

Youth Entrepreneur Partnership - A Program of the Nelson Institute

Location: McCook, Nebraska

Executive Director: Vicki Leibbrandt

Funding: Funded through the Nelson Institute, with contributions from the Southwest Nebraska RC&D, the University of Nebraska CARI, McCook Community College, Perkins and McCook National Bank

**Mission of the
Nelson Institute:**

“The Nelson Institute is committed to building One Nebraska, founded on the belief that Nebraska will be at its best when all communities within the state prosper, and dedicated to proving this can happen when necessary local commitment and reasonable opportunity are provided. The mission of the Institute is to seek ways to provide those opportunities. A primary objective of the Institute is to provide opportunities for engaging young people in community and economic development.”

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Nebraska Youth: The Hope of Rural Communities

Before taking an entrepreneur course in high school, Tiffany Ledall thought that after graduation, she would probably continue her education or look for a job.

“The last thing on your mind is that you can start your own business at my age,” she said.

But with inspiration from the course, she and her sister Chandra did just that, starting their own retail plant nursery.

The Ledalls join a growing number of high school students in rural Nebraska who have participated in the state’s Youth Entrepreneur Partnership.

Executive Director Vicki Leibbrandt, along with many other leaders in the state, said that getting young people to stay in their small communities is of utmost importance for survival of small towns.

“We are trying to stay connected with these young people so we can get them reconnected to their communities,” she said.

Rallying for Rural Areas

“Children may be 20 percent of our population, but they are 100 percent of our future,” said Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE), founder of the Nelson Institute.

Sen. Nelson started the Institute in 1998 to support community and rural development initiatives. Born and raised in McCook, Neb., Nelson knows about the plight of rural areas.

“Senator Nelson really made a huge commitment to this program,” Leibbrandt said. “He has a heart for rural communities.”

And rural communities are in dire need of high profile boosters such as Nelson.

While urban populations in Nebraska have steadily risen since 1900, the number of people in rural areas has declined from 800,000 in 1940 to about 500,000 in 2000, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census.

Business partners Tiffany (19) and Chandra (17) Ledall are from Chase County, in rural southwest Nebraska. Their county has slowly lost population over the past five decades, falling from a high of nearly 5,500 in 1930 to just over 4,000, according to the 2000 census. And, similar to a large portion of rural Nebraska, the median age of citizens is increasing – in Chase County, rising from about 30 in 1950 to 42 in 2000.

Many rural advocates and policy makers attribute population trends to lack of economic opportunities. Rural areas face a discouraging environment for agriculture, an overall declining economy and the lack of capacity in rural communities to support services and infrastructure. “Ninety percent of our communities are now 2000 or less; 80 percent are 1,000 or less,” Leibbrandt added.

And future projections show Chase County, like many other rural Nebraska areas, continuing to lose their citizen base in the future, a prediction that Leibbrandt and her organization are trying to fight.

One of the main objectives of the Nelson Institute is to engage young people in community economic development. YEP tries to alter rural population trends by addressing four main aspects of entrepreneurial development among students: awareness and education, mentoring and apprenticeship, business training and leadership development.

“When you look at the population statistics, you begin to understand why economic development is so critical,” Leibbrandt said. “We need to get kids to stay in this state. We need to start working with them before they have formed the opinion that they need to leave their communities to be successful.”

Courses and Career Fairs

The Youth Entrepreneurship Program started just four years ago as a collaboration among a number of agencies in a nine-county rural region.

Partners include the Southwest Nebraska RC & D, McCook Community College, the University of Nebraska's Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI), the Southwest Nebraska Distance Learning Consortium and others.

"We knew there were already some great programs out there for our youth, such as FFA and 4-H," Leibbrandt said. "We wanted to help tie these together and begin to really focus on helping our young people start their own businesses."

YEP started with funding from Americorps and UNL CARI grants, and since then has been funded through the Nelson Institute; the Southwest Nebraska RC&D; local contributors, such as McCook National Bank; some Kellogg Foundation dollars and various other grants, such as Perkins funds.

Piloted in southwest Nebraska, the program is designed as a model that can be used across the state.

