kcff

keith county foundation fund

dedicated to the improvement and long-term viability of the community

2025-26 ANNUAL REPORT

Our MISSION

Enhance Keith County's ability to grow as a community where people want to live, work, learn, have fun, and prosper.

Our VISION

To provide leadership that promotes collaboration, cooperation, and partnerships within the Keith County community,

Encourage charitable giving to build endowments and other community-focused funds,

Provide stewardship in partnership with the Nebraska Community Foundation that provides guardianship and investment of funds,

And make impactful grants addressing community needs and opportunities through high-impact, sustainable grant-making.



THANKS KEITH COUNTY – Members of the Keith County Foundation Fund advisory committee (from left) Richard Gibson, Jon Holzfaster, Amber Kuskie, Mary Pierce, Karen Lundquist and Gary Pfeifer, and Big Give committee members Laura Kemp and Caitlin Fuller celebrated the tremendous $719,140.99 raised during the annual fundraiser at the Big Give celebration, held July 23.

Big Give Breaks Record

Thanks to a generous community, the sixth annual Big Give raised nearly $720,000 for non-profit organizations serving Keith County. A program of the Keith County Foundation Fund, from June 1 through June 15, the Big Give encourages donations to participating non-profit entities.

And, just like in past years, the community stepped forward. With 54 entities participating, 430 unique donors made 1,271 donations, which totaled $573,199.41. An additional $2,375 was awarded to non-profit participants for raising money early, daily drawings, increasing donor count and dollars raised. A new prize was added this year to highlight youth-giving with the winner selecting the participating organization of his/her choice as the recipient of $125.

KCFF provided $75,000 in matching funds, which were distributed proportionately to the participating non-profits. In addition, the Foundation provided dollar-to-dollar matches up to $25,000 to the Brule and Paxton volunteer fire departments and the Ogallala Rural Fire District. This resulted in an additional $68,698 in matched funds. Thus, the Big Give raised, in total, $719,140.99 for the non-profit entities and programs supporting Keith County residents, far exceeding a $400,000 goal.

"Amazing, just amazing," said Mandy Hoover, KCFF fund advisory committee member and treasurer of the Big Give committee.

Since its inception in June 2021, the Big Give has increased in donations each year. The inaugural event raised $152,333.87, followed in 2022 by $212,442.45. In 2023, $262,445.44 was generated by the event, and $317,512.32 in 2024. Last year, donations were $356,213.92. In total since inception, the event has generated $2,020,089.

The Big Give has also increased in participating organizations from 31 in 2021, 30 in 2022, 39 in 2023, 38 in 2024, 50 in 2025 and 54 this year.

Gary Pfeifer, KCFF fund advisory committee member and chair of the Big Give committee, credits the energy and drive of the volunteer Big Give committee, which includes Hoover, Jon Holzfaster, Caitlin Fuller, Laura Kemp, Gentri Welsh, and Karen Lundquist.

He also credited those associated with the 54 non-profit entities participating in this year's Big Give. "Their tireless work transforms our community," Pfeifer said. "We're grateful to them for what they do to enhance life for Keith County and its residents.



WILD WEST SOAP BOX DERBY YOUTH DONATION – In recognition of youth donating to the Big Give, Emerson Kemp, second from left, selected the Wild West Soap Box Derby as the recipient of a $125 prize. Pictured from left are Dave Barrett, WWSBD race director; Kemp; Marissa Juarez; and Denise Barrett.



Gary Pfeifer and Jon Holzfaster, KCFF Fund Advisory and Big Give committee members, post a sign on Highway 30 to launch the 2026 Big Give season.

Keith County Historical Society	$121,232.01
Pathways Pregnancy Center of Ogallala	$35,668.71
St. Luke's Catholic School	$34,088.71
Brule Volunteer Fire Department	$57,263.71
Sandhills Crisis Intervention Program (SCIP)	$28,260.71
Community Prairie Theatre	$27,423.21
Ogallala Rural Fire Protection District	$49,694.71
Paxton Volunteer Fire Department	$45,488.71
Wild West Soap Box Derby	$24,678.71
Keith County Senior Citizens (Senior Center)	$21,928.56
Trails West CASA	$22,000.63
South Platte Early Learning Programs	$19,568.50
St. Paul's Lutheran Church and School	$15,285.83
Teammates Mentoring Program of Ogallala	$15,162.47
Ogallala Regional Arts Council	$14,792.36
Goodall YMCA of Ogallala via YMCA of Scottsbluff	$13,688.56
Western Trails Creative District - KCAD	$13,129.82
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Keith County	$12,512.97
Ogallala Community Hospital & Health Foundation	$11,690.51
Ogallala Baseball Association	$11,241.86
Big Mac Sports Club	$10,754.08
Friends of the Kenfield Gallery	$10,069.09
Lemoyne Senior Center	$7,842.05
Ogallala Community Blood Drive	$7,049.49
Keith County Agricultural Society	$6,956.67
Communities For Kids via ESU #16	$6,946.09
Brule Lions Club via Keith County Foundation Fund	$6,761.63
Ogallala First Impressions - KCAD	$5,909.80
Friends of Tri-Trails Park via Nat'l Pony Express Assoc.	$5,580.81
Brule Community Center Association	$5,422.19
Ogallala Youth Trap Club	$5,208.35
Paxton Optimist Club via Optimist Int'l Foundation	$5,146.08
Brule Community Improvement Group via BCCA	$4,981.59
Ogallala Public School Foundation	$4,499.86
City of Ogallala Tree Board	$3,516.18
Brule First Impressions - KCAD	$3,383.67
Keep Keith County Beautiful	$3,254.43
Rotary Club of Ogallala	$2,948.94
Prairie View PTO	$2,811.60
Front Street Cowboy Museum	$2,299.85
Keystone Women's Library Association	$2,288.62
Ogallala Optimist Club	$1,797.50
Ogallala Roundup Rodeo	$1,401.54
Paxton Public Library	$1.368.64
American Legion Hankins-Miller Post No. 303	$1,356.89
Western Resources Group	$1,092.53
Paxton First Impressions - KCAD	$745.92
Bridge of Hope Child Advocacy Center Inc	$704.80
Paxton Food Pantry via Paxton UMC	$687.18
Girls on the Run of Nebraska	$587.31
Shop with a First Responder (City of Ogallala/Police)	$420.46
Ogallala Lions Club via Keith County Foundation Fund	$387.57
Outy Obsession Inc.	$93.80
Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation (NSHSF)	$64.46

