

# Elevating the Good



Arbor Day Farm

Nebraska institutions, like the Arbor Day Foundation, are celebrating big birthdays this year.

# As Nebraska Life Celebrates 25 Years, We Recognize 3 Uniquely Nebraskan Institutions

BY MEGAN FEENEY

For 25 years, *Nebraska Life* has elevated the good. We've done this by featuring heartfelt, thoughtful, entertaining stories and breathtaking photography that reflect our state's people, places, cultures and communities. In recognition of our anniversary, we decided to share the spotlight with other Nebraska organizations that strengthen and beautify our good life and make us proud of what we can accomplish when we work together.





# Nebraska Community Foundation

*Founded: 1994*

**JEFF YOST GREW** up in Red Cloud, where “Lots and lots of adults loved and nurtured me. And many encouraged me that my future was somewhere else,” Yost said. “How does that make sense?”

As Nebraska Community Foundation president and CEO, he helps empower local community foundations to promote a different message to Nebraska’s youth: You have a bright future here.

It’s a promise backed by action.

Since 1994, Nebraska Community Foundation has matched affiliated local funds with the tools and resources to



Kira Geiger/Nebraska Community Foundation

Local community foundation funds investigate what their towns need to thrive and then take real steps to provide those services or facilities. Nebraska Community Foundation helps with training and connecting people throughout the state.



Carrie Malek-Madani/Nebraska Community Foundation

build the hometowns of their dreams.

Local community foundation funds solicit community input and use philanthropic donations to undertake projects for their communities. That includes literacy programs, community gardens, English as a second language tutoring, non-traditional scholarships, after-school programs for kids, and renovation or construction of community gathering spaces, like parks or movie theaters. Major focuses of these local funds include early childhood development, local food in schools, leadership and entrepreneurship development. Nebraska Community Foundation works with more than 270 communities through 250 affiliated funds and supports

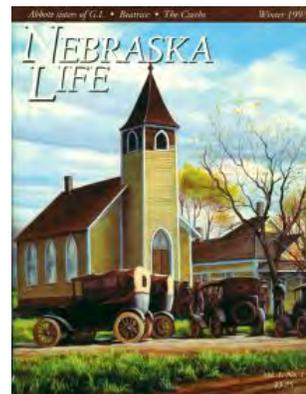
local community foundation funds with training, network connections and marketing expertise. NCF also sets the messaging for all the funds – encouraging an attitude of abundance – to appreciate and amplify a place’s positive attributes. There’s also the lesson of some simple math regarding its philanthropic aims. A small percentage of an enormous number is still a significant number.

Kiel VanderVeen works as a financial planner and serves on Nebraska Community Foundation’s board. In Otoe County, over the next decade, about \$1.4 billion will shift from one generation to the next, VanderVeen said. If 5 percent of that figure went to the Nebraska City Community Foundation Fund, that would be \$70 million that could go toward improving the community.

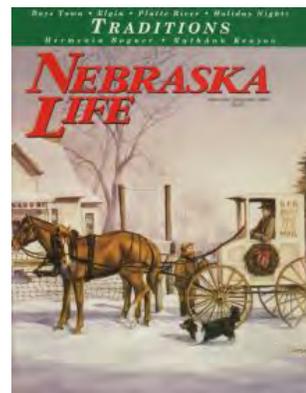
Indeed, network-wide, NCF has \$266 million in total assets, \$423 million reinvested since 1994 and grantmaking of \$30 million or more each year.

When he was in high school, VanderVeen was the first member of the Nebraska City Community Foundation

# Nebraska Life 25 years



Winter • 1997



November/December • 1998



November/December • 2000



Michael Wunder/Nebraska Community Foundation



Arbor Day began in Nebraska City. Today, people across the state dig in to help their communities become greener, cleaner places with the power of trees. This year, the Arbor Day Foundation celebrates 50 years. Unbe-leaf-able!



Carrie Malek-Madani/Nebraska Community Foundation

Fund's youth group. He's been involved with the Nebraska City fund or the statewide board ever since.

Nebraska Community Foundation surveys reveal that Nebraska youth want to be a part of contributing to their communities. Sometimes they don't even need to be asked first.

A few years ago in Imperial, a young boy named Trevin Moreno dreamed of having a place to skateboard. He pitched the idea to the city administrator, but she was unsure. So he started selling lemonade.

Soon after, other skaters got involved and undertook various fundraising ef-

forts. The city decided to help, and the Imperial Community Foundation Fund pitched in a generous donation. Within a year and a half, the kids had their skatepark. Trevin was 9 when he slid his skateboard down the ramps for the first time.

Encouraging youth to be decision-makers is what McCook's Youth Change Reaction group is all about, too. Supported by the McCook Community Foundation Fund, the youth board decides what projects to take on, which organizations to partner with and how the board wants to spend funds. The youth board has awarded grants to an elementary school and a 4-H club, coordinated a bike-share program with Nebraska Game and Parks, organized dances and helped with community events.

