

Nicole Sedlacek

Entrepreneurial Story from Holt County Nebraska

This entrepreneurial story was commissioned during the Center's early years and is now part of its Heritage Resources.

Straight Talk with Nicole Sedlacek

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Nicole Sedlacek grew up in Holt County, in north central Nebraska. Holt County has nine small towns, a population of 12,000 people, and a strong agricultural foundation to its local economy and culture. Ms. Sedlacek is the Director of Holt County Economic Development. She is 29 years old, married, with two small children. She says she never thought of settling anywhere else.

Ms. Sedlacek studied journalism at Northeast Community College in Norfolk, which is 75 miles away from O'Neill—the county seat—on Highways 20 and 281. Afterwards, she got a job at the O'Neill radio station.

“I like the small town feeling and I wanted to be in radio,” she says, when asked why she chose to live in O'Neill. “You feel like you can do more good here.” Nicole's answers are short and to the point, without embellishment.

At a small radio station, you do a little of everything, so Ms. Sedlacek got her fair share of on air time. Her main role, however, was in sales and marketing. Ms. Sedlacek worked with local businesses on their marketing strategies, and so she learned quickly about the local economy and business environment. When a volunteer group of citizens started a committee to address economic development issues in 2005, Ms. Sedlacek joined up. She said she was mostly interested in keeping young people in the community.



Photo of Nicole Sedlacek

In the beginning, there were three independent community committees working on economic development, as well as a county-wide effort. In 2007, they merged their efforts and secured funding to support one full-time director. That's when Ms. Sedlacek was hired as the first (and only) Director of Holt County Economic Development. In the first three years, the organization has grown to two full-time and one part-time staff members and a nine member Board of Directors, who represent most of the towns in the county.

When asked how the county was able to shift from a volunteer effort to a formal organization with a professional staff and Board, Ms. Sedlacek says simply, “We worked out a budget and divided it on a per capita basis. The towns cost-shared out of their municipal budgets and committed for three years.” She says this as if it’s not extraordinary. Extraordinary, in this age of competition among rural communities, to have such like-minded collaboration across different townships. Extraordinary in that the towns were willing to dig into their own coffers to support a new, untested initiative.

Ms. Sedlacek continues. The group also secured two key grants, a JOBS grant (Joint Opportunity for Building Success grant through the Federal Home Loan Bank of Topeka and a BECA grant (through the Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act of Nebraska). These financial resources gave Holt County Economic Development the seed money it needed for a strong start. Recently, they received an estate gift, which is a three-year commitment to support entrepreneurial coaching and business coaching.

Holt County Economic Development now has three priorities: (1) supporting existing local businesses; (2) helping new businesses get established; and (3) assisting former residents to move back to Holt County. Working with local youth is an underlying component of all three priorities.

“Agriculture and health care are the primary industries in Holt County,” explains Ms. Sedlacek. “There are a lot of farms and ranches. And, there are several ag-based businesses.” There are approximately 1,220 farms and ranches in the county, a relatively large number for a population of 12,000. Ms. Sedlacek goes on to list some of the businesses that are related to agriculture. A potato plant, an ethanol plant, hay operations, cows, hog operations, and feed lots. And, a hydroponic green house for tomatoes and cucumbers. The retail sector is surprisingly large, along with the government sector, in Holt County, each employing about 900 people. According to Ms. Sedlacek, there are quite a few small, downtown businesses, mostly retail and service shops, along with a few larger chain retail and grocery stores in O’Neill and across the county.¹

“Our main priority is working with existing businesses,” says Ms. Sedlacek. “If you take care of the ones that are here, others will come to the area.” Her brevity nearly masks the insight behind the words. Nearly.

Ms. Sedlacek says that her radio days gave her a leg up when it came to working with existing businesses. She already knew many of the local business people when she started at Holt County Economic Development. And, she understood some of the local business challenges from those days, such as maintaining a customer base with a dwindling population and encouraging people to shop locally as opposed to going out of town or shopping on-line.

¹ Information from Ms. Sedlacek was supplemented with data from US Bureau of Economic Analysis, Table CA25N: Total full-time and part-time employment by NAICS industry for 2008 accessed at <http://www.bea.gov> on May 26, 2010.

