



# **2019 - 2020 ANNUAL REPORT**

*Connecting & Celebrating McCook*





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## Mission

Inspiring investment in the quality of life for the people of Southwest Nebraska.



# A LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

By Cynthia Huff  
MCFF Chairperson

Being a part of the McCook Community Foundation Fund, which is an affiliated fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation, offers opportunities that I could never have imagined. Joining the MCFF committee has given me a sense of hope that is the reality of McCook. The kind of hope that builds an intentional spark and then explodes into unforeseeable capacity in relationship and community building.

While the feeling of hope may be intangible, the reality of what we have accomplished in McCook because of our hope reaches beyond our city's limits. We hope to hold up all southwest Nebraska through creating shared experiences, uplifting opportunities, and positive impacts on daily life functions.

Through the foresight and diligence of earlier community members, MCFF has been able to build on what they started to develop a fund that will have far-reaching impact for the member of communities in our corner of Nebraska. This foundation will allow us, using capital in our unrestricted endowment fund, to continue to build

vibrant, inclusive communities in southwest Nebraska through:

- Successfully completing challenge grant after challenge grant. Allowing us to develop our unrestricted endowment fund to more than \$3,000,000, which therefore funds our annual grant-making capacity at more than \$100,000 a year.
- Developing amazing arts and culture arenas that are welcoming and available to community members of our area.
- Building partnerships that generate capacity, support, cohesiveness, and creativity in areas that before were unimaginable.
- Remaining connected to past and present community members who never stop giving, such as our recent challenge grant sponsored by Susan Sehnert Stuart, which will promote art and cultural experiences in McCook. This challenge effort witnessed over 30 community volunteers participating in the 'Making the Ask' training and then going out into the community talking about our dreams and getting those pledges to meet our goal in a third of the anticipated time.

# Vision

McCook is a vibrant, inclusive community with access to the world. We nurture innovation, economic and educational opportunities, quality community leadership, cultural arts and healthy families and lifestyles.



- Being involved in the creation of several exciting projects such as the Norris Alley Project, which, when fully developed, will create an inclusive platform for gatherings and expressions; and the Brain-Friendly Early Childhood concept, building, and expanding on our current in-home provider model. Where we offer support, education, and connections in helping current providers and training and support for additional in-home providers.
- And holding up our schools as places where kids want to learn and experience new ideas and concepts.

David Brooks, a New York Times Op-Ed columnist, upon his visit to McCook this past summer, was struck by the way we go about our daily lives unaware of the civic mindset we have developed in abundance. It will be through the McCook Community Foundation Fund that we will continue to grow a positive impact with our community, weaving our way to a greater McCook.

## ***FUND ADVISORY COMMITTEE***

**Cynthia Huff**, Chairperson

**Dale Dueland**, Vice Chairperson

**Mark Graff**, Treasurer

**Peggy Been**, Secretary

**Andy Long**

**Dennis Berry**

**Linda Frank**

**Dr. Bill Graves**

**Gavin Harsh**

**Pam Wolford**

**Ronda Graff**, MCFE Coordinator



Jeff Yost, President and CEO  
Nebraska Community Foundation



When I was approached to write this piece for the McCook Community Foundation Fund's annual report, beyond compiling my own list of reflections about what makes McCook so unique and special, I asked several of my colleagues at Nebraska Community Foundation to do the same:

"McCook has always had an exceptional set of leaders leading their foundation fund."

"There are few community conversations that do not involve the fund."

"McCook leaders have thought outside the box and then asked NCF to help them proceed, moving forward collectively, and the progress has been amazing."

"McCook has really grown a desire for excellence when it comes to arts and culture."

"I've seen McCook embrace difficult conversations."

"When I'm driving to McCook, I always have a feeling of 'home.'"

