

FOOD SYSTEMS & RURAL DEVELOPMENT

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

Rural Nebraska Reaches Inward to Meet External Changes

Lincoln, Nebraska



When author Willa Cather talked about the “human yearning for something enduring, without shadow of change,” she could have been describing the wishful mindset of small-town America at the end of the 20th century. In too many rural areas, a steady stream of decline has drained communities of population and opportunity.

In Cather’s native Nebraska today, an initiative called HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) is teaching small towns statewide that collaborating to take control of change may be the key to preserving rural towns — with 21st century improvements.

“We’re trying to change the psychology in communities that have had a continued loss of young people and economic opportunity, and of hope,” says Jeff Yost, president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation, one of four partners working in communities of 5,000 or less to help make rural areas vibrant again.

“I can honestly say that my optimism has grown by a 140 percent in the last year,” says Pat Marsh, an Ord, Nebraska, business owner. “I used to be very pessimistic, but I hear and feel a different kind of enthusiasm and hope now.”

HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) began as a pilot project in Ord and Valley County in 2002. A recipient of an Innovative Program Award from the Community Development Society, an international organization, HTC also received a W.K. Kellogg Foundation 75th Anniversary grant in 2005. Now, Ord shares the lessons it has learned with six other Nebraska communities that are part of the effort.



“Rural communities must diversify their economics beyond production agriculture,” says Yost. “HTC helps them realize they can build their economic future with their homegrown assets.” He cites four local strengths that HTC trains towns to cultivate: leadership, youth, philanthropy, and entrepreneurship.



“Entrepreneurship is a strategy that embraces all of those things. It helps us to tap into that creative potential and innovation that so many folks have lost. It also really fits with the rural American work ethic and independent culture that says, ‘we want to control our own destiny.’”

Entrepreneur Marsh has owned her P.S. Etc. store for 20 years, repeatedly adding to her shop’s offerings in creative responses to consumer needs. “In a small community you have to evolve and take care of the needs that come forward,” she says.

A multitasker's dream, P.S. Etc. now includes a JCPenney Catalog Store, a frame shop, and an art gallery. Most recently, Marsh filled a void when the town's last dry cleaners closed. She convinced a local health lab courier to transport her laundry bags back and forth to the next town so that P.S. Etc. can offer drop-off dry cleaning service to its customers.

A similar responsiveness has guided Ord's efforts to reverse the out-migration of young people after high school.

"The conversation in small towns for 20 years has been, 'We've got to get you out of here so you can make a living,'" says Milan Wall, co-director of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. "Students tell us, 'That's what my parents and my teachers tell me.' The parents and teachers say, 'Oh, my, that's right, isn't it?' Part of our vision is to change that conversation."

Nancy Glaubke, business development coordinator for the Valley County Economic Development Board couldn't agree more: "We want to create an environment for our youth so they feel good about coming back to a small community."

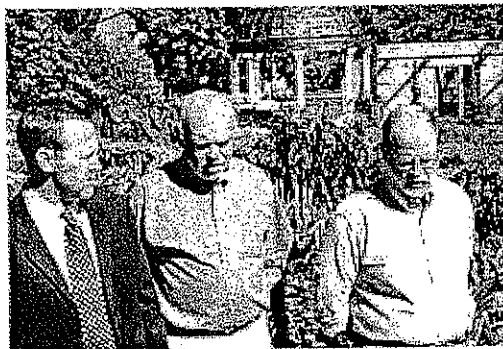


To cultivate local assets of all ages, Ord launched Leadership Quest, a nine-month training opportunity. The annual program has graduated 70 residents, including many high-schoolers. Workshops, group activities, and guest presenters help participants learn about themselves and their community. The increased interest in civic engagement is evident as more people agree to run for office, serve on local boards, and head up volunteer projects.

Ord High School Senior Jenny Kroger was part of Leadership Quest in 2005.

"I learned a lot about my personality, how to work well with others," she says. "I'm not the most organized person, but I'm great with ideas. So I know that I need to work with people who are more organized than I am."

Training young leaders is such a priority that the Valley County schools incorporated entrepreneurship instruction throughout the curriculum. Sales topping \$4,000 made the Youth Entrepreneurship Fair a success in April 2005 for 30 young entrepreneurs. Popular items included a golf abacus for keeping track of strokes, hand-made pillowcases, squirrel feeders, and horseshoe picture frames.



Developing local philanthropy is another focus of HomeTown Competitiveness. And, the Ord Founder's club exceeded its target, recruiting 55 individuals—seven from out of state—to donate \$1,000 apiece to help fund local initiatives.

The town's vision, persistence, and pervasive problem-solving attitude have already paid off. During a six-month period in 2005, Ord added 17 new businesses to the community – including an ethanol plant and a call center.

"We're seeing more and more individuals who were born and raised in this community coming back to raise their children here. I see that as a success story in itself," says Glaubke.

The story of Ord's success is spreading. Recent coverage by *USA Today* and *The New York Times* reported on 10 young professional couples who have moved back to town, some with relocation assistance from the new Valley County Foundation.

"There's just so many great people here," says Kroger. "My interest has definitely been enhanced to come back to a small community. It's comfort to know my kids can walk down the street and that the people they see are going to care about them."