

Civic Entrepreneur of the Month

Janell Anderson Ehrke, Founder and Executive Director, GROW Nebraska

Home: Stamford, Nebraska

Education: Bachelor's in Psychology from the University of Nebraska

Family: Husband Leon, two children

Organization: GROW Nebraska

Mission: GROW Nebraska's Mission is to maximize the state's entrepreneurial spirit, create an economically viable and sustainable environment for entrepreneurs and generate social awareness through promotion, marketing and education of products made or designed in Nebraska.

Employees: 3 full-time, 1 part-time

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GROWing Businesses in Nebraska

On a plane home from vacation, Janell Anderson Ehrke read an in-flight magazine article about the Watermark Association of Artisans in North Carolina. Organized in 1978 by 35 women, Watermark is a member-owned crafters cooperative selling products throughout the U.S. and in several other countries. After successfully emerging from a large debt in the early years, the organization now provides a living to hundreds of people in one of North Carolina's poorest counties.

That story sparked an idea in Anderson, and she turned the idea into a non-profit organization serving budding small business leaders in the state of Nebraska.

Grassroots Resources and Opportunities for Winners (GROW) Nebraska is a marketing and training program for Nebraska artisan-focused businesses and home-based entrepreneurs.

In 1995, Anderson and others developed a business plan for the organization. She invited Nebraska's then-Lieutenant Governor Kim Robak and Don Macke, co-director of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (CRE), to survey potential of GROW Nebraska.

"They liked the idea," she said. "I could have never done it without the CRE assistance in the beginning."

Macke helped Anderson get a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development grant. With those funds, as well as money from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, GROW Nebraska took off.

Anderson's endless energy, along with Nebraska's pool of talented artists and crafters, has fed the fast growth of GROW Nebraska. The organization now claims 175 members in 88 of Nebraska's 93 counties, accounting for 249 full-time jobs in the state. Annual sales from these businesses are \$8 million.

“I have a lot of passion for what I do,” Anderson said of her drive keep GROW growing. “I’m no different than every other entrepreneur – I want this organization and its members to succeed.”

The Game Plan for Budding Nebraska Entrepreneurs

“From the beginning, people kept telling me that I can’t depend on grants to stay viable,” Anderson said. “I had to help the organization become self-sufficient.”

With this in mind, Anderson and her team developed services paid for – and highly desired by – members of GROW.

The program now offers 20 of these services. Members are selected through an application and jury review process to ensure that new artisans can produce quality work and benefit from the GROW program.

Membership fees are \$75 annually.

With a theme of “Nebraska is where the products are!” Anderson set forth a marketing plan for GROW Nebraska that showcases Nebraska products to state, regional, national and international audiences.

All interested Nebraska residents may take advantage of non-juried services. These services offer beginning arts and crafts people resources and technical assistance to develop their business and marketing skills. Program staff can help prepare them for the juried portion of the GROW program.

Nebraska entrepreneurs whose works have been accepted through the jury process are eligible for juried services, focused on wholesale production. Entrepreneurs producing one-of-a-kind work or retailing only can benefit from GROW Nebraska's juried services.

GROW Nebraska’s services include marketing, education and business building opportunities, such as use of the GROW logo and website for promoting products; cooperative advertising in major magazines; technical training; marketing workshops; “Quick GROW” loans; participation in state and national wholesale and retail gift markets; and inclusion on a Nebraska tourism map. (For a complete list of services, see www.growneb.com/services.php)

Anderson emphasizes early success to her members, adding, “We want them to be able to put money in their pockets in the first six months of being involved in the GROW program. They need to have initial success coming out of the shoot.”

This, Anderson said, proves to friends and family that they have a viable business and boosts the entrepreneur’s confidence.

Anderson said GROW member Kim Curtis exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit and talent represented by GROW Nebraska’s growing portfolio of businesses.

The Curtis family began milking sheep in 1993 in a converted hog farrowing facility. In 2000, Shepherd’s Dairy bath and body products were born on the family’s farm in the picturesque Victoria Springs area near Anselmo, Nebraska.

Shepherd’s Dairy offers sheep milk-based soaps, lotions, bath salts, bath teas and candles in a variety of scents.

Kim started her business at small craft shows and one retail market in a small town. After attending a GROW-sponsored wholesale market, Kim left with 11 new accounts and networking contacts from major crafting journals.

They now make their soap in a new building on the family farm, producing 4,500 bars a week and employing eight people. The family has also started an agritourism component, inviting visitors to their farm.

“Like many of our members, Kim is really a sponge for information,” Anderson said. “She learns new ideas and techniques from our organization, and you can just see the wheels turning in her head.”

Anderson said that GROW Nebraska’s reputation for constant and consistent response to members makes the organization highly relevant to those it serves.