A Great Big Thank You to You



Mary Pierce, Keith County Foundation Fund Chair

What a year.

If you ask me what I'm most proud of in my role as Keith County Foundation Fund Advisory Committee chair, it is you.

Thanks to an incredibly generous community and supporters thereof, this year's Keith County Big Give not only totaled nearly $720,000, it nearly doubled last year's record of $356,000.

How does this happen?

It happened through the hard work of the volunteers running the 54 participating non-profit organizations, entities that support the programs and projects that enhance life for Keith County residents.

It happened through the generosity of our residents and those from other states who love Keith County. They ranged in ages and income yet shared the common goal of love for life in western Nebraska and its residents.

While the Big Give certainly is a community accomplishment, the community's continued support of the Keith County Foundation Fund allowed for several impactful grants this year.

The Foundation provided $250,000 to help keep first responders safe by purchasing a new 911 response system. While the professionals working in those fields were aware of the antiquated system, the devastating March fires brought to light a need to "do something." That grant is not only helping to enhance safety for Keith County responders but also for responders in the other counties served by the Keith County center, including Deuel, Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Logan, McPherson and Perkins.

From helping those who keep us safe to supporting our youngest residents, the Foundation was able to provide $200,000 to Tiny Trails Early Learning Center, the Ogallala Public Schools' expanded preschool program. Through donations, including KCFF's, OPS was able to go from serving 15 children to 43 in the preschool program.

Other impactful grants included $25,000 to repair and update the lift on the Keith-Arthur Counties Food Pantry truck. The truck is used to collect food donations, which are distributed from the pantry's location on West O Street. The pantry is operated by volunteers.

The foundation also provided $75,000 in funding to the Community Prairie Theater group, which is operated by volunteers who are working tirelessly to revive the historic Prairie Theater.

Whether you donated to the Big Give or to the Keith County Foundation Fund, thank you. Without you, this great work would not be possible.

Keith County Foundation Fund Advisory Committee Members

Mary Pierce, chair
Richard Gibson, vice-chair
Angie Kolste, past-chair
Eric Duhachek, co-treasurer
Teri Elmshaueser, co-treasurer
Sue Schilz, secretary
Lorena Beckius
Chris Goertz
Jon Holzfaster
Mandy Hoover
Lisa Kraus
Amber Kuskie
Gary Pfeifer
Andy Pollock
Karen Lundquist, KCFF coordinator
Jana Jensen, Nebraska Community Foundation affiliate fund coordinator

"Donors don't give to institutions. They invest in ideas and people in whom they believe."
— G.T. Smith

Keith County Foundation Fund June 30, 2026 Statement	
General Fund	$110,328
Scholarships	$260,224
Ogallala Library	$374,290
FAC Endowed	$11,543,186
Paxton Library Fund	$16,906
Brule Cemetery Fund	$11,644
Ogallala Arts Endowment	$12,430
Legacy Account	$2,542,166
Holzfaster Board Endowment	$47,410
Berryman Education Account	$250,032
Big Give	$172,511
Payout Account	$134,662
Ken Schimonitz	$357,978
Kathleen Lute Library Replacement	$424,296
Aimee J. Haley - Holzfaster Memorial	$97,092
Set Aside Account	$1,115,630
PAKS	$399,042
Total Fund Balance	$17,869, 827



THE KATHLEEN LUTE PUBLIC LIBRARY - The local library is one of the many community projects the Keith County Foundation Fund has assisted in bringing to fruition in the past decades.

Keith County Foundation Fund Celebrates 25 Years

In 2025, the Keith County Foundation Fund celebrated 25 years, and in October of the same year, the community was invited to join in a celebration of the milestone event at the Keith County Fairgrounds Exhibit Hall. The event brought together founders, former and current committee members, and dozens of people who had donated not only funds but their time and talents during the years.

For more than a quarter of a century, KCFF has been a mainstay in the community. Although the wording of its mission and vision statements may have changed during the last 25 years, the ultimate goal remains: to continue to build permanent endowments and invest dollars in the community by way of impactful grants that focus on people, programs and projects that enhance life for the residents in the county.

The foundation is a permanent local pillar, and its group of volunteer fund advisory committee members are trusted financial stewards and active community leaders who unite local donors, nonprofits, and residents to improve quality of life. The foundation acts as a permanent savings account for the area, pooling gifts to generate reliable annual funding for regional needs.

