under a new operational model. In November 2023, the Palace Community Theatre will mark its 20th anniversary under the management of high school seniors enrolled in the Palace Class.

“My favorite part is getting the experience – getting out there and knowing you’re managing something,” said class member Jake Moses. “You get a little bit more respect from the community. We’re teenagers running a business, so that gets looked on highly. A lot of future employers will look at that and think highly too.”

Jerry and Maxine Robben, of Oakley, who came to the Palace to watch *A Man Called Otto* on Feb. 5, said they could confirm a favorable response from future employers from their own children’s experience.

“Both of our kids had this on their resume when they applied for their first job, and that was the thing that both of their employers wanted to know about,” Jerry Robben said. “They were really surprised and pleased.”

In addition to Moses, the 10 other managers from July 2022 through June 2023 are Josiah Annis, Katie Baalman, Savannah Beougher, Kaylie Bockwinkel, Aniston Dunn, Kirsten Honeyman, Craig Kuhlman, Noah Larshus, Will Schmidt and Katelyn Wilson. Like their predecessors, they are learning what it’s like to be responsible for running a business.

‘They do it all.’

“It’s a great experience,” Campbell said. “They get to see all parts of the business. They get to see what the expenses are going out and the income coming in, and how to control costs and advertising and everything else. They do it all.”

Kimberly Munk, who teaches the Palace Class, as well as a

variety of other business classes, said in general, ticket sales don’t generate much income because movie studios require a royalty payment of more than half of the ticket price. Most of the theater’s profits come from concessions and donations. At the Palace, tickets are \$6 apiece, and so is the small combo of pop, popcorn and a piece of candy.

She said dealing with customers and situations that arise offers students the biggest learning opportunity. Sometimes customers get upset about a movie’s content. Sometimes middle schoolers need to be reminded of appropriate theater



Volunteers Ansley Moellering (Oakley High), Nathan Stramel (NWK Tech) and Kirsten Honeyman (Oakley High) serve Bridgit Bockwinkel drinks, popcorn and candy at the concession counter.

behavior. Sometimes a customer starts feeling sick and throws up in the lobby before making it to the restroom.



KIMBERLY MUNK

Baalman said once someone threatened to beat her up when the pop machine wasn’t working.

“So yeah, the real-world experiences and learning how to deal with them is the biggest thing with this,” Munk said. “In business management and communication classes, we talk about scenarios, but when you actually have to do it, it’s a different learning experience.”

And there’s a ghost

There are also the other-worldly experiences. Students in the class described having a variety of encounters with a theater ghost dubbed Walter. Some said Walter opened doors, thumped down the stairs and even mimicked their teacher asking if they were all right.

“I don’t think Walter is a nice ghost,” Wilson said. “He’s a creepy old guy. There are noises and things that shouldn’t happen. It’s just a general bad vibe.”

Munk said she’s never encountered Walter in her eight years of teaching the course, but every year students swear he exists.

The theater first brought movie magic to Oakley at its grand opening in the summer of 1949. At one point, it was one of two downtown theaters, not to mention two drive-ins, that served Oakley residents. But by the 1970s, the cost of going to the show had increased and most households had televisions, so demand had begun to drop. The other theaters eventually closed and left the Palace as the only show in town. Even so, the small-town theater struggled to bring in enough revenue to keep the lights on. Tickets and popcorn sales weren't cutting it, and the Palace finally went dark in 2001.



THE 2022-23 PALACE CLASS Back: Mrs. Munk, Craig Kuhlman, Josiah Annis, Noah Larshus, Will Schmidt, Jake Moses. Front: Kirsten Honeyman, Katelyn Wilson, Kaylie Bockwinkel, Savannah Beougher, Aniston Dunn, Katherine Baalman

Around that time, the bowling alley had also closed, so entertainment options were slim. Campbell and Oakley residents Frank Munk and Eric Sperber decided to see what they could do about that. They approached the theater's owner about selling. The price he offered was right, but there would be several projects resulting from years of deferred maintenance.

