



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR MORE THAN 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | JULY & AUGUST 2022

Martin and Linda dedicate lives to family farms, organic farming, and renewable energy

by Nick Bergin, nickb@cfra.org

People have traversed the world to visit 365 acres of certified organic fields and pastures nestled in the valley of West Bow Creek in northeast Nebraska.

Linda and Martin Kleinschmit welcome their visitors with practical wisdom and an open mind.

They compared notes with a man from Argentina on pasture seeding. A generation of Nebraska women gathered around the kitchen table to discuss holistic family business practices and being equal partners in farm enterprises.

Martin and Linda have dedicated their lives to sustaining family farms, pioneering work in organic farming, and advancing renewable energy. The Center for Rural Affairs presents them with the 2021 Seventh Generation Award to acknowledge their lifetime of service. The award is given to people who

—SEE MARTIN AND LINDA ON PAGE 3



This spring, Martin and Linda Kleinschmit received the Center for Rural Affairs' top honor, the Seventh Generation Award. The award is given to those who have made significant contributions to improving rural life and protecting our land and water. | Photo by Wyatt Fraas

Inside this issue

- 2 Editor's note
- 4 Support for small meat processors, rural broadband highlight state legislative sessions
- 5 Women landowners showcase their land and legacy
- 6 Yellow Taco Truck owner cooks his way to the top
- 7 Miro-dairy serves community with value-added grant
- 8 From the executive director: Rural America needs investment in home construction and repair

Center publishes resources on USDA conservation programs

by Justin Carter, justinc@cfra.org

Rural farms and ranches have a reciprocal relationship with their environment. Soil health, sufficient water, and proper temperatures all bring crops or animals to fruition.

Too often, agriculture practices cause our environment to tire, leading to the use of more inputs and higher costs to produce food.

This doesn't need to be the case. When agriculture is coupled with conservation practices, it can return nutrients to the soil and create an environment in which the land is replenished to grow food. These are the results we often see when farmers and ranchers use working lands conservation practices, such as planting cover

—SEE CONSERVATION RESOURCES ON PAGE 2

Editor's note

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

During the last couple of months, I have assisted our staff with creating soil health videos. These videos will soon be available on our YouTube channel.

On one particular farm visit, we taped Sharon Oamek, owner of Honey Creek Creamery near Crescent, Iowa. She raises goats and brings a lot of folks to her operation with agritourism—goat yoga and goat hikes. In addition, she runs a restaurant during the summer months featuring gelato and cheeses she makes.

During the opening scenes of

the video, Sharon was standing in front of the goat pen telling us about goats' daily walk to the pasture. She had just said "they are not confined," when Rufus, the smallest goat (a triplet), snuck through the fence behind her and started sniffing around. I had to walk away so my giggles were not caught on tape.

Sharon then took us on our very own goat hike up to the top of the hill, with the goats and the dogs leading the way. She pointed out the fields across the highway and the work she and her husband have done to improve the



soil health on those fields and the pastures where the goats and cows graze.

After returning to her house, taste testing four different types of cheese, and giving the two dogs more pets, we completed the video. I can't wait to show you what life is like at Honey Creek Creamery. Stay tuned!

Conservation resources, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

crops, installing pollinator habitats, or using rotational grazing practices. Unfortunately, while these techniques are beneficial they are not the norm, and require financial resources and expanded knowledge to implement.

Luckily, the Natural Resources Conservation Service offers conservation programs that can be a valuable tool for farmers and ranchers. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) provide farmers and ranchers with financial technical assistance to put these practices in place. EQIP is for producers who are new to conservation, including beginning farmers and ranchers. CSP is for producers already implementing conservation who are looking to expand their efforts.

Unfortunately, these programs

are often difficult to enroll in, especially for farmers from underrepresented communities and those who speak a language other than English.

Because of this, the Center has produced a set of bilingual resources to expand access to these programs. The Center offers fact sheets and informational videos on topics related to eligibility requirements and application processes for CSP and EQIP. These tools also detail how payments are structured and when they are distributed.

These resources include additional helpful information. For instance, EQIP includes special initiatives to aid in the purchase of high tunnels and assist organic growers. Both of these programs can help beginning farmers interested in growing specialty crops.

Producers can learn about the

basics of working with USDA Service Centers, including how to prepare for your first appointment and how to get a farm number. Information is included on how socially disadvantaged farmers, such as veterans and farmers of color, can receive specific benefits in the application and payment process. For example, payments for EQIP are awarded on a reimbursement basis but farmers from these groups have the option of applying for advanced payments.

The Center will continue to promote these programs with the goal of expanding access and implementing further conservation efforts in our region. We invite anyone with interest to contact us.

Contact Justin Carter with questions in English at justinc@cfra.org and Lucia Schulz with questions in Spanish at lucias@cfra.org

PAPER & E-NEWS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit cfra.org/sign-up or email outreach@cfra.org.