At its simplest, a community foundation helps people give back to the place they live in a structured, lasting way. Gifts made to the foundation today continue supporting the community well into the future.

With adherence to the belief that "we have all we need right here," the foundation's volunteers are enthusiastic about the vision that continues to unfold, along with the resources to transform dreams and needs into the next generation's reality.

The seeds of philanthropy in Keith County were planted in the late 1990s with the creation of the Western Nebraska Community Foundation, which later became the Keith County Community Foundation Fund and, ultimately, the Keith County Foundation Fund.

In 2000, the board voted to approve a name change to Keith County Community Foundation, and in April of the same year, it became an affiliate fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation. The NCF affiliation benefited the local foundation with increased resources, including educational opportunities and operational support. These enhancements fueled the vision of the founding board, which was dedicated to championing projects that would strengthen and grow the local community.

NCF's partnership has provided crucial expertise in endowments and challenge grants. In 2003, Larry and Mary Lynn Callen challenged the community with $100,000 to match those dollars two-to-one. The committee's enthusiasm led to a larger goal of matching the funds three-to-one one for a potential $400,000 endowment fund. After a five-month, high-intensity campaign to educate the community about the KCCF endowment, donations reached $349,000, creating eligibility for the $100,000 match and establishing the fund with $449,000.With the successful challenge grant completed, an annual grant cycle was started. Emphasis remained on growing the endowment and the Builder's Club was created. The club included regular solicitation mailings and in-person requests, as well as raffles and promotions during annual grant-making celebrations.

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During the years, as the endowment grew, so did the ability to make grants. In 2003, its inaugural grant-making year, the foundation provided grants totaling $6,500. During the next 10 years, the foundation's endowment grew to more than $1.3 million and was providing more than $20,000 in annual grants. And in 2017, its 14th year of grant-giving, $37,575 was dispensed to non-profit programs and projects. In 2018, the endowment first topped $2 million allowing for the granting of more than $31,000.

In 2019, the foundation's assets increased dramatically thanks to an anonymous $8 million gift. That year, the endowment totaled more than $9.7 million, expanding the foundation's ability to provide grants to more than $140,000 that year. This figure would grow to more than $400,000 by 2022 when the entire donation was realized.

Today, the foundation's endowment tops $14 million and generates approximately $500,000 annually. And in the 2025-26 fiscal year, more than $550,000 was granted to a variety of nonprofits, programs, and projects.

Recipients of KCFF grants during the past 25 years include the Ogallala, Keystone-Lemoyne, Brule and Paxton fire and rescue departments; Ogallala and Paxton libraries; Ogallala and Lemoyne senior centers; social entities including Sandhills Crisis Intervention Program, Trails West Court Appointed Special Advocates, Ogallala Women's Resource Center (Pathways), Keith-Arthur Counties Food Pantry, Perkins-Arthur-Keith Development Services, Nebraska Home Health, Western Prairie Hospice, Sandhills District Health Department and Clinic, and the Salvation Army; programs and/or projects associated with the public schools and Mid-Plains Community College; programs and/or projects associated with the city, the county, the Keith County Housing Authority and Keith County Area Development; programs and/or projects associated with the village of Brule, the village of Paxton, the village of Keystone; the Keith County Historical Society, the Phelps Hotel Historical Preservation Association; Petrified Wood Gallery; Front Street Cowboy Museum; the Wild West Soap Box Derby; Ogallala Regional Arts Council; the recreation center; Boy and Girl Scout troops; Ogallala Baseball Association; recycling entities; Ogallala Community Hospital; and numerous service clubs.

A Salute to the Fire Heroes of the Morrill Fire

During March, the Morrill Fire scorched approximately 644,000 acres across Arthur, Garden, Grant, Keith and Morrill counties. The largest wildfire in the United States during the 2026 wildfire season, is also Nebraska's largest in history.

To show appreciation for the hundreds of personnel from several states who participated in the overall incident command and suppression efforts, the Keith County Foundation Fund strategically placed "Thank You Fire Heroes" signs across the county.









NEW CONSOLE SYSTEM – The Keith County Foundation Fund provided $250,000 to purchase a new console system, the communication system for all emergency response. Pictured left to right, Keith County Board of Commissioners Chairman Corey Crandall, Dispatchers, Zoey Gorham and JoAnna Swisher; Keith County Emergency Manager David Kling; Mary Pierce, Amber Kuskie and Angie Kolste, Keith County Foundation Fund advisory committee members; and Keith County Emergency Medical Services Chief Jordan Meininger.

$250,000 Grant Awarded to Upgrade Emergency Dispatch System

The Keith County Foundation Fund awarded a $250,000 grant to support a critical upgrade to the Keith County Emergency Management Center's dispatch system, strengthening emergency communications for residents across Keith County and surrounding region and concluding a multi-year effort to upgrade local emergency radio systems.

The Emergency Operations and Dispatch Center, a joint effort between the City of Ogallala and Keith County since 1985, serves as a hub for first responders, providing dispatch services to Keith County, Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Logan and McPherson counties.

The grant will fund replacement of the center's aging dispatch console system, integrating radio, telephone and computer-aided dispatch communications. The current system is outdated and increasingly unable to meet modern emergency response demands.