"It needed a new roof, and it was just in pretty bad shape at the time," Campbell said.

A fundraising effort was initiated to cover the cost of purchasing and repairing the theater, which would now be community-owned. Also in the plans was replacing the seats with bigger, more comfortable seats purchased from a closed theater in Texas. Campbell said area contractors put a new roof on the building for the cost of materials.

When renovations started, a fourth board member was added, Butch Burris. Sperber and Burris served on the board until 2022. Current board members are Campbell, Frank Munk, Kevin Uhrich and Zach Broeckelman.

Divide and manage

When people heard how the theater would be managed, donations really started to pour in. A feasibility study had shown that there wouldn't be sufficient funds to pay for a professional manager, so the theater's board of directors came

up with a creative approach.

Campbell pitched the idea of the high school business class running the theater to Jim Keenan, who was the business teacher at the time. Campbell said it just seemed to him like it could work, and Keenan agreed to give it a try.

"It was a pretty novel idea. It'd never been done before that I'm aware of," Campbell said. "It's been 20 years. I was hoping they'd still be doing it 20 years later!"

The Palace Class is the capstone course for the career and technical pathway, Kimberly Munk said. To be selected for the course, seniors must have completed Accounting 1 and preferably be enrolled in Business Communications or Business Management. Students fill out an application and go through an interview process. A maximum of 11 students are accepted.

"This is the real-world experience for our pathway," she said. "Schools usually have a coffee shop, a snack area or a T-shirt shop at the school, or some have students sign up to work one-on-one in a business with mentorship."

The many responsibilities of a professional theater manager are divided up into specific tasks that each student is assigned for a semester. The inventory manager restocks the concession stand and orders supplies as needed; the advertising manager updates social media and email lists with upcoming movies and sends information to the *Oakley Graphic*, and the accounting manager counts the money collected and keeps the books. The movie playlist manager uploads the week's feature film from a hard drive received in the mail and prepares movie trailers to promote upcoming shows.

Because the theater is a nonprofit, one manager seeks out businesses to sponsor each movie. Sponsors chip in \$150 – typically about half the amount due to the movie production company for each film. There is also a manager that handles scan cards that can be preloaded for ticket and concession stand purchases. Additional managers have an assortment of bill-paying, paperwork and website responsibilities.

Beyond the classroom

Most of the behind-the-scenes work can be completed during class. Outside of class, the real responsibilities come on the 10 to 12 times a year that a student is night manager at the theater on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Student managers are paid for those evening shifts, and also for hours worked in the summer. When they graduate, former managers receive a small scholarship.

The night manager picks up the door key at the police station and arrives about an hour before opening. He or she starts the popcorn, checks the thermostat, starts the digital projector, prepares a sheet to track attendance, checks the cash box and awaits the arrival of friends or family members who have agreed to volunteer in the concession stand. If anything goes wrong, there's an adult supervisor to call.

"You kind of just make sure everything's ready," Wilson said. "Once people come in, the manager stays at the front desk and

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A Soft Place to Land

Sleeping mats crocheted from plastic bags at Norton prison offer comfort for homeless

PHOTOS AND STORY
BY ERIN MATHEWS

[NORTON] At the Norton Correctional Facility live men who are out of sight, and possibly out of mind for many of the people outside the prison walls. However, they are making a difference for another often forgotten group of people – those who sleep without a roof over their heads at all.

Thirteen men who work in the Norton prison's Hobbycraft program have been cutting donated plastic bags into strips and looping those strips into chains. Three of the men then crochet those chains into sleeping mats that make the ground a little softer and drier.

"One of the things I like about it is both communities – the prison community and the homeless community – are kind of forgotten," said Shane, a resident of the minimum- to low-medium-security prison. "Hopefully they get these and know that we're making them for them, and they appreciate it, and it brings them some comfort."