These kids are growing up in a world where remote work is a real option. As a result, community economic development has shifted, Yost said. It isn't just connected to jobs anymore.

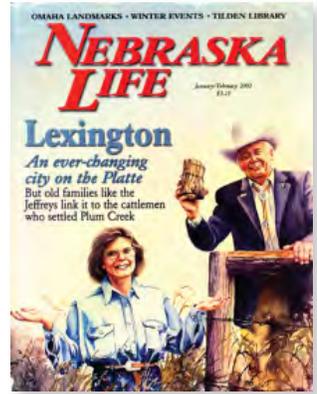
"The new question is, why do I want to live and raise my kids here?" Yost said.

Day by day, the statewide foundation supports local efforts to develop Nebraskans' confidence, skills, collaborative spirit, and openness to the vast possibilities of their hometowns.

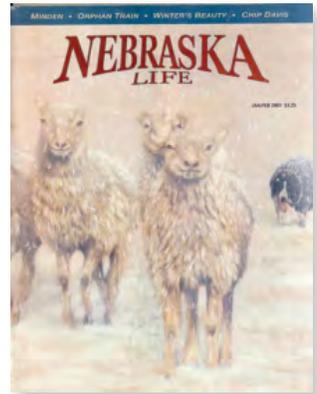


Arbor Day Farm

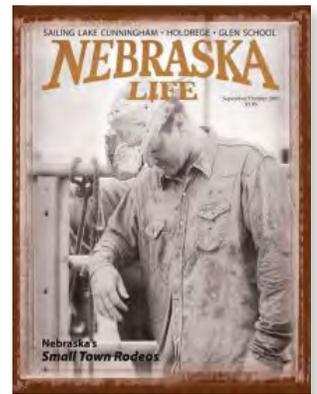
Nebraska *Life*  
**25**  
 years



January/February • 2002



January/February • 2003



September/October • 2005

# Arbor Day Foundation

## Founded: 1972

**DRIVING TO NEBRASKA CITY** each fall to pick apples and drink apple cider is a tradition for many families.

Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City is a beautiful 260 acres packed with natural beauty and family fun. Run by the Arbor Day Foundation, the campus amenities – including lodging, dining, orchards, vineyards, parks and trails – encourage and inspire people to plant and celebrate trees. It's become a celebrated and well-known destination spot in southeastern Nebraska.

But the Arbor Day Foundation's reach and impact extend far beyond its Nebraska City property. The Lincoln-based foundation has quietly become the most

prominent tree planting nonprofit in the world.

Globally and locally, the foundation works with people, corporate and government partners to restore forests, assist families affected by natural disasters, and create green spaces in urban neighborhoods. Since its founding in 1972 to celebrate Arbor Day's 100th anniversary, the foundation has planted 500 million trees in 50 countries.

Dan Lambe grew up in Crete and remembered as a kid piling in the family car for Nebraska City apples and cider. Recalling the tangy crunch of the first bite of an apple straight from a tree each fall makes him smile. Today Lambe is the president of the foundation. "Trees are the one thing we can agree on in these divisive times,"

he said. "Trees connect generations, communities and cultures."

Trees provide us with breathable air. They create habitats for space-crunched creatures. They beautify our environment. They root people in place – and they can even help heal broken hearts.

Bradley Brandt leads the foundation's replanting efforts in areas devastated by fire or other natural disasters. It might be hard to imagine how someone whose home was damaged or destroyed could take solace in free trees, but Brandt has often seen it happen during his 14 years with the foundation. Whether in Missouri following a tornado or Texas after a fire, Brandt has heard a familiar refrain:

"We've lost everything, but these trees are the start of having some hope for the future."

Public lands have also benefited from the program. For example, the foundation worked with the forest service in Colorado's Pike National Forest to plant seedlings in the shadow of burnt stumps after a devastating fire. Twenty years later, those trees are taller than Brandt and are bearing cones brimming with seeds.

"Now it's taking on a life of its own and regenerating itself," Brandt said.

Abroad, tree planting programs in Madagascar restore rainforest habitats for animals and provide people jobs. In 2009, only eight black and white lemurs remained on the African island nation. Tree planting work employed 1,700 locals, affording them access to housing and education. Today, the lemur population has climbed to at least 50.

Back home in Nebraska, the foundation funded programs on the Chadron State College campus to help get trees back in the ground after a fire and worked with the Nature Conservancy to plant Nebraska's state tree – the cottonwood – along Nebraska rivers.

Wherever the Arbor Day Foundation works, staff share their Nebraska pride. And their partners "like the authenticity we provide and the humility we bring to our work," Lambe said. These characteristics are a "direct reflection of Nebraska values."

Here's toasting a glass of Nebraska City apple cider to that.

Having planted more than 500 million trees in 50 countries, the Arbor Day Foundation has become the most prominent tree-planting nonprofit in the world and a unifying good. This year, it announced new ambitions: planting another 500 million trees in five years.

Downtown Lincoln Association





Alan J. Bartels/Lower Loup NRD

Three cheers for Natural Resources Districts, an innovative conservation solution started in 1972. Stream basins determine local governance rather than political boundaries.

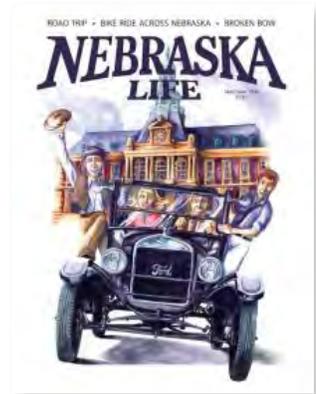
# Natural Resources Districts

## *Founded: 1972*

**FOUR SIGNIFICANT FLOODS** swept through Nebraska in the 1950s claiming 23 lives. Soon after, drought clutched the land. Many producers abandoned farming. Others dug wells. Different regions sharing water resources failed to work together on flood control or drought relief. Overlapping authority caused confusion and conflict.

Then in 1969, a soft-spoken Milford-born Nebraska State Senator named Maurice Kremer introduced an innovative solution. He proposed the idea of Natural Resources Districts. He suggested that stream basins determine the boundaries of these local government units rather than existing political boundaries. Locally elected directors would take on flood control, groundwater quality and quantity, soil erosion and irrigation runoff.

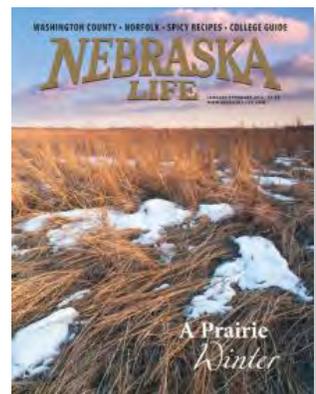
Nebraska *Life*  
**25**  
years



May/June • 2006



January/February • 2007



January/February • 2012



It was a new – even risky – concept that might not work. But, to its credit, the Nebraska Legislature backed the idea. Thanks to “Mr. Water,” as Sen. Kremer was affectionately known, in 1972, Natural Resources Districts took over conserving and protecting Nebraska’s natural resources. Today, 23 NRDs cover different parts of the state, each working in response to local needs and aspirations.

Nebraska’s 80,000 miles of rivers beautify our state’s landscape, provide recreational opportunities and feed our industries. The health of these rivers and our state’s groundwater and land owe much

to Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts, which are celebrating 50 years.

Local NRDs hold classes and camps for kids, restore wildlife habitats, own and manage recreational areas, help property owners with forestation efforts, and work with farmers to monitor and diminish nitrate levels in groundwater. This year NRDs planted their 100 millionth tree. They’ve kept Nebraska groundwater levels steady, despite years of drought.

But it’s not just what NRDs do that makes them work – it’s how they do it. They seek solutions and buy-in from the communities they serve.

Jim Eschliman is a retired dairy farm-

er who served as the president of the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts and is still a co-chairman on the Lower Loup NRD’s Board of Directors. His father-in-law – also a dairyman – served on the board until he died.

Having a farming background helped Eschliman connect with producers about how and why local NRD had to implement a rule or regulation – like limiting nitrates from fertilizer that goes into the groundwater.

“I tell them, there are smarter people than I am,” Eschliman said. “And you’ve got to trust that they know what they’re doing.”



Dennis Wiehn of Elgin fishes for bluegills at the Lower Loup NRD's Pibel Lake Recreation Area in southern Wheeler County. Under local leadership, Nebraska NRDs protect water, the state's most precious resource, from overuse and pollution.



Alan J. Bartels/Lower Loup NRD

Alan J. Bartels/Lower Loup NRD

Some projects are straightforward and don't require much of a sell, like cleaning up Wheeler County's Pibel Lake – formerly a state park. The Lower Loup NRD received federal grants to dredge sediment and build campground facilities. It's rustic – no electricity – but there are plenty of ways to connect, with picnic tables and a playground.

NRDs also help protect private property and, wherever possible, solve problems without landowner sacrifice.

For example, residents of a Columbus lakeside community weren't happy when their water levels fell. But instead of regulating water use, the Lower Loup NRD

developed a project that would move water around while “allowing water users to keep doing what they're doing,” said Russell Callan, Lower Loup NRD general manager. Callan developed the project with the county and city governments, an agricultural processor, and the homeowners' association. The project demonstrates how stakeholders come together, with NRDs in the lead, to reach the common goal of resource preservation.

Nationally admired, Nebraska's NRDs are one of our state's singular political innovations born out of the desire to come together to protect this great land and this good life. 🐮

# Nebraska Life

# 25

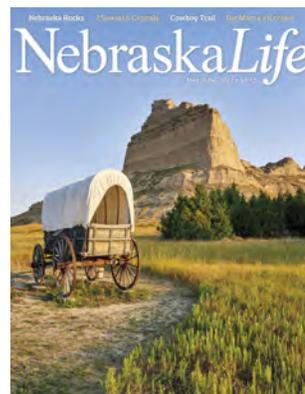
years



January/February • 2017



May/June • 2017



May/June • 2022