Recent wildfires across Keith County and neighboring areas underscored the need for greater communication capacity, especially to manage multiple dedicated channels for personnel in the field.

After the fires, Keith County Foundation Fund Advisory Committee members contacted Keith County Emergency Management Center to discuss ways to help. Manager Dave Kling said the dispatch console immediately came to mind as a need with tremendous impact.

Mary Pierce, KCFF advisory committee chair, said the investment reflects the organization's commitment to community safety and well-being. "Reliable communication is paramount to effective emergency response, and this project ensures our first responders are equipped with the tools they need—both today and into the future," Pierce said.

The upgraded system will include a modern, three-position, 20-channel dispatch console; enhanced recording capabilities; new radio repeaters; and tower/network infrastructure improvements. Designed for 24/7 reliability, it will expand communication capacity and support future growth.

Through Nebraska's participation in the National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO), pre-negotiated contracts will enable efficient, cost-effective procurement.

"This grant is an investment not only in technology, but in people," said Eric Duhachek, also a member of KCFF's advisory committee. "It supports the firefighters, EMTs, law enforcement officers and neighbors who serve our region every day."

> "Without this grant, I don't think we'd be getting this upgrade as quickly. Government funding is always tight. We would have had to cut something else."
>
> Dave Kling, EMS Manager

The Keith County Foundation Fund supports quality-of-life, community-strengthening and county needs projects. The Kenneth F. Schimonitz Account of the Keith County Foundation Fund made this public safety and regional collaboration investment possible.



KCFF DONATES -- From left, Angie Kolste, KCFF; Jacob Fehr, OPSD director of student services; Mary Pierce, KCFF; Gene Russell, OPSD superintendent; and Amber Kuskie, Chris Goertz, and Richard Gibson, KCFF; celebrated the $200,000 donation from KCFF for the Tiny Trails, Ogallala Public Schools' new preschool facility. The donation sparked additional frunds from other entities.

Preschool Expansion a Reality

The Keith County Foundation Fund is a major donor to the expansion of the Ogallala Public Schools' preschool project. A $200,000 contribution helped launch the Tiny Trails Early Learning Center program to reality.

Located in the former armory building, which had been used for several years by the school district for its after-school Kids Oasis program, the facility now houses the district's preschool. Preschool opportunities have been expanded from 15 to 43 students.

"Tiny Trails represents an exciting investment in our youngest learners, their families and the future of our community," Gene Russel, OPS superintendent, said.

Several years ago, KCFF's advisory committee named early childhood education and quality childcare as a major focus area.

"We know that access to early childhood education and quality childcare are vital to children, families and the community," Mary Pierce, KCFF advisory committee chair, said. "We're proud to be a partner with the school district on this endeavor."

According to the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, 90 percent of a child's brain development happens before kindergarten. Programs that build foundational cognitive, social, and emotional skills are crucial, can close opportunity gaps and support long-term academic success.

In addition to researched benefits to the children, high-quality early childhood programs can have positive economic and workforce impacts on a community. Russel said as they began exploring the avenues of expanding access to high-quality early childhood education, one of the first organizations to step forward in support was the Keith County Foundation Fund.

"We are proud to recognize the Keith County Foundation Fund for its extraordinary $200,000 contribution to the OPSD early learning program expansion," Russel said. "This contribution represents far more than a financial donation, but rather a commitment to creating opportunities for the children of Keith County during some of the most important years of development."

"We are deeply grateful to the Keith County Foundation Fund for believing in this vision from the beginning and helping turn an idea into a lasting investment in the children and families of Keith County."

Childcare Providers Participate in Incentive Plan

Schmittler awarded $15,000 for quality work

Kayla Schmittler is serious about her work, even when it involves play. Schmittler, who owns and operates Growing Minds Childcare in Ogallala, knows that what she does is important.

"I want them to feel loved, to have that safe environment growing up, and a second home," she said.



LEVEL 5 — Kayla Schmittler, left, was accompanied by her husband, Kaleb, and daughter Keaton, when recognized for achieving Step Up to Quality's top level.

While her goal is simple, Schmittler has worked hard on the quality of she provides. She is the first currently-licensed provider in the county who has reached level five in the Step Up to Quality program. Last fall, she received the $15,000 incentive offered by the Keith County Foundation Fund. "We have many amazing providers in Keith County. We want to financially incentivize those who choose to participate in this program," said Mary Pierce, fund advisory chair for the Keith County Foundation Fund.

Step Up to Quality is a five-level voluntary program of the Nebraska Department of Education. Each level builds on the previous one, creating a mindset for continuous quality improvement.

Taking care of children was a calling, Schmittler said. She started her career first as a babysitter in her teens to later working at Kids Zone, a center-based childcare facility in Ogallala. After marrying and starting her own family, she opened her own in-home childcare business, which she has operated for the last 13 years.

Schmittler said participating in the SUTQ was a lot of work, yet it complemented her early childhood education degree. She acknowledged the program, which includes training, having a coach, and creating and adopting a curriculum, was challenging and added hours to already long days. The program also included professional observation, one of the more stressful elements, Schmittler said, adding that there is no way to anticipate everything that can happen. While she most enjoyed working with her mentor and the joy of learning and applying new ideas, Schmittler said she completed Step Up To Quality for herself.

"I wanted that verification that I was doing everything I could for these kids," she said.

Pierce said it was an impressive accomplishment.