“We have always been real accessible to members,” she added. “With our toll-free number and personal replies to every e-mail, members feel they are getting the help they need. And we are constantly asking members what services they need so we can stay relevant to their business operations.”

Marketing Products and Place

Anderson tackles tough markets through emphasizing solid marketing plans.

“We tell our members that they must be consistent, and they must have a game plan,” she said. “And there are powers in numbers when it comes to marketing.”

While GROW refers clients to other state programs for business planning, Anderson’s organizational focus is on promoting their products. All of GROW’s marketing services involve sending messages to wholesale and retail buyers that products are of high quality and readily available.

Not only does GROW help businesses with minor but important marketing tools such as phone and fax numbers, brochures and attractive displays. The GROW program also utilizes online and in-print catalogs, cooperative advertising in such national magazines as *Country Business*, template news releases and the use of the GROW Nebraska logo, among other marketing techniques. Clients can be confident that their products are well-promoted.

Anderson’s approach to marketing includes a broader vision, too: promoting the state of Nebraska.

“We’re trying not only to grow entrepreneurs, but also to grow communities,” she said. “We want to grow the reputation of Nebraska so people don’t see us just as a big empty space of fields and plains.”

Promoting tourism is a newer initiative at GROW Nebraska.

Anderson’s organization now offers a map compiling GROW member artists with studios or galleries, stores carrying Nebraska products and selected historical sites. The map highlights by region to promote cultural tourism of Nebraska. (See the printable map at www.treasuresofnebraska.com)

Anderson and her clients are banking on the idea that showcasing Nebraska will help to not only move products, but also boost local economies.

“We’re trying to prove that you can grow your state from within,” she added. “We can depend on our entrepreneurs to develop jobs and foster economic growth, and we don’t always have to be chasing smokestacks and attracting large employers to the state.”

Entrepreneurial Spirit Drives Director

From a “typical farm and 4-H family,” Anderson said her rural Nebraska background feeds much of her inner drive to succeed.

“My parents really instilled in me the entrepreneurial spirit,” she added. “As farmers, they realized that life is not always 8 to 5, and you have to work hard to get what you want.”

A graduate of psychology from the University of Nebraska, Anderson pursued a career in management at a mutual fund company before returning to her native state to help her brothers expand the family feedlot business.

Anderson then worked as director of Central Plains Foundation, Inc., a rural business incubator, which she still directs while simultaneously GROWing Nebraska. When the GROW Nebraska opportunity emerged, Anderson jumped at the chance.

From her farm background and her parents’ insistence on self-initiative, Anderson continued to pick up new skills and knowledge through workshops, networking and conferences.

She said she learned many marketing tactics on her own – by watching TV, avid reading and meeting marketing leaders.

“I’m one of those people who goes to the grocery store and pays attention to all of the packaging,” Anderson added.

And she attributes much of her marketing knowledge to meeting Fran Redmon of Kentucky Crafted, a state agency that markets Kentucky’s crafts. Redmon mentored Anderson and eventually visited Nebraska to speak at a GROW training event.

“Fran probably put us three years ahead of where we would have been,” Anderson added.

Being a member of CODA – the Craft Organization Directors Association – has also helped Anderson keep ahead of the learning curve through research, information clearinghouses, communication networks and an annual conference.

“The CODA conference is always a phenomenal experience,” Anderson said. “It provides examples of so many excellent programs with goals similar to GROW.”

Anderson’s main inspiration is her clients, such as Kim Curtis, who keep her driving forward to improve the organization and the climate for small businesses in Nebraska.

“I am proud of our members and their products and the job that I do,” she said. “My 6-year-old daughter tells people, ‘My mom grows jobs.’”

GROWing into the Future

Anderson said GROW Nebraska can be expanded in many different directions, according to needs of her clients and the best methods to meet those needs.

The new tourism initiative represents one creative new venture. Anderson and her staff and Board also see expansion in capabilities of the GROW website.

“What we’re anticipating is the GROW Nebraska website will become an umbrella for any other product made in the state,” Anderson said. “We are also looking to do an e-commerce site where products can be purchased online.”

A big initiative for 2003 involves point-of-purchase signage for each GROW member. Each sign includes a color picture of the artist or crafter alongside the GROW

Nebraska logo and bulleted points of interest on each product. Point-of-purchase signs will be ready for members to use during the 2003 Christmas season.

“This is helping members realize the importance of telling their story,” Anderson said, adding that Nebraskans’ tendency for being humble was an obstacle to overcome in this project.

Anderson envisions a long future for GROW Nebraska, and she will continue to grow professionally to support the organization.

“I have a lot of passion for what I do,” she said. “I’m like any business person – I don’t want to fail.”

-By Lisa Bauer, 10/03

For more information on...

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

... USDA Rural Development, go to www.rurdev.usda.gov

... the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, go to www.neded.org

... Kentucky Crafted, go to www.kycraft.ky.gov