Jesus, who makes most of the mats crocheted at Norton Correctional Facility (NCF), said through his Spanish interpreter, Gabino, that when he is released from prison, if

he sees someone sleeping on one of his mats, he "would be very joyful."

In February, Jesus estimated that he'd made at least 300 mats in the past four or five months.

"He's a very fast worker, and when he gets in his zone, he could knock out two or three a day," Gabino said.

A meaningful gift

Ross Dessert, president of the Uplift Organization in Kansas City, Mo., can attest that the mats are a meaningful gift for the people who receive them. He said he and other Uplift volunteers hand them out – along with food, clothing, and other essential supplies. Working out of a van that travels to parks, bridges and other places people sleep, Uplift volunteers serve 250 to 400 homeless people three nights a week.

Dessert estimated each sleeping mat is used for three to nine months, depending on the person and their living situation.

"They are really helpful in the colder winter months and in any kind of rainy weather," he said. "They help folks get a bit of separation from the ground."

He said Uplift receives sleeping mats from various



Jesus crochets most of the sleeping mats produced at the Norton Correctional Facility.



Norton native Shawna VanEngen, right, and another Uplift Organization volunteer distribute sleeping mats made at Norton Correctional Facility to homeless people in Kansas City, Mo. (Courtesy photo)

groups, but the NCF mats are special.

“When I have told people who made these mats and that they came all the way from Norton, Kansas, and the Correctional Facility, they think that’s pretty wonderful,” he said. “One person said it was impressive that they were doing something positive and constructive to help others.”

Capable of doing good

Whatever crimes put them in prison – their stays can range from 30 days to more than 30 years – “giving back to the community is something we try to teach our residents,” said NCF Warden Hazel Peterson.

“I’m not saying they never did that, but it probably wasn’t a big part of their lives once they became adults,” she said.

HAZEL PETERSON



“We get caught up in life and whatever trouble we got into, and we forget

how giving is meaningful. It makes your heart feel good. I think we all need our heart to feel good.”

NCF Corrections Counselor Tayler Petersen said people in prison sometimes don’t feel capable of doing good.

“It’s good to get these guys some positive recognition so they know no matter what bad things they’ve done in their lives they can also do good,” she said.

Peterson originally made the connection with Uplift through a long-time friend, Shawna VanEngen, an Uplift volunteer. Once 20 or 30 mats are completed, sometimes she

loads them up and heads to Kansas City for a visit. Prison staff have contacts with area church groups that also make the mats, and sometimes those groups arrange for transport. Peterson said she hopes to one day go on a delivery run to see the mats being distributed.

Travis, who crochets mats, said working with the plastic bags is a lot different than working with yarn. He said his grandmother taught him and his siblings to crochet a daisy chain when they were children.

“We could make a long chain, and we thought that was the greatest thing in the world,” he said. “When I got here, we started putting stitches together to actually make stuff. That was nice.”

Influx of bags

Petersen said in February that since an ad appeared in the local newspaper requesting bags for the project, an almost overwhelming number had been donated.

“We had a huge influx of bags, and we needed to get rid of them, so they weren’t a fire violation,” she said. “So, I recruited all of these guys to cut and help loop chains. Everybody back here volunteered to help.”

She said all the Hobbycraft workers spent a solid week sorting, cutting, and getting bags ready to crochet. She said preparing the bags is the hard part.

“I was getting blisters on my fingers,” said Killian, one of the residents working on the project. “I had to tape my fingers. It was thousands of bags.”

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THEATRE, from page 25

takes money or scan cards.”

Because there is work to be done during the movie, the night manager and concession workers can stay afterward if they wish and have the theater to themselves to watch a movie. That’s one perk that makes being a Palace manager something that a lot of Oakley students look forward to in their senior year. Until then, they – like their parents – just appreciate having a movie theater downtown.