"We know this wasn't quick or easy," Pierce said. "We're so proud of Kayla and the work she did to reach level five. What a gift she has given to the children in her program and their families."

Quality childcare and the importance of early childhood education have been a focus area for KCFF since visioning sessions were held in 2020. The SUTQ incentive program was implemented in 2023 as a way to reward licensed providers in Keith County for their work and focus on quality childcare.

Mini's House Investing in Learning

Mini's House Childcare Center has reached Level 4 in the Nebraska Department of Education's Step Up to Quality program and in July was awarded $5,000 from the Keith County Foundation Fund.



LEVEL 4 — Mary Ann Christensen and Maddie Breer represented Mini's House.

Mini's House owner Mary Ann Christensen said pursuing the Step Up to Quality levels has been a lot of work, but well worth the effort. Christensen said they will continue to work toward Level 5 and hope for attainment in 2027. Mini's House opened in May 2023. Currently, there are 54 children enrolled in the program.

"Running a safe, nurturing, and high-quality childcare and pre-school environment takes a village, and support like the foundation's makes an immeasurable difference," stated Christensen. "This generous contribution will allow us to enhance our learning centers, upgrade our educational and play materials, and continue providing the best possible foundation for the children in our care—from our youngest infants to our pre-K explorers."

The SUTQ incentive program for licensed childcare providers in Keith County has been extended to 2029. Contact info@keithcountyfoundation.org for more information.



PAKS DONATION — Jim Ayers, left, and Dave Schwasinger, right, both representing PAKS Developmental Services, presented Keith County Foundation fund member Eric Duhachek with a check for $450,000, half of the proceeds of the dissolution of the PAKS entity.

PAKS Legacy Will Live On

PAKS Developmental Service Inc. gifted more than $900,000 to the Keith County Foundation Fund and the Ogallala Public Schools Foundation after it completed the dissolution of its company in December 2025. Each entity received $454,000 after the dissolution of the local non-profit corporation.

PAKS President Dave Schwasinger was in charge of completing final PAKS business, liquidating the business's assets and presenting the gift checks to the two local foundations.

For more than 50 years, PAKS was a community-based organization that provided support and services for individuals with developmental disabilities. The company focused on promoting independence and enhancing the quality of life through a range of programs and resources tailored to meet the unique needs of individuals.

Jim Ayres, who served as a longtime Ogallala Public Schools teacher and as a board member for both PAKS and the OPSF, said the local entity was absorbed by North Platte and renamed the Ogallala Opportunity Center.

The money and property sold in the PAKS' coffers allowed for the gifts to the OPSF and KCFF.

"The PAKS board was fully behind donating to these two organizations," said Ayres, who served on the PAKS board during its early formative years.

Ayres also credited the effort of the late Dwayne Orth, who served as chairman of the PAKS board for about 35 years.

"Dwayne was instrumental in establishing and perpetuating PAKS contributions to the community," Ayres said. "His time, efforts and contributions are certainly worthy of recognition and these gifts will continue to support the school and community."

OPSF became a 501(c)(3) foundation in 2014 to build an endowment that will financially support Ogallala Public Schools for years to come, according to OPSF President Loree Cain. The secondary goal of the foundation is to provide yearly grants to classroom teachers for innovative and creative programming that will positively impact students, Cain said.

"The OPSF board will honor PAKS, and what this organization and group of people stand for, by dedicating funds from this gift to specifically go toward students with special needs. This is a gift that will positively impact Ogallala students for decades to come. We are honored to be the stewards of these funds," Cain said.

The Keith County Foundation Fund mission is to promote collaboration, cooperation and partnerships within Keith County; encourage charitable giving to build endowment and other community-focused funds; provide stewardship in partnership with the Nebraska Community Foundation; and make impactful grants addressing community needs.

KCFF Chair Mary Pierce said the PAKS gift will be placed under its own account in the fund's endowment. While the principal grows, the earned interest will allow KCFF to make "impactful grants while respecting the directed purpose of the funds," Pierce said. "We appreciate the thoughtfulness of the PAKS boards in leaving these funds to the Keith County Foundation Fund and the Ogallala Public School Foundation. These dollars can then be reinvested in the community and leave a lasting legacy of the PAKS organization."

Collecting Food Gets a Lift

Thanks to a $25,000 donation, collecting food for the Keith-Arthur Counties Food Pantry has become a little simpler and much safer.

According to Brenda Griffith, pantry director, the truck was in need of a new lift and repairs to the truck's ceiling. The truck's motor also needed work, as it was limited to a speed no faster than 40 miles per hour.

With a new lift installed, the motor repaired and leaks fixed, volunteers are now able to complete their food collection routes more safely, quicker and easier.

"The lift is a blessing," Griffith said. "The ease at which the lift goes down is much faster than the old one."

Griffith said the gate itself is lighter in weight. That weight reduction helps current volunteers feel capable and confident in operating the box truck. While the winter season will be the true test of the new lift, Griffith is confident.