Nebraska Community Foundation loves McCook. McCook has a can-do spirit and a big open heart. McCook doesn't just talk the talk, it walks the walk. The NCF network is constantly looking to McCook as a shining example of a community that is thinking progressively about the future, embracing its abundant assets, and cultivating a culture of generosity – and boy is McCook full of generous people. New York Times columnist David Brooks loves McCook, too. In March 2019 he came in search of what makes a strong community. Brooks affirmed what we have long known – rural America has much to teach the rest of the country and hometowns like McCook are fueled by a rare civic mind-set that has built an exceptional place to live, work and raise a family.

McCook Community Foundation Fund has been a big part of the Nebraska Community Foundation family for nearly 20 years and has long been at the forefront of our effort to build a Greater Nebraska. Fund Advisory Committee members have given generously of their time, not only to the Fund, but to peers in other communities, and NCF's statewide board. In many ways, I think MCF and NCF have grown up together. Our growth and success

have taken parallel courses. At the end of fiscal year 2008, McCook had \$657,360 in endowed assets. By the end of FY 2019, MCF increased its endowment by 484% to \$3,840,813! Beyond that, there are 18 planned gifts conservatively estimated at \$2.3 million!

McCook isn't afraid of challenges, and its involvement in the NCF network has resulted in many. Challenge grant after challenge grant – from large Nebraska foundations to homegrown benefactors who radiate pride for their hometown. We can always count on McCook to impress us and my NCF colleagues and I have spent many hours marveling at the extensive list of all your amazing accomplishments.

For nearly 20 years, McCook Community Foundation Fund has been diligently building up capacity with great success. But the true pleasure has been watching that capacity evolve into high impact grantmaking that is transforming the lives of community members and attracting new ones to join you. In true McCook fashion, your grantmaking is grounded with intentionality and aspiration. NCF is proud to work alongside members of MCF as you continue to learn about your community, build relationships, and reach out to new people and groups with open hearts and minds.

This capacity will allow McCook to dream bigger than it's ever dreamed before... it's already happening. Fund Advisory Committee members aren't waiting to be asked for help. You are actively reaching out to local teachers, artists, entrepreneurs and others who share their optimism for the future.

In November 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation is thrilled to once again hold its Annual Celebration in McCook. Not only do folks in McCook know how to raise money, they know how to throw a party! We last gathered the NCF network in McCook in 2016. Our guests will be astonished at all you have achieved in just four short years. We can't wait to showcase your many accomplishments – in fundraising, the arts, youth engagement, and creating a vibrant and welcoming community.

Congratulations on all of your hard-earned success and thank you for all you are doing to build a stronger McCook and a Greater Nebraska!



# WHAT RURAL AMERICA HAS TO TEACH US

## Civic service as a way of life.

By David Brooks - Opinion Columnist

A version of this article appears in print on March 22, 2019, Section A, Page 23 of the New York edition with the headline: What Rural America Has To Teach Us.

Everybody says rural America is collapsing. But I keep going to places with more moral coherence and social commitment than we have in booming urban areas. These visits prompt the same question: How can we spread the civic mind-set they have in abundance?

For example, I spent this week in Nebraska, in towns like McCook and Grand Island. These places are not rich. At many of the schools, 50 percent of the students receive free or reduced-cost lunch. But they don't have the pathologies we associate with poverty.

Nearly everybody is working at something. Nebraska has the sixth-lowest unemployment rate among the 50 states. It has the 12th-longest healthy life expectancy. Some of the high schools have 98 percent graduation rates. It ranks seventh among the states in intact family structure.

Crime is low. Many people leave their homes and cars unlocked.

One woman I met came home and noticed her bedroom light was on. She thought it was her husband home early. But it was her plumber. She'd mentioned at the coffee shop that she had a clogged sink, so he'd swung round, let himself in and fixed it.

When she needs some auto work done, she leaves a blank check on the front seat of the car. The town mechanic comes by when he can, drives the car to his garage, does the work and fills out the check.

Nebraska ranks eighth in the country for social capital. McCook has only 7,700 residents, but it has a Rotary club, a 4-H club, a future farmers group, a music festival, a storytelling festival, a chapter of the Nebraska Community Foundation, churches, libraries, museums and Sehnert's, a James Beard Award-winning bakery and coffee shop where the retired men gather and kibbitz.