Two main components of the program are a career fair and an entrepreneurial curriculum.

"The career fair is not just a job fair," Leibbrandt said. "We bring in many presenters who are entrepreneurs and try to mix some fun in with the learning. One year we had a live band. One year we had a one-act play. We just really try to draw the kids in and inspire them."

In its fourth year, the career fair brings an estimated 300 to 400 students to the McCook Community College Campus during spring break. Entrepreneurs are available to talk one-on-one to young people interested in emulating them.

Developed by the University of Nebraska's CARI program, the entrepreneurial curriculum, called "Buzz on Biz," helps build skills exposing youth to the world of small business as an alternative, but viable, career option.

Still in a pilot phase, the Buzz on Biz program started as an after school activity for 10th through 12th graders, but students requested that the program be available during the school day. So now students can take the course over the lunch hour in three rural Nebraska high schools.

"Through their Career Services divisions, the Community College will help students assess skills, build school and career goals, research jobs and bring in guest speakers," Leibbrandt said. "We also want students to be more active in designing the program and developing leadership skills."

Tiffany Ledall recalls being inspired by her experience in the Buzz on Biz course.

“They took us through so many aspects of starting a business – from doing a business plan to budgets, marketing and advertising. They just really gave us good basic knowledge,” she said.

Tiffany and Chandra started TLC Gardens, a retail plant store set up in a Quonset hut on their parents’ property.

With help from FFA, their business is slowly growing.

Tiffany is nothing but positive about her YEP experience, and her future in business.

“Most start-ups do not make a profit until the third year,” she said. “Even though it was small, we’ve already made a profit.”

YEP brought the business world to an attainable level for the Ledall sisters. Tiffany especially connected with young entrepreneurial speakers brought in by the program.

She said, “I really enjoyed hearing the kids talk about the businesses that they started. That was so motivational.”

Beyond the Basics at YEP

When the YEP program is fully implemented, students in 8th through 12th grades will have opportunities to learn about owning their own business and becoming active in their communities.

“The ideal situation is for the students to participate in the entire program,” Leibbrandt said. “They can then mentor younger students.”

In addition to the career fair and the Buzz on Biz courses, YEP helps students acquire business loans, facilitates community improvement projects and is developing an apprenticeship program. The students are also able to meet with technical advisors for help with business planning.

In the community improvement projects, students learn about planning effective meetings and work with adult mentors in the community.

“We are trying to build a positive perception of their communities,” Leibbrandt said. “We want the kids to say, ‘Hey, we didn’t know that we had so much here in our own town!’”

The apprenticeship component is also in early stages of development. For this program, YEP has been chartered as an Explorer Post. This provides a leadership model for the students as well as mitigating potential liability issues. And, since Sen. Nelson was an Eagle Scout, it seems even more appropriate.

Apprenticeships, Leibbrandt said, give students first-hand experience in running a business, with the added goal of helping small business transfer in rural areas.

Leibbrandt said YEP also has additional projects in the works, such as a leadership development retreat and an exploratory summer camp revolving around entrepreneurship.

Banking on a Bright Future

Although in early stages, YEP's goal to engage more young people in rural economic development could bring big payoffs to rural communities.

“On average, if we can have 10 young people per county in southwest Nebraska stay or return, we would see results in growing communities,” Leibbrandt said. “Long-term, this is one of the most important things we can do. Everything else we're doing won't matter if we don't get young people involved.”

Perhaps the most important part of the business started by Tiffany and Chandra is the fact that their new livelihood is, for now, keeping them in rural Nebraska – a place hanging their hopes on luring more local entrepreneurs from a younger generation.

-By Lisa Bauer, 11/04

For more information on...

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.ruraleship.org

... the Nelson Institute, go to www.thenelsoninstitute.org

... Southwest Nebraska RC & D, go to www.swrcd.org

... McCook Community College, go to www.mpcca.cc.ne.us/mccook.htm

... the University of Nebraska's Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI), go to www.cari.unl.edu

... the Buzz on Biz curriculum, go to www.nebraskaedge.unl.edu/nxyouth.htm

... the Southwest Nebraska Distance Learning Consortium, go to www.userweb.esu15.org/~dlhome