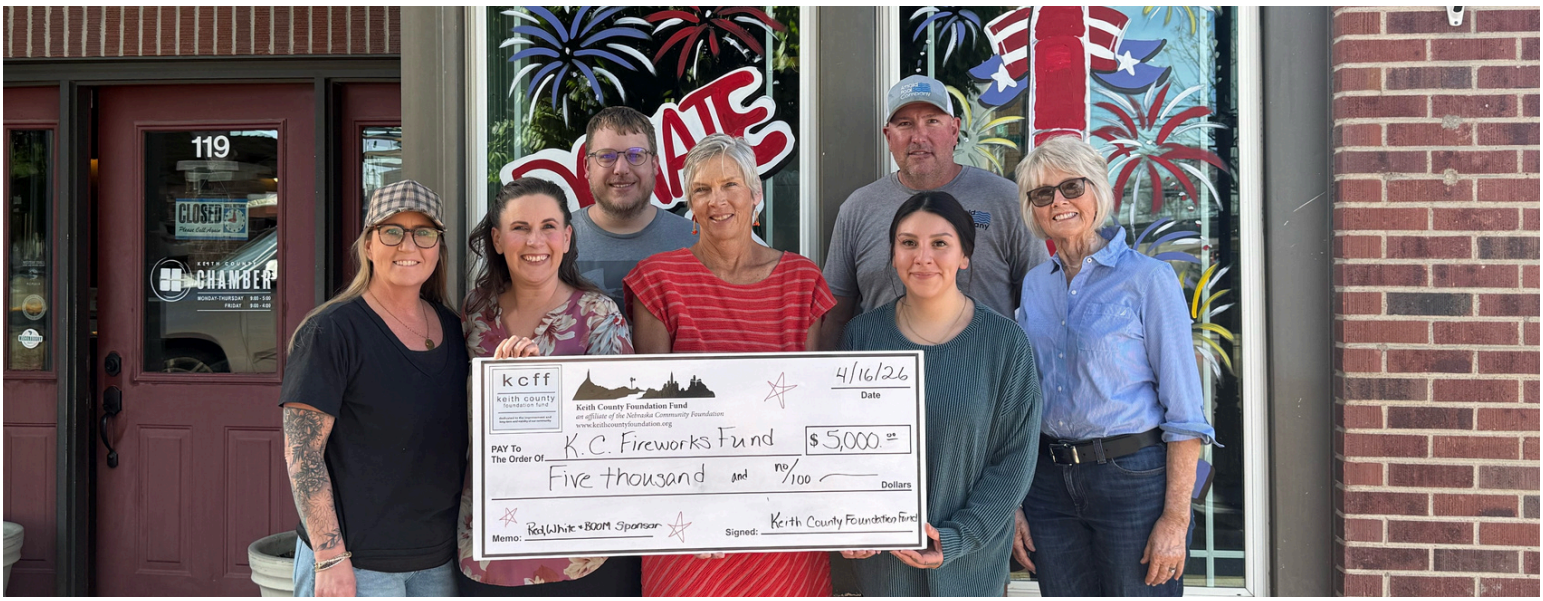
"No more jumping to get the lift down, which will minimize the potential for volunteer injuries. I have high hopes it will work awesome," she said.

The pantry, located at 309 W. O Street in Ogallala, serves from 35 to 55 families per week. The pantry is open from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the first and third Wednesdays of the month, and from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on the second, fourth and fifth Wednesdays of the month.



REPAIRED TRUCK - Keith-Arthur Counties Food Pantry volunteers (in front, left to right) Dave Brown and Brenda Griffith, director, and (in back, left to right) Mitch Budziszewski, Randy Peck, and Bill Christensen are appreciative of the repaired truck. Volunteer Dave Shafer was not present for the photo.

Celebrating 250 Years: The Rockets Red Glare



FIREWORKS — The Keith County Foundation Fund was one of several donors that helped to make this year's Fourth of July Ogallala fireworks display a reality in 2026. Pictured with a KCFF for $5,000 to chamber officials were, from left, Kerri Schroeder, Dawn Haney, David Ziola, Mary Pierce, Darby Flansburg, Ariana Mungia, and Angie Kolste.



GRACIOUS GIRLS - Now fifth graders, (in front) Isabelle VanWinkle and Ivy Wood and (in back, from left) Andersyn Wilson, Claire Roberts and Maisie Cain made blankets to spread warmth and joy for residents of local care facilities while participating in the YIP program.

YIP Program Continues to Inspire Philanthropy

A couple of years ago, six third-grade girls chose as their Youth Inspired Philanthropy (YIP) project to make fleece blankets for residents in Indian Hills Manor and Wel-Life assisted living facilities. Each resident chose the color and fabric theme for their blanket. Simple, right?

Yet when Isabelle Van Winkle, Andersyn Wilson, Claire Roberts, Ivy Wood and Maisie Cain participated in the 2024 YIP program, not only did they provide blankets for the 61 residents of the care facilities, they also sparked hope and optimism for the future.

YIP, a program of the Keith County Foundation Fund, is an opportunity for Keith County youth in third through 12th grades to utilize their creativity, compassion, and love for their community to make a difference.

Started in 2020, KCFF has provided $10,000 in annual funding, up to $1,000 per selected project. Participants undergo a grant application, create a budget, implement a project, and measure its impact. By exploring what is possible, youth practice leadership, entrepreneurial skills, and experience the joy of bringing ideas to reality.

From a raucous trip to a fabric store, filled with laughter and the spirit of five young girls, to the making of the blankets, and to the individual presentations of the gifts to the individual residents, the girls agree the project was “great.”

And even more than a year later, all remember the warm feelings of thanks expressed by the residents as well as their own feelings of satisfaction for simply doing for others with no anticipated reward.

While the $10,000 annual KCFF investment in the YIP program is significant, the return on investment will surface years from now when the girls return “home” to start careers, raise families and live in a community in which they felt loved and valued, and their actions mattered.