The discussion turns to local youth, Ms. Sedlacek's original interest in the local economic development effort. Youth engagement is one of the four pillars of *Hometown Competitiveness*,² an economic development strategy for rural areas, which emphasizes the importance of developing local assets as a basis for renewed community economic activity. The other three pillars are: Leadership, Entrepreneurship, and Community Assets. Holt County used the *Hometown Competitiveness* model early in its economic development efforts and has seen progress in all areas. Its progress in youth engagement is particularly noteworthy.

In 2005, even before Holt County Economic Development was fully operational, Holt County held a rally called "Staying Alive with Community Pride." The rally featured a panel of young people who came back to Holt to talk about their experiences, which was very influential for the local teen-agers.

"Tom Osborne came to that rally," says Ms. Sedlacek. And then, almost as an afterthought, "That made an impression, too." It is becoming apparent that Ms. Sedlacek is a master of understatement.

She pauses, "He used to be the Cornhusker football coach. And the US Representative for the 3rd District."

Since its inception in 2007, Holt County Economic Development has been actively working with high school students. Ms. Sedlacek explains that in the past, Holt County adults seemed to be giving youth the message that they needed to leave town to be successful.

"Now, kids don't really have that attitude. Over half of local kids say they'd like to come back to Holt County."

Ms. Sedlacek has the data to back up her statement. The RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship has implemented a survey with over 6,000 youth in 39 rural communities in three states (Nebraska, Missouri and Kansas), including Holt County. Ms. Sedlacek assisted the RUPRI Center to implement this survey with over 500 local 7th – 12th graders in 2009.

A whopping 83 percent of Holt County youth surveyed said that they would prefer to stay in their hometown area after graduation or return sometime in the future, compared to 61 percent for the larger sample of 6,000 students, across the three states. When asked why they would want to return, 68 percent of Holt County youth said it was a "Good place to raise a family," compared to 45 percent overall. Over half (58 percent) of Holt County youth surveyed said that "Family ties" would influence them to move back.

² *Hometown Competitiveness* is a collaborative involving the Nebraska Community Foundation, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and the Heartland Center for Leadership Development.

When asked why they might end up leaving their hometown areas, 61 percent said they might leave for “career opportunities elsewhere,” compared to 43 percent overall. And, 62 percent said they thought they could earn more money elsewhere, compared to 50 percent overall.³ These are high stakes for young people. Holt County youth might have the desire to remain or return to the region, but the perception of earning less and having fewer career opportunities can be a real deal breaker for some.

It seems that the desire to return to Holt overcomes the barriers for many former residents, though. Ms. Sedlacek says that Holt County Economic Development receives one or two requests per month from people who would like to come back to Holt County, often with their spouses and children. She says social media is a very important tool for Holt County Economic Development because it’s the way young people communicate and it’s affordable. Holt County has a website and a presence on Facebook. Many of the young adults who contact Holt County Economic Development go first to the internet.

When asked what she does when she gets these calls, Ms. Sedlacek says, “I usually talk to them and get their resumes. We send out a packet. Then, I look at our employment listings to see if there’s a match. Sometimes I call the businesses directly to try to connect the candidates to the businesses.” She stops. It sounds simple and straight forward when she says it like this. But, youth outmigration, population loss, and aging communities are some of the most pressing challenges facing many rural areas. To have a high percentage of local youth interested in returning home and a steady stream of “alumni” or former residents who want to return is no small feat for a rural community.

Ms. Sedlacek has ideas about the future of Holt County. “We’d like to get into new industries including high tech with higher paying jobs. But,” she says with her usual understated astuteness, “we want to make sure that there is a good fit with the existing businesses.”

“Broadband is also a challenge. We have it in the cities and townships, but not in all the rural parts of the county. I’d like to see it across the whole county.” Ms. Sedlacek stops there. It’s straight forward for her and for the future of Holt County.

For more information on...

... the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org

...Holt County Economic Development, go to <http://www.holtcountynebraska.com/>

³ Preliminary results from “DRAFT Holt County Youth Survey Analysis” by Craig Schroeder, RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship. May 6, 2010.

Questions & More Information

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