

Entrepreneurial Community of the Month

Ord, Nebraska and Valley County Economic Development

Location: Ord, Nebraska
Organization: Valley County Economic Development (VCED)
Executive Director: Bethanne Kunz
Funding: Local and county government, local chamber of commerce, private sponsorships and grants

Mission of the VCED: To promote a spirit of unity and cooperation in order to plan, organize, and affect the future development of the Valley County area by helping businesses grow and expand, retaining existing businesses, recruiting new businesses and improving residents' quality of life.

E-mail: valleycountyed@frontiernet.net
Website: www.ordneusa.com
Phone: 308-728-7875
Fax: 308-728-7691

A Small Town in Nebraska with Big Ideas for Economic Growth

There are two fundamental elements to economic development success in the 21st Century. The first is having a great game plan that can get results. The second is the commitment and staying power to make the game plan into reality. Valley County has both ... Continued hard work will ensure that Valley County will emerge as a leader in economic development this decade.

-Don Macke, Co-Director, RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship

Graduating from high school in 1995, Bethanne Kunz left her rural hometown of Ord, Nebraska, for the city life in Lincoln and then Omaha. There, at the College of St Mary, she obtained her bachelor's degree, with plans to pursue a career in health management information.

Luckily for her hometown, her plans changed.

At age 23, she landed the position as executive director of the Ord Chamber of Commerce and Valley County Economic Development in 2000.

When asked what brought her back to small-town life in Valley County – population 4,647 -- Kunz quickly replies, "This job."

Now Kunz – who received Ord's Employee of the Year and ExtrORDinary Person of the Year in 2003 – spends her time luring other young people to the Valley County area in central Nebraska.

"Any community who has a Bethanne is lucky," said Nancy Glaubke, VCED's Business Development Coordinator

Bethanne's enthusiasm and hard work has put Ord on the map as a rural area fighting the trends of depopulation and small-town demise and seeking a prosperous future through economic development.

Pioneer Past, Pioneering the Future

For Bethanne, going back to Ord was an easy decision.

"I always wanted to move back to a small town," she said, adding that her husband had felt the same way. "And I figured my hometown was as good as any."

But it wasn't as easy for earlier Ord settlers to arrive.

A website with Ord history states, "The early settlers coming into Valley County literally walked here. Summer's heat found practically everyone barefoot, but in the winter men and boys wore boots with rags wrapped around their feet in place of socks to keep their feet from freezing."

Pioneers arrived and persevered through drought, grasshoppers and attacks by Native Americans to stake claims on homesteads. By 1920, population in Valley County reached nearly 10,000. But from 1950 to 2000, Valley County experienced a 35 percent decrease in population.

Like many other regions in the rural Great Plains, Valley County's economic decline has created an aged population and lack of opportunities for young people. Valley County follows the state-wide out-migration pattern with the 15 to 25-year-old citizens being the largest batch to go.

If Bethanne and her staff can help it, these statistics will change.

"We have a goal that by 2010, the population here will be stabilized," Kunz said. "There are some young families moving back. I just hope that trend continues."

Economic Development Game Plan for the 21st Century

Visitors to the ComeHometoOrd.com website will find Flash graphics, slide shows, videos and a wealth of reasons to relocate to this small Nebraska town.

A main focus of the site – and Valley County Economic Development – is marketing their area to outsiders. Kunz said bringing businesses to town goes hand-in-hand with improving the quality of life for residents and attracting new ones.

"A lot of this work is getting one person at a time interested in moving back," Kunz said. "People who have roots here will start having children and realize it's a nice place to raise kids. There are several young families wanting to move back."

She relates the recent story of a young couple coming back to Ord. He is a 1996 Ord alumni who moved back to start his own business. His wife is a counselor and found a good job in Ord as well.

Aside from individual attention, Kunz said VCED has a specific mission and goals to improve economics and quality of life in Valley County.

The VCED Board of Directors consists of eight members: two from the City of Ord, two from Valley County, two from the Ord Area Chamber of Commerce and two from the GLVA – the Greater Loup Valley Activities, Inc., a non-profit corporation active in community and economic development. Members meet monthly to focus on top priorities, which include assisting existing businesses, recruitment of new businesses, housing, leadership development, philanthropy projects and development of information technology.

In 2001 and 2002, Kunz assisted with more than 60 local business visits to assess needs, many of which revolve around information and capital.

VCED offers local business incentives for new and existing businesses, including city sales taxes set aside for economic development, a local re-use fund for Valley County, the Loup Valley Investment Club, LLC and Tax Increment Financing.

Another project of the VCED stems from the Home Town Competitiveness (HTC) Program, a rural economic development program that focuses on communities of 5,000 residents or less located in the Plains region. A joint venture of the Nebraska Community Foundation, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development and the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, HTC offers planning for small communities built on leadership, capital, entrepreneurship and youth.

Leadership Quest emerged from the HTC. This 9-month class helps participants develop interpersonal skills, empowerment, and conflict management, and creates a strong community culture.

“Through Leadership Quest, we are trying to create a group of young leaders,” Kunz said. “We teach skills needed to lead in small town, and anywhere.”

Many Quest participants have been young people, including a high school student who said this about the classes: “It’s a unique, fun way to develop skills needed to excel, not only in the business world, but in life in general ... I would highly recommend Leadership Quest to anyone who wants to get more involved with their community or anyone who wants to build stronger relationships with their family, co-workers or friends.”

This kind of response from Valley County youth keeps hope alive for Kunz and for the future of Valley County.

Opportunities for Young People

Considering the median age of citizens in Valley County is 43, significantly older than that of Nebraska as a whole, Kunz and the economic development team invest time and energy in programs – and job opportunities -- luring youths back to the area.

Last summer, VCED welcomed a young intern from the University of Nebraska.

Brian Zimmer, of Bellwood, Neb., joined Kunz to work on various technology projects for VCED and their partners.

Zimmer completed community and business marketing CD’s and turned them into a website made available as part of an alumni recruitment effort. Brochures will soon be mailed to all Ord High School Alumni from 1960 to 2000. Zimmer worked on other county websites as well as conducted a youth opinion survey and a business development database.

Helping foster an entrepreneurial spirit in even younger citizens is the VCED Business Development Coordinator, Nancy Glaubke.

Glaubke joined Kunz’s team in July 2004. Made possible by a grant from USDA Rural Development, the business development position was created to provide resources for new and existing business owners.

“Focus on this new position is business start-ups, business transfer and business growth,” Kunz said. “There are quite a few business owners in our area who are retiring soon, and we want to make sure there are not vacant storefronts downtown.”

Glaubke also works with area schools in developing entrepreneurship programs for students.

“We are trying to get across the idea that they can have a business in their own home town,” Glaubke said. “They can be an entrepreneur and live anywhere they want to.”

One exciting project currently on Glaubke’s list is working with teachers at a local Catholic school on some entrepreneurial curriculum. Glaubke visits the school once a week to teach entrepreneurship. She combines various teaching materials, including Mind Your Own Business (Heritage) and Making a Job (Kauffmann Center), but she also creates her own lessons with

information from the *Wall Street Journal* – and her home. Once Glaubke brought in her Roomba vacuum cleaner, a high-tech robot that scoots around your house to clean floors.

“I let them play with it, and they were amazed,” Glaubke said. “It made them think about developing products that they might otherwise overlook.”

Thirty-four 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders have picked products to make and sell, writing business plans, applying for loans, developing business cards, designing advertisements, and mostly just having fun.

“These kids, you would not believe some of the things they have come up with,” said Glaubke, with more than a hint of enthusiasm.

For example, an 8th grade girl and her 6th grade brother are respectively making and selling homemade wooden tops and helicopter toys.

“You should have seen her brother describe his project to the loan officer,” Glaubke said. “(The officers) were very impressed.”

And then there is the case of Ben and Michael and their rabbit fur business.

These two 8th graders love to hunt, said Glaubke. They’ve taken their shared passion and partnered to create a business selling rabbit fur-covered koozies. When a representative from the Kellogg Foundation came to visit the young entrepreneurs, she put a koozie on her wrist, saying, “That makes a nice cuff!”

“Now the boys are taking it a step further and selling rabbit fur cuffs for gloves or sweaters,” Glaubke said. “These were kids who were not very excited about the business thing in the beginning. But once they saw they could combine their love for hunting with a business opportunity, they were sold.”

In April, Glaubke’s students will bring their products to a business fair. And, consumers world-wide will soon have the opportunity to purchase the student wares through ebay.

Some of these young entrepreneurs plan to sell their products on ebay.com, the popular online auction site. A businesswoman in Ord will be teaching the children how to post items on ebay.

Both Glaubke and Kunz were born and raised in Ord.

“When I was in high school, I couldn’t wait to leave this place and see the world,” Glaubke said.

But they both came back and now practice what they preach – living and working in rural Nebraska really is the good life.

-By Lisa Bauer, 1/05

For more information on...

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

... Ord, Nebraska, and VCED, go to www.ordneusa.com

... Valley County, Nebraska, go to www.co.valley.ne.us

... the Ord business and community marketing CD’s, go to www.ComeHomeToOrd.com

... ebay, go to www.ebay.com