For details, visit www.keithcountyfoundation.org.

Youth Inspired Philanthropy 2025-26 Projects

YIP Projects for the 2025-26 program year were selected in November of 2025 and were completed by Sept. 1. Volunteer leaders for the YIP program include Barb Jeffres, Laura Kemp, and Kayla Schmittler, as well as mentors for each project.

The projects included the following:

- The Indoor Recess Cart: Joslyn Korth and Sayler Towell focused on providing games and activities for indoor recess days. The third-grade girls surveyed K-5 students and teachers to determine cart supplies.
- Prairie View One Book, One School: Heather Orth and her fourth graders launched a school-wide reading project for preschool through fifth grade students, fostering connections between school and family.
- Reading Buddies: Kailey Carlson continued her initiative with Head Start families, emphasizing the importance of family reading time, and provided books and bags.
- Book Bins: Orth's fourth graders Hank Kempton, Lillie Mungia, Dahlia Roberts, Hayden Cudaback, Elizabeth Troy, Hudson Johnson, Bowyn Armknecht, Isabelle Gayle, Luis Ramirez Macias, and Michael Leibhart created storage containers for preschool through third-grade students to help them keep track of the books and instill a love of reading.
- Fish On: Third-grader Gavin Hanson hosted a fishing event at Humphreys Pond for kindergarten through fifth-grade students, provided fishing rods and gear to inspire a love for fishing and family bonding.
- Rockin' With My Book: Kaleena Schmittler plans to enhance the Prairie View Library with flexible seating and a video promoting the joy of reading.
- Bags of Bravery: Kaleena Schmittler and Ava Nordhausen honor first responders by creating appreciation bags.

Inaugural Junior Philanthropy Workshop Offered

This summer, youth in fifth through seventh grades were invited to the inaugural Junior Philanthropy Workshop, a Youth Inspired Philanthropy program of the Keith County Community Foundation.

The daylong event, held June 17, was a hands-on experience that started at the Kathleen Lute Public Library with a conversation about philanthropy in one's own community and concluded with a beautification project at Tiny Trails Learning Center, the Ogallala Public Schools' new preschool.

As the youth planted flowers and added mulch and a bench to a green space at the school, they explored the importance of volunteerism and how one can give back to their community at any age.



CLINIC — Sophia Fehr, Will Fehr, Emerson Kemp, Cullen McBride, Adaela McBride, Burklee Canning and Avery Jones and Program volunteers Laura Kemp, Barb Jeffers and Ella Schlake, beautified an area.

Hometown Intern Program Engages Young Adults in Their Communities

Ella Schlake of Ogallala, now a sophomore at the University of Nebraska Omaha pursuing a music education degree, was the Keith County Foundation Fund's hometown intern this summer.

A program of the Nebraska Community Foundation, a Hometown Intern is a high school graduate who has spent at least one academic year away from their hometown, whether at school, the workplace, or elsewhere, and lives in their hometown for the summer. The intern works alongside their local affiliated funds to discover and unleash community assets.

Qualities include curiosity, a desire to see one's hometown through fresh eyes, and a drive to contribute to the future of his/her community. The interns have opportunities throughout the summer to form bonds with interns from other communities and to look in-depth not only at their own communities but at others across the state. While the interns work directly within Keith County investigating local aspects, the summer typically ends with the intern writing a letter to their hometown.



2026 HOMETOWN INTERNS - In May, interns gathered for an introductory session in Nebraska City. The program included 22 young people from across the state.

This paid experience is flexible, builds leadership skills, and capitalizes on the individual's strengths and interests. The position is about 20 hours per week with a capstone-style project(s) or phase of a program.

Hometown Intern Program Engages Young Adults in Their Communities



Dear Keith County,

Thank you for all that you and your people have given to me since I arrived here 18 years ago. You have made me the strong, smart and capable person I am today. This internship has taught me so much more about my community and the people who make it feel like home.

I am strong because Keith County has strong roots that are evident in the way you preserve and display your history at the Mansion on the Hill, Boot Hill, the Petrified Wood Gallery, Front Street, nd so many other places. I have worked at the Mansion and at Front Street, and we would not be the same place today without the many parts of history here. Working in this internship I talked with very involved community members and saw another side of Keith County that otherwise is looked over.

I am smart because you have invested in your youth and schools. I was and still am a fine arts person. For me music was the one place that I had safety in and a place where my talent and ability could be put to use. I had the privilege of working with incredible teachers who nurtured my abilities and encouraged me to push myself further. With participation in many clubs, activities and volunteer time, I was able to foster skills in leadership, working, and now education. Later, I started working at our library in Ogallala, which was a favorite spot as a kid and still is today. Through the library, I had many experiences to help and work with others to benefit Keith County.

I am capable because of programs like this one, the Keith County Foundation Funds Hometown Intern. I have come to see what is possible when people intentionally invest in relationships, listen to one another, and create opportunities for community members to contribute. The internship also showed me that Keith County has many strengths on which to build. The strong sense of community, willingness to help one another, and pride people have in this area creates opportunities for new ideas to grow. By continuing to listen to youth, support their involvement, and create meaningful ways for them to contribute, Keith County can become a place where more young people choose to stay, return, and invest in their own future and the future of the community.