Pandemic problems

Over the decades, this management arrangement has worked well. About 10 years ago, when theaters were switching from reel-to-reel projectors to the much-improved digital version, the Palace was able to take out a loan for the expensive new equipment and paid it off early, Campbell said. Other big-ticket expenses such as a heat and air equipment purchase have also been in the budget.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new set of challenges. The theater was closed for three months, and annual ticket sales that had averaged 6,000 to 7,000 plunged to 1,200, Campbell said. Studios began releasing fewer movies, and more of what was being made went straight to online streaming.

“We were on the verge of closing, so we put a story in the paper and let everybody know that we probably had about one year left with the funds that we had to keep the theater open,” Campbell said. “So, the Farmers State Bank here in town announced they’d match up to \$10,000 in donations. People donated around \$26,000. That gave us \$36,000 to keep it up and running for a while.”

Kimberly Munk said \$10,000 of that money was used to install a new ceiling, since tiles had begun to fall. The remainder is being saved for future repairs.

“Our community has really wrapped their arms around us, and that’s been nice,” she said. “That’s a great thing.”

20 years and counting

At the theater and on its website, evidence of its nearly 20-year connection to Oakley High School is prominently displayed. A large section of the old high school gym floor featuring the Oakley Plainsman decorates the theater lobby wall. It is surrounded by group photos of every class of managers. Senior photos of the current managers can be found on the theater’s website, palacetheatreoakley.com.

At the high school, the movie poster for *Radio*, starring Ed Harris and Cuba Gooding Jr., hangs in the classroom where the Palace Class meets. That was the movie aired when the theater reopened on Nov. 7, 2003.

“The kids still need a place to go and meet their friends and take a date to the movie and hold hands and all that sort of thing,” Campbell said. “They’ve got to have someplace to go. How long it will last, I don’t know, but we’ll keep going as long as we can. Hopefully it can go for another 20 years.” ■

From the Eye to the Canvas

Painter Jim Nelson found inspiration in museums, the trenches of Vietnam, history books, and on his family farm

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETSY WEARING

[JEWELL] Jewell County farmer Jim Nelson estimates he has completed about 3,000 paintings in his lifetime. But don't call him an artist, or "arteest," as he says with a wry grin. Nelson is a painter. Spend a little time with him and you could also say he is a historian — and still a farmer.

Nelson was born in Beloit, but his family followed his father's career as a professor. He grew up in Boulder where his dad taught at the University of Colorado. Today, he lives on the family farm where he spent time with his grandparents.

"We came this way for summer and at Christmas," Nelson said. "Five generations of my family lived on the farm. My great-great-grandparents escaped the locust plague in Nebraska and homesteaded in Jewell County in 1870."

The farmhouse he lives in replaced the original sod house in 1912. "Folks thought it was a mansion because it had two stories," he said.

Despite the generations on the farm, Nelson, 80, is known less as a farmer and more for his paintings. More than a dozen found their way on book covers, and many more hang in museums, businesses, churches and private homes. There is even one somewhere in Washington, D.C., perhaps stored in the White House.

Tornado alley to Washington, D.C.

"After the election in 2020, I did a sketch of Trump and sent it to the White House," he said. "I got a letter from the



Jim Nelson with a work commissioned by Troy Evans, the actor who played Frank Martin on the television series *ER*. Evans served in the same unit as Nelson - 22nd infantry 25th division, Vietnam — one year apart.

secretary that said they liked it and were going to file it away in case they needed my services. I was just surprised to hear from them."

Nelson specializes in portraits, particularly full-length canvases. So, he thought "Why not do a full-length portrait?" He did. Then rolled it up in a tube and sent it on its way. "It cost me \$22."

Again, he heard from the people in D.C. "I got a phone call from the White House, Jeremy someone, an archivist or curator," Nelson recalled. "He asked if I was Jim Nelson who lived in Kansas in tornado alley."

Nelson said they talked about the painting and again, it had been received favorably. "I asked if they were going to send it back," Nelson said. "But he said, 'No, it was part of the archive now.' I wondered if he (Trump) might hang it at one of his golf courses, but I don't have any idea where it is now."