If a teenager misbehaves, his parents have heard about it by the time he gets home. Many people make time for civic life and seem to wear 15 hats.

Jared Muehlenkamp returned from Los Angeles to McCook and runs a print and design store. He went to three meetings after work the day before I met him, including of the City Council, on which he serves.

Mark Graff, who runs a local bank, says he spends 50 percent of his time on civic volunteering.

His sister-in-law, Ronda Graff, is raising seven children. She also writes for the newspaper,

coaches swimming, is a substitute teacher and bus driver, competes in ironman triathlons, works at the Y, helps run a concert series, helped organize the building of the dog park, helps out with the high school discipline program and seems to sit on every spontaneous civic organization that pops up.

It should be acknowledged that things are not as rosy as they appear on the surface. "There are a lot of people here in desperate economic circumstances doing extraordinary things to look middle class," one Nebraskan told me.

But these community weavers are pretty honest about their problems. A few of the towns are 30 percent Latino, and they struggle with integration. The most highly educated young people leave. The community project is to find ways to lure them back.

One farmer said there is a feudal mind-set among many of his friends. They're too proud to admit any dependence. They're afraid of vulnerability. The attitude is: I'm a farmer. My business is my business, and your business is your business. Their loneliness is driven by fear and pride.

And they do have to work hard to make sure national viciousness doesn't tear local bonds. At one dinner, a Latina woman looked at her Anglo friends with tears in her eyes and told them why she had dropped off Facebook: "There's a lot of people who make me feel at home here, and I'd never had a home. I know you because I know how you make me feel. I don't want to change my mind about you because you liked one comment on social media."

Over all, I was left wondering: What causes the community's weavers to be so civically active? I have a few theories.

Farm life inculcates an insane work ethic, which gets carried into community life. The weavers are deeply rooted in place. Many said their main goal in life is to make their small town better at their death than it was at their birth.

There are also 93 counties in Nebraska, several with populations below 1,000. That means there are a ton of local government functions and not that many people to fill them, so everybody has to chip in.

The word I heard most was "intentionality" — especially about community. Many people try not to use Amazon so they can support local businesses. They don't use the self-checkout lanes in the drugstore so they can support local workers. They're almost fanatical in their support of local arts programs.

Constantly they are thinking: Does this help my town or hurt it? And when you tell them that this pervasive civic mind-set is an unusual way to be, they look at you blankly because they can't fathom any other.



“I was left wondering: What causes the community's weavers to be so civically active?”



# ***BISON DAYS 2019***

Students have the opportunity to take part in courses that are not typically offered at McCook High School. The two days of classes allow students to find hobbies, interests, and skills which don't always have a place or a time in the regular classroom.

# 2019 MCFF GRANT HIGHLIGHTS - BISON DAYS

By Pam Wolford  
MCFF Committee Member

Something different can easily describe Bison Days, a two-day program for the entire McCook High School student body. The McCook Community Foundation Fund has chosen to support Bison Days for the past two years with a grant because the program offers something different. It is something different for the students, for the staff, for the community by exposing them to different hobbies and interests offered in McCook.

Through the program, students have the opportunity to take part in courses that are not typically offered at McCook High School. The two days of classes allow students to find hobbies, interests, and skills which don't always

have a place or a time in the regular classroom. Over the two days of sessions, students can experience four different classes, which are taught by teachers, administrators and community volunteers.

The goal of the project is to help students explore opportunities in the community and also to build relationships between students, community volunteers and the McCook High School staff while providing skill-building activities.

The grant money from MCFF is used to provide supplies and equipment for the classes with supplies being retained by the school to be continuously used for the project for future years. New to the 2020 Bison Days will be a community service day for the McCook High School students, such as cleaning parks, plant-

ing flowers or painting "M" Hill. Scheduled for February each year, Bison Days hopes to continue year after year, thanks to in-kind donations of time and money from the community and staff.