Love,
Ella Schlake



Prairie Theater Now a Community Asset

A $75,000 grant from the Keith County Foundation Fund to the Community Prairie Theater group provided funds to assist in the purchase of the historic theater.

"The Foundation's $75,000 gift didn't just lift a weight; it gave us room to grow without debt. Thanks to the Foundation, instead of making loan payments, we are able to invest in programming, renovate and maintain this historic space, and keep our doors open," Hannah Flaming, Prairie Theater Group board member, said.

"This gift energized our volunteers, board members, local businesses, and banks to come together around The Prairie Theatre and keeping it here, we hope, for generations to come."

The Community Prairie Theater, a 501c3 nonprofit organization, is run by a four-person volunteer board that has been meeting since August 2024.

The vision behind Ogallala's Prairie Theater is to renovate the historic Prairie Theater and create a space that engages and enlightens the community.

The theater was built in 1936 and has been a landmark in Ogallala's downtown for decades. It was operated as a private business until 2024. In 2025, the theater was purchased by the non-profit group. The theater has reopened and is showing first-run movies while volunteers continue to restore and improve the historic landmark.



Hermance, Berryman Scholarship Award Winners Announced

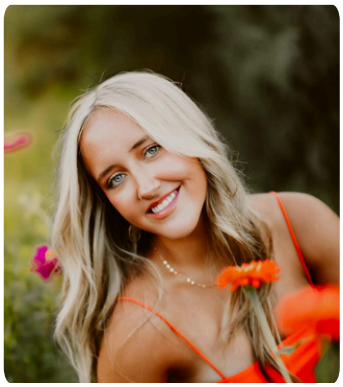
Paige Armijo of Ogallala was awarded the Hermance Scholarship. A recent graduate of Ogallala High School, Armijo is attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and plans to major in pre-law.

The Hermance Scholarship was initially funded in October 2002 with a gift from the children of the late Cliff and Ruth Hermance.

The Hermance Scholarship is given annually to an Ogallala High School graduating senior.

Armijo also was a recipient of a Berryman Scholarship as were Sadie Flansburg, Amanda Hoffman and Lily Knoke.

Flansburg, also an OHS graduate, is attending Southeast Community College and is enrolled in the radiology technician program.



Paige Armijo



Sadie Flansburg

Knoke also attends UN-L and is studying pre-health, pursuing a pre-cytology program.

Hoffman, a UN-L graduate, is attending Colorado Christian University. She plans to complete a master of fine arts degree in clinical mental health counseling in December.

The Berryman Scholarship was established in 2012 with donations from the estate of rancher Charles Wilson "Bud" Berryman. Endowments for college scholarships were created by bequests in both Keith and Arthur counties.

The Hermance and Berryman scholarships are administered through the Keith County Foundation Fund, an affiliate of the Nebraska Community Foundation.



Lily Knoke



Amanda Hoffman

Investments in Keith County Foundation Fund Grow into Future

Imagine an extra $28 million invested in Keith County during the next decade, funding local projects, strengthening the community, and improving quality of life for its residents. That possibility isn't far-fetched. In fact, the resources already exist. The challenge is keeping them here.

A 2021 Transfer of Wealth Study by Nebraska Community Foundation revealed a staggering trend. Across Nebraska, an estimated $100 billion will transfer from one generation to the next during the next 10 years Keith County alone is expected to see $565 million change hands between now and 2035.

The question is where that wealth will go. As assets pass from one generation to the next, much of it will be left to heirs. With many families moving out of the area, those funds often leave the community for good, along with the opportunity to give back.

For information on leaving a planned gift, email info@keithcountyfoundation.org.

KEITH COUNTY



2020 POPULATION
8,335



CONFIRMED PLANNED GIFTS
9
Totalling $795,039
to be endowed

A10-YEAR TRANSFER OF WEALTH
$565 Million



5% OF 10-YEAR TOW
$28 MILLION

5 TO THRIVE

When we leave some of our wealth to the places where it was made and accumulated, we can ensure a prosperous future for our hometowns.

REMEMBER
Once our wealth leaves the community, it is gone forever. Once our wealth is endowed in our community, it is here forever.

Five Ways to Help Keith County Thrive!

1. Visit www.fivetothrivene.org and learn more about the transfer of wealth in your county.
2. Explore NCF's planned giving resources at nebcommfound.giftlegacy.com.
3. Talk to your professional advisor about including your community in your estate plans.
4. Give to the endowment of KCFF or another favorite charity.
5. Spread the word!

Keith County Foundation Fund
PO Box 104
Ogallala, NE 69153

Keith County thrives on your support. Contribute today at www.keithcountyfoundation.org.

I would like to make a gift to Keith County Foundation Fund General Account

- ☐ One-time Contribution in the amount of $ _____ to be paid by _____
- ☐ Monthly Contribution $ _____ to be paid by _____
- ☐ Other _____

☐ If you would like to use an ACH/bank account to gift securities or other assets, or to learn morea bout gift options, endowments, and special legacies, check here and we will reach out with more details.

Your Name(s) _____
Email _____
Phone _____
Address _____
_____

☐ I would like to make this donation anonymously
☐ This gift is (circle your choice) In memory of In honor of _____

The Keith County Foundation Fund is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All monetary gifts are tax deductible.
Mail to: KCFF, PO Box 104, Ogallala, NE 69153. Or save a stamp and donate online at keithcountyfoundation.org.
The Keith County Foundation Fund is an affiliated fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation.