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‘Bonus years’ fuel strong desire for Howells woman to give back to community

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HOWELLS — Kathy Heard still chokes up when she thinks about the medical emergency that nearly stole her husband’s life.

It happened in October 2012. After putting in a full day of hard work on their farm near Howells, Jerry Heard sat down to read the newspaper while she cleaned supper dishes.

He had just offered commentary on a story about someone being struck by lightning on a clear day when he slumped over at the counter.

“At first, I thought he was sleeping. He’d worked hard that day,” she said. “I just kept working. Then I heard that gurgle.”

For Heard, the noise triggered a memory of “the death rattle,” a sound made when a dying person can no longer clear saliva or mucus from the back of their throat. That’s when she realized her husband was in trouble.

“I turned around and was like ‘Oh my (gosh). This is not the end,’ ” she said. “I dialed 911. I started beating on him profusely, but I never felt like I was alone.”

She wasn’t.

Moments later, Pat Eller, the town police officer, showed up to assist her with CPR. Shortly thereafter, rescue personnel arrived and shocked her husband multiple times before taking him to the hospital in West Point. He then was flown to Omaha, where Heard said he was put on hypothermic treatment to protect his tissue and brain cells.

Her husband’s cardiac arrest—the result of a bad valve, which was later replaced—began a months-long road to recovery, as well as a lesson in the selflessness and caring nature of the residents in their hometown of Howells, a lesson that has further sparked the her desire to give back to her community.



Heard said she already knew residents in the small Colfax County town of about 550 had a giving nature. The Dodge native, whose family owned the grain elevator in Howells for many years, received a big dose that giving nature when she volunteered to serve the town’s Q125 celebration committee, four years before her husband’s cardiac arrest.

As a committee member, Heard worked with a team to raise funds to pay for the celebration. By the time the event was complete in the summer of 2012, all of the expenses had been paid and nearly \$100,000 was left over.

“Our whole community worked so well together for that Q125. Nobody said no,” she said. “Everyone—from the pie-baking ladies to the committee heads—everybody said yes. Everybody was on board. It was awesome.”

But the excess funds led to a dilemma.

After some of the excess money was dispersed to groups that had helped with the event, nearly \$50,000 remained, and discussion arose about what to do with the leftover funds.

The suggestions that were offered provided the community with tangible

results, but they would benefit only current residents of the town, Heard said.

Then Heard attended the Ag-ceptional Women’s Conference at Northeast Community College in Norfolk that fall, and she learned about a way to stretch those leftover funds for the benefit of future generations.

At the conference, Heard listened to a representative of the Nebraska Community Foundation talk about the benefit of creating an endowment on which to build a community’s future. The representative talked about how residents of the tiny town of Byron, Neb., gathered one night and wrote down on a bar napkin ideas of how to keep their community solid.

Heard began thinking about the way her community worked so well together to support the Q125, and she began mulling the possibility of using that teamwork and can-do attitude in Howells to create an endowment.

“It was just amazing, and I thought to myself, ‘We can do this,’” Heard said.

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Heard went back to the group in Howells with the idea of starting a foundation. After other residents were on board with the idea, the leftover \$50,000 was used as seed money for the endowment.

The Howells Community Fund later joined forces with the Nebraska Community Foundation, which provides training and a network of other towns across the state with whom ideas are shared on projects to help draw each community's assets and talents to the forefront.

Heard said communities like Byron and Shickley have been a source of inspiration, and an idea from Imperial helped send the message to the community's youth that their talents are needed and welcome at home.

"When I graduated (from high school), they gave us suitcases. Now, we give them mailboxes and tell them we want them to come home," Heard said. "We got that idea from Imperial."

Heard said the creation of a community fund leaves a legacy that honors and respects the past, as well as benefits Howells in its future endeavors.

"It's going to be forever," Heard said of the money put into the fund. "Every year, we're going to get dividends and earnings, and it's going to be there forever."

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The community already has benefited from the fund. It purchased a new sound system, which is housed in the Howells Ballroom, and made some much-needed improvements to the park and its shelter. Money also has been donated for the addition of new playground equipment, built by the Howells Community Club, and the fund has participated in a joint project to build a new basketball court.

Heard, who serves on the board for the Howells Community Fund, said she and others are now going door to door to raise money for the challenge grant opportunity from the Sherwood Foundation.

The challenge is for the community to raise \$500,000 over the course of four years and, in return, the Sherwood Foundation will give \$250,000 if the challenge is met.

"Right now, we are well on our way," Heard said of the challenge.

Heard said she—as well as other members of the Howells Community Fund board—are motivated partially by the inspiration of former advisory committee member Dorothy Mejstrik, who died in 2016. In addition to their fundraising efforts, each board member has pledged money to the fund, as well.

"You cannot ask people to give if you're not vested yourself," she said.

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Heard said she and her husband feel strongly about "paying it forward" to the future of the community that has given them so much.

The cardiac surgeon had told Heard that her husband had less than a 10% chance of surviving if his cardiac arrest had happened in the Omaha hospital; given his distance from any hospital when it happened, it was nothing short of a miracle that he survived, she said.

The five months that followed the event were a blur of hospital and nursing home stays and rounds of dialysis. His heart valve since has been replaced, and he's recovered significantly, Heard said.

But she added they still are wondering how to repay the kindness and support that was offered by residents of the Howells community—from the rescue personnel to the friends who looked out for their home and decorated it for Christmas to the prayers that were offered for healing and strength—as the couple struggled through the ordeal.