Developing a sense of community has been a strong goal of McCook High School over the last two years. The school feels it is important to utilize local businesses and resources to provide students with more opportunities for real world connections within the community of McCook. The hope of the school and the committee is to develop a stronger sense of community between the school and its members as well as show students the opportunities available here in McCook, a sentiment also shared by MCFF.

McCook Public Schools and Bison Days was one of a dozen MCFF grants during 2019. To date, MCFF has distributed more than \$422,000 since 2003 with nearly \$70,000 in just 2019.

## *The grants included:*

- **St. Patrick Elementary:**  
Playground Equipment
- **Cultivate Rural Leaders:**  
McCook Leadership 2.0
- **Hillcrest Nursing Home Foundation:**  
Facility Improvements
- **McCook Midget Baseball Association/City of McCook:**  
Felling Field Improvements
- **High Plains Historical Society ~ High Plains Museum:**  
Display upgrades
- **McCook K9 Korner Dog Park:**  
Dog Park Development
- **McCook Community College:**  
Robotics Educational Program
- **McCook Arts Council/Chamber of Commerce:**  
Third Thursday Evenings
- **McCook Arts Council/Prairie Roots Festival:**  
Prairie Roots Festival Concert
- **McCook Arts Council/Simply Strings:**  
Simply Strings Concert
- **Norris Institute:**  
Norris Alley
- **McCook Economic Development Corp.:**  
Early Childhood Committee 4 Kids
- **McCook High School:**  
Bison Days
- **Neb 4-H Foundation/Red Willow 4-H:**  
CWF Washington, DC Trip
- **MCFF Youth Task Force:**  
MHS Senior gift
- **McCook Toy Box:**  
Christmas Gift Give-Away



## McCook Community Foundation Fund

An Affiliated Fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation Funds Statement

November 30, 2019 (Unaudited)