MORE ABOUT JIM NELSON

Find Jim Nelson's work at **The Collectibles Shop**, 211 N. Mill St., Beloit, (785) 738-0342, or **Village Lines**, 139 W. Lincoln Ave., Lincoln, (866) 520-0841.

Visit his website: jimdnelson.com

His book, *Vietnam War Paintings*, featuring art by Nelson and narratives by participants, is available on Amazon.

This foray into political paintings is not what Nelson is most known for. It is his historical work, and largely his work depicting battle scenes that has brought him notoriety.

No money, big dreams

Nelson said it was a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City with his grandmother that sparked his passion for art and his resolve to make his career in the field. He was 14.

"I saw the Rembrandts and knew what I wanted to do," he said. His idols include many of the great masters. "People told me 'Don't do it.' But I got on a train in Belleville when I was 17 with no money and went to New York to study at the Art Students League."

There he said he studied in the same room as Norman Rockwell. He did well and earned scholarships to continue. He lived in the Bowery and paid attention to



Painting of General Philip Sheridan during the 1868 Indian Raids at an encampment in Lincoln County.



A wall-sized painting titled *The Battle of Suoi Cut* caught the attention of a general and led to Nelson becoming a combat artist during the Vietnam War.

artists who were earning a living doing what they loved.

In the summers, he returned to Kansas and helped on the farm. It was there that he got his first commission.

"I was home plowing for my grandma. It was the summer my grandfather died," Nelson recalled. "Goldie and Lloyd Mowers hired me to do a painting of their farmstead with a horse in the foreground."

He earned \$50, not a bad commission for 1957.

"One of their former employees still has it hanging in their house," he said.

After five years in New York, Nelson was hired by Raymond Loewy, an industrial designer known for designing the Coca Cola bottle and other iconic items. He put Nelson to work painting murals, mostly western scenes, for Famous Barr department stores.

"I was good at horses," Nelson said. "I had a studio on Fifth Avenue and was a member of the 829 Union for Scenic Artists. For about three years I was making \$100 a day."

Chronicling life in the trenches

Life was good for Nelson, then in 1967 he was drafted. After training in Fort Bliss, Texas, and Fort Polk, La., he said he realized he was heading to Vietnam.

"I wanted to buy a movie camera so I could be a war cinematographer," Nelson said. "They gave us a 30-day leave, and I went to New York to say goodbye to my friends, because we were told by our drill sergeant that we were probably not coming back."

Nelson was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division where he was often involved in heavy combat. He did not have a movie camera, but he said he carried a sketch book and pencils so he could chronicle the experience.

"It rained all the time," he recalled. "That sketch book got soaking wet."

Still, Nelson continued his drawings. He said one particular day his unit was in the middle of a five-day battle in an area full of underground tunnels dug by the enemy.

"We had been sent into the jungle to look for enemy camps," Nelson said.

"I had never seen anything like it (the tunnels). A friend came to me and said, 'Jim, come see this.' I followed him in, and there was a room with a big roll of paper and a set of watercolors."

Nelson said he had no way to carry the paper, but he stuffed the paints in his trousers so he could use them later.

Nelson's drawings got some attention when his Lieutenant Colonel saw them. He wanted Nelson to do drawings of the enemy camps. Soon he was removed from the infantry and sent to headquarters, where he eventually became a cartographer, drawing maps for the Army.

Away from enemy lines, Nelson asked his parents to send him canvases. In his free time, he created a wall-size painting of the battle of Suoi Cut.

"General Gleason saw it," Nelson said, "and he recommended me as a combat artist."

Nelson said he continued his work on maps, worked as a driver, and also was able to paint for combat books that chronicled everyday life in warfare.

"I was living the life of luxury because I had a mosquito net, and I wasn't sleeping in the mud anymore," he said.

But still, headquartered at Dau Tieng, he said they were under mortar fire nightly.

Many of the staff there had not been to the front lines, and he recalled one day when he heard the sound that preluded a mortar shell.

"I heard that pop, pop, pop," Nelson said, "and I yelled, 'Mortar!' People scrambled, and the shell hit right on our building. I don't know how many lives I saved that day."

Starting over in Kansas

Nelson returned to the United States in 1968, where he found a country that did not want to acknowledge the sacrifices made by him and others. He was sent to a Naval Hospital in San Francisco with an extreme case of trench foot. He left there and credits a clinic in Denver, where a doctor who had served in WWII cured him.

"I had \$900 saved from the Army. I

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The top and bottom of each bag is cut off, and the middle section is cut into four-inch-wide strips. Best Choice and Walmart bags can be cut into two strips, and White's Foodliner bags are big enough for three.

The job is made more tedious and time-consuming because, for security reasons, the men must use blunt-tipped safety scissors, similar to the type purchased for a young child as a school supply.

Using creativity

Mats have been crocheted at the prison since 2018, when the Hobbycraft program was started. The men who work in Hobbycraft do a variety of creative projects – including painting, 3D origami and making sculptures out of recycled materials. They receive a salary of \$1.05 a day, and their creations are made available to staff who want to purchase them.

Several of the men also participate in a Community Crochet project. Blankets, hats, scarves, and other items they crochet or knit using donated yarn are distributed through a variety of charities. Those have included the Salina Rescue Mission; Ashby House, of Salina; Lori's Place, of Norton; and Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, of Littleton, Colo.

"The idea for the mats actually came from a management team meeting and then I developed it," Peterson said. "We had added more than 100 inmates to our population and were brainstorming how to keep them busy."

The program was

introduced after Hilary VanPatten, NCF behavior health director, heard about a group of women in nearby Almena who were making the mats. It seemed like a good project for the men in the Hobbycraft area, since plastic bags were free and readily available.

Jean Ann Wilson, from the Almena group, came to the prison to teach anyone in the Hobbycraft area who was interested how to make "plarn" and use a large crochet hook to make the mats. VanPatten assisted and translated for Spanish speakers.

"Some of the residents with whom I spoke about the project shared that they themselves had been homeless at times, and an item like the bag mats would have made a difference for them – not only for helping to meet their physical needs, but also the need of feeling that someone cared about their well-being," VanPatten said.

Wilson said teaching the class at the prison "was a very good experience for me."

"We did not have enough crochet hooks, and some of them crocheted with their fingers," she said. "They were very respectful and willing to follow directions."

Jesus said he was there during the presentation and that is where he learned to crochet.

"Ever since then he kind of fell in love with it, and he's enjoying it now," Gabino said.

Shoulder bags, too

Shane was also one of the original participants. He said he had previously taught himself to crochet while



Shane makes shoulder bags out of plastic bags. His bags are also distributed to the homeless.

serving time at the El Dorado Correctional Facility.

"It's really fun, and it definitely keeps the time going," he said. "I try to put it down, but it's addictive."

Shane is no longer assigned to the Hobbycraft area, but he continues to crochet. In his current job assignment, he doesn't have the space to spread out a full six-foot-by-three-foot sleeping mat, so instead, when he has downtime, he's begun crocheting shoulder bags out of smaller strips of plastic bags. He said he can get one made in about four hours. So far, he's made 50 or 60, which have also been distributed to the homeless. He said he likes giving back to the community, and he feels there is an environmental impact in giving the plastic bags a new purpose.

"It's nice to know that you're putting something out there for people," he said. "I've heard they go pretty fast. They hand them out as soon as they

get them."

Shane said when the men are sorting and preparing bags for cutting, they try to save him nice ones.

Peterson said producing shoulder bags and sleeping mats from discarded plastic bags seems like a good fit for the prison population. It gives them a satisfying, low-cost hobby, and an opportunity to be of service to people who can use the help.

When the men are released, they will need to start their own lives over in a way that is more productive. She said NCF offers a variety of educational and vocational training opportunities to ensure that residents have the ability to support themselves and their families upon release.

"The punishment was at the court," she said. "Here they're just doing their time, and we need to figure out how they can do that productively and help them learn new behaviors." ■

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visited friends in New York and then went to Europe and Madrid for nine months,” he said. There, Nelson healed the rest of him by studying and copying the works of the Old Masters.

Then Nelson returned home to Kansas. “I decided to start life all over,” he said. “Basically, we were treated so bad – especially in New York, which was a hotbed of protest. So, I came to Beloit with 50 cents in my pocket.”

The farmhouse was in disrepair, and the milo crop wasn’t enough to live on that spring. So, Nelson became a tractor mechanic to earn a living and fix up the farm.

The funeral director in Cawker City approached Nelson and commissioned two religious paintings for his funeral homes. That led to more work, including banks in Mankato and Jamestown.

“The bankers and morticians had all the money,” Nelson laughed.

He was happy to be painting again —and buying farmland. He said he was being considered to paint a series of murals for the State House in Topeka and became disillusioned when it was awarded to an out-of-state artist without ties to Kansas.

He spent time in Canada doing portraits in the late 70s and early 80s. “My paintings paid for fertilizer,” Nelson said.

In 1991, Jim married his wife, Sharon. “She passed away nine years ago,” he said. “I give her credit for any success I had. I procrastinated a long time before we got married.”

Sharon was a rural mail carrier in Lincoln County, and the couple had a house there in addition to the farm. They had no children. Sharon’s likeness is represented in several of



The First Miracle in the First Christian Church in Beloit. Nelson used the likeness of his wife, Sharon as Mary. He said though it was unusual, he painted Jesus with short hair, as his research showed that would have been appropriate for the time period.

Nelson’s paintings — sometimes her hands, or her face. Other times she simply dressed in a garment that would be used in a painting so Nelson could get the draping or folds just right.

“Historical Western impressionism” and more

At The Collectibles Shop in Beloit, Nelson and friend Michael Graviett visit over coffee most mornings. Graviett serves as Nelson’s agent and handles sales.

Nelson said his work can also be purchased in Lincoln at Village Lines.

“I get the history from Jim and write up the descriptions for the paintings,” Graviett said. He coined the phrase “historical Western impressionism” to describe much of Nelson’s work.

He said paintings are priced with what the market will bear. Nelson shares that many painters have multiple pricings, “Friends, other folks and SOB’s,” he laughs. “I don’t have any of those.”

A stack of books that feature Nelson’s paintings either inside or on the cover sit on a side table. One is particularly rare. The book *Dog Soldier Justice* has a painting of a woman with an infant on a horse. Her hands are

tied. She’s being led by a Dog Soldier Indian. Other children are seen on the ground with arrows in their backs.

“That’s the original cover,” Nelson said. It was changed by the University of Nebraska Press on a second printing. “They thought the artwork was too violent.”

“The original is in demand now,” Graviett said.



MICHAEL GRAVIETT

Painting on the public side

The two men can’t remember how they met but figure it was at least 25 years ago.

Nelson said he has enough work that he still paints every day, mostly commissions.

Pointing to a painting of a card playing scene, Graviett said, “No telling how many of those we have sold.”

“It’s a pool hall in Randall, Kansas,” Nelson said.

“He can paint it with people’s friends in the picture,” Graviett added.

Though nationally Nelson is known for his military work, Graviett said locally it is his portraits.

Nelson explains that portrait work is unique. “Every person has a private side and a public side. The left side is usually the public side,” he said. “You always want to paint women on the public side.”

He adds, “You want to capture the character. A photo can’t capture that. It comes through the eye to the brain and out through the arm and the brush.”

Graviett explains it more simply. “His portraits make people look younger and better looking.” ■



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