### ***Unrestricted Cash and Investments by Account***

McCook Community Foundation General Operating Account \$ 16,113

### ***Total Unrestricted Endowment Accounts Including***

McCook Community Foundation Anderson Family Gift Account

McCook Community Foundation Jewell Family Gift Account

McCook Community Foundation Myers Family Gift Account

McCook Community Foundation Sehnert Family Gift Account

McCook Community Foundation General Endowment Account

\$2,950,725

### ***Restricted Accounts***

Kathryn A. Wall Endowment Account \$ 453,515

McCook Education Foundation Endowment Account 162,706

Barbara Fassler Neumann Nursing Scholarship Account 112,705

Community Chest Account 98,529

Hillcrest Nursing Home Foundation Endowment Account 54,192

McCook College Foundation Endowment Account 42,207

Memorial Methodist Church Legacy Account 40,363

Nelda Haag Scholarship Account 38,964

Myron Mingo Memorial MCC Scholarship Account 26,733

Bison Alumni Newsletter Account 23,566

Kansas Nebraska Good News Radio Endowment Account 21,591

Thinkery of SW Nebraska (Children's Museum) 16,535

Youth Change Reaction (YCR) Endowment Account 13,738

Ed Thomas YMCA Endowment Account 12,788

Heritage Square Account 9,189

Community Hospital Health Foundation Endowment Account 6,525

McCook Recreation Account 5,139

Celebrate McCook Account 4,890

Eight Miscellaneous Accounts with Balances Under \$5,000 12,061

### ***Total Fund Balance***

***\$4,122,774***

### ***Financial Activity Summary of All Accounts on Cash Basis***

*March 1, 2018 through November 30, 2019*

### ***Beginning Fund Balances 3-1-18***

Income

Grant & Contribution Income \$ 775,899

Endowment Acct Investment Value Increases (Decreases) \$ 409,141

Investment & Interest Income \$ 36,032

### ***Total Income***

***\$ 3,345,357***

***\$ 1,221,072***

Disbursements

Charitable Grants \$ 310,103

Disbursements for Charitable Activities \$ 28,258

### ***Total Disbursements for Local Charitable Causes***

***\$ 338,361***

Nebraska Community Foundation Fees \$ 33,506

Investment Management Fees \$ 27,879

Fund Administrative Services \$ 20,037

General Fund Operating Expenses \$ 23,872

### ***Total Fund Operating Disbursements***

***\$ 105,294***

### ***Total Disbursements***

***\$ 443,655***

### ***Net Change in Total Fund Balances***

***\$ 777,417***

### ***Ending Fund Balances 11-30-19***

***\$4,122,774***

# "NICEST PLACE" NOMINEE

By Ronda Graff, MCFF Coordinator

McCook had the privilege of being named Nebraska's "Nicest Place in America" by Reader's Digest in 2019. While McCook didn't receive the top prize, the contest did allow the community to share what makes McCook and all of Southwest Nebraska so great.

Columbiana, Ohio, was named "Nicest Place in America" from the national magazine. The town of 6,000 has focused its efforts on its Main St. Theater, which allows everyone to be a star and symbolizes that no one is left behind.

The "Nicest Place in America" contest included more than 1,100 nominations, 49 finalists, tens of thousands of online votes and eight judges, who selected the nominations and the eventual winner.

McCook got into the running after a visit by national journalist David Brooks, who was brought to Southwest Nebraska by the Nebraska Community Foundation and the McCook Community Foundation Fund.

The New York Times Columnist visited McCook last March as part of a listening tour and community dinner to encourage communication between those with different viewpoints. Brooks also spoke at the McCook Rotary Club lunch during his two days in McCook. The visit even resulted in a column in the New York Times about Mc-

Cook and rural America.

After the visit, several community members were encouraged to submit a nomination for McCook.

McCook's nomination focused on the great quality of life in McCook, specifically citing Sehnert's Bakery and Bieroc Cafe's positive role in the community. The online comments raved about the hospitality of the bakery and its employees, its' wonderful selection of baked goods and just a welcoming environment in general, which has been created by Walt and Jean Sehnert and Matt and Shelly Sehnert.

As part of the contest, the McCook Gazette ran more than 20 news articles about all the nice things in McCook that we can just take for granted. Ideas ranged from those who responded after a home north of McCook was destroyed by a tornado to a McCook youth baseball team traveling to Tennessee to visit and play with a sick teammate.

There were more ideas than space in the paper...just showing how nice McCook and Southwest Nebraska can be.

McCook may not have won Reader's Digest's 2019 Nicest Place in America contest, but at the end of the day, McCook is still a pretty nice place to live and great place to call home.

"The "Nicest Place in America" contest included more than 1,100 nominations, 49 finalists, tens of thousands of online votes and eight judges, who selected the nominations and the eventual winner."



Rich Barnett (left) visits with City Councilman Jerry Calvin and City Manager Nate Schneider during his Openline radio program. This "Nicest Place" article received hundreds of positive online responses during voting.



Don Roberts (right) visits with Kent Gerih as they cleaned up after a tornado destroyed the Roberts' house north of McCook in May 2019. The story was the most shared online of all the "Nicest Place" articles, which ran in the McCook Gazette in June/July 2019.



# Sehnert Challenge Ends with Celebration and Appreciation

By RONDA GRAFF  
MCFF Coordinator

"Big skies. Big dreams. Big talent."

"McCook is a community that is growing and always trying to better itself. I am excited about raising a family, knowing that our kids will have endless opportunities."

"The best part of McCook is the people, their passion and their perseverance to see a positive future."

Those were just a few of the answers given during the wrap-up party for the McCook Community Foundation Fund's Sehnert Challenge, held in March at Sehnert's Bakery. Asked to reflect on what they appreciate about McCook, people responded with dozens of reasons why they love McCook, with almost all of them returning to one common theme: it's the people.

Ultimately, it's the people who make McCook a place where young people want to raise a family, where people choose to retire, where people decide to open their business.

And it was the people who helped MCFF conduct such a successful campaign for the Sehnert Challenge, from the dozens of volunteers who asked for donations to those who saw the importance of a financial gift which will help future generations realize their dreams.

With a campaign which began in March 2018, McCook and Southwest Nebraska accomplished an amazing feat, raising more than \$400,000 in donations and pledges, which will, in turn, lead to grants from MCFF to support new ideas, to support innovative projects, to support more bright spots.

MCFF began the ambitious project when Susan Sehnert Stuart challenged the fund advisory committee to raise \$200,000 toward its' unrestricted endowment. In return, she would provide \$100,000 in matching funds to honor her parents, Walt and Jean Sehnert, and to celebrate her hometown.

That total was quickly reached and the goal was doubled.

Then in early 2019, MCFF reached its' goal of \$400,000 in donations and pledges toward the Sehnert Challenge and concluded with a celebration at Sehnert's Bakery.

The Sehnert Challenge was led by co-chairs, Mary and Dale Dueland and Alice and Don Harpst, along with the fund advisory committee and dozens of community volunteers asking for donations.

"They instilled this love for arts and community in their children and their many McCook friends. This thriving group of arts lovers make sure McCook has quality experiences in all arts disciplines; music, theater, literary, poetry, storytelling, and visual arts just to name a few," Dueland said, adding, "Thanks to the Sehnert Challenge, we are laying additional financial foundation to assure our community continues to excel in this area." With a \$600,000 increase to the endowment, MCFF will be able to make a larger impact in the community immediately through increased grant capacity, including a grant in Walt and Jean's name to a project or organizations which reflects their interests and passions in arts and culture in McCook.

MCFF distributed more than \$70,000 in grants in 2019 and will have \$100,000 available for grants in the near future.

The complete list of responses to the Bright Spots in McCook, along with lists from the "idea trees" gathered over the past year as part of the Sehnert Challenge, are available on the MCFF website, [www.mccookfoundation.org](http://www.mccookfoundation.org).

## LEAVING A LASTING LEGACY



## YCR BRINGING CHANGE ONE STUDENT, ONE PROJECT AT A TIME

**By Tess Nelson**  
YCR Member

Youth Change Reaction (YCR) works to create positive opportunities and changes through the youth in the community.

Founded in 2009 by the McCook Community Foundation Fund, the group consists of 12 high school students (3 from each grade), who work together through dedication to promote and encourage positive change to our youth throughout our community.

Representatives this year are:

**Seniors**-Candace Coleman, Dawson Bredvick, Emily Loker

**Juniors**-Lexi Hauxwell, Megan Hodgson, Shayli Wilkinson

**Sophomores**-James Neel, Tesa Nelson, Tucker Gillespie

**Freshman**-Natalie Roberts, Carsyn Craig, Shawna Wilkinson

All 12 of us love doing activities through this group such as Junior High dances, having lunches with elementary students, and one of our favorites, The Giving Tree. Usually hosted by our local businesses, a tree holds ornaments with families who are going through a tough

financial time. An ornament is selected at random, and the families name is on the ornament. We, as a group, use a grant of \$500 to buy the family gifts, but then also surprise them with another \$500 from the grant to use on any their personal expenses.

We also help with the 7th grade Heritage Tour as well, which consists of walking around our beautiful town for a day, as well as learning about businesses and historical, significant landmarks.

Over the next year or two, YCR hopes to fix up some of our older parks and implement new attractions to the McCook area. YCR loves activities that are fun in the moment and creates instant memories, but our goal as a group is to be part of something with lasts for years.

One of our hopes is to coordinate with the McCook High School, the City of McCook, and the community to redo the Elks Tennis Courts, offering a safe, fun place for people to enjoy playing tennis and pickleball. YCR is extremely thankful for the endowment account set up by Andy and Geri Anderson, which is where the grant money comes from for the

Giving Tree and other projects. YCR's mission will never change and we will constantly strive to shape the youth in our community through positive change just like we have for 10 great years.



# *Connecting & Celebrating McCook*