Editing and layout by Rhea Landholm, Kylie Kai, Teresa Hoffman, Catharine Huddle, and Liz Stewart.

Printed at Enterprise Publishing, Blair, NE

Address corrections: Fax the back page to 402.687.2200 or call 402.687.2100.

The Center is an equal opportunity employer and provider.



Martin and Linda, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

have made significant contributions to improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

BUILDING A RURAL LIFE TOGETHER

While sitting at the wooden kitchen table inside their farmhouse, Martin pointed northwest. He was born in a house that used to stand on top of that hill. Martin's grandfather found his way to Nebraska from Germany by way of Wisconsin.

Linda grew up in Valentine, and spent time on her father's family ranch west of town. Her father was a carpenter, and her mother, widowed at 41, worked in a clothing store.

Both Linda and Martin attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Martin majored in animal science and Linda in elementary education.

Martin fell in love twice while attending college in the 1960s.

The first time was on a night out with friends in Yankton, South Dakota. That night he met Linda.

The second time was in the driver's seat of a 1952 John Deere tractor. Martin's dad, Cletus, had asked him to replant a cornfield wiped out by worms; the first of many fields Martin would sow.

He knew he wanted to farm in Bow Valley, just like his father and grandfather. In 1970, Martin's father suffered a heart attack that left him unable to cope with the demands of a farm. Martin and Linda moved their family from Germany, where Martin was stationed in the U.S. Army, back to Nebraska to run the homestead.

Linda knew little about the day-to-day hardships of making a farm family work. She worried about living up to expectations and leaving behind her own friends and family to settle in a new community.

But the women in Martin's family gave her gardening tips, taught her how to bake kolaches, and introduced her to an old German card game.



Martin and Linda commit to making the world better through service and action. | Photo by Wyatt Fraas

She became known as someone not afraid to challenge conservative traditions. Women leaders at their church told her, "That's not the way we do things," and "Don't do anything to upset the husbands."

But Martin and Linda are critical thinkers, and minding convention is not how they live their lives.

A LIFETIME OF INNOVATION

Martin and Linda's lifetime of service and innovation shows their commitment to making the world better.

Vince Rossiter, a Hartington banker and a family friend, introduced Martin and Linda to the Center for Rural Affairs. From 1976 to 1980, Martin and his brother participated in the Center's Small Farms Energy Project, designed to help farmers discover and develop viable alternatives and renewable energy systems for their farms.

Linda joined the movement to improve rural life and helped organize the Center's first women's impact group. She encouraged women to be active partners in the farm business.

"Farms were being lost because people are getting divorced because women are really unhappy," Linda said. "We needed a women's group to talk about why they were

unhappy and what they needed."

Martin was a Center employee for 17 years, working on issues like building soil, wind power for farms and communities, and organic farming. He tested many of these ideas on his farm.

He was among the first to tell a national audience that farmers are willing and able to make changes that can affect global warming.

After retiring, he oversaw a project to introduce farmers to organic farming, resulting in 60,000 acres enrolled in organic transition in Nebraska. Today, Martin runs a business that installs solar panels to take advantage of Nebraska's ample sunshine and to net meter electrical power with the local rural electric association.

Linda's long service list includes time as a Center for Rural Affairs Advisory Committee member and on the Administrative Council for U.S. Department of Agriculture North Central Region (NCR) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, among other organizations.

Martin and Linda rent their 365 acres of organic crops and pastureland to a young farmer who maintains the organic certification while they continue their small business pursuits by operating a vacation rental at the family homestead called the Farmhouse Inn.

Support for small meat processors, rural broadband highlight state legislative sessions

by Tim Mussack, tim@cfra.org; Kate Hansen, kateh@cfra.org; Heidi Kolbeck-Urlacher, heidiku@cfra.org

During their 2022 sessions, the Nebraska and Iowa legislatures continued to show support for small meat processors, with the passage of bills that create new programs and provide funding to increase capacity and address workforce issues. Meanwhile, South Dakota lawmakers approved bills addressing solar energy facilities, rural broadband, and the state's home-processed foods law. Here's an overview:

IOWA

Two measures supporting Iowa's small meat processors were successful. Lawmakers unanimously passed House File (HF) 2470, which will put into motion recommendations from the Artisanal Butchery Task Force created by the Legislature in 2021. Among other initiatives, the bill creates framework for a one-year community college certificate program on artisanal butchery. Legislators also passed HF 2564, an appropriations package that included \$1 million for the Butchery Innovation and Revitalization Fund, a grant program established in 2021. This year's funding is an increase of \$250,000.

In addition, the Legislature made good on a promise to Iowans investing in residential solar energy systems. Senate File (SF) 2367 included components that will pay out the residential waitlist of the Solar Energy Systems Tax Credit and extend the application deadline for projects completed last year to June 30. This legislation achieved the same goals the Center strongly supported in HF 2556 and SF 2326 for much of the session.



Small meat processors from across Nebraska joined Sen. Tom Brandt and Center staff to testify in support of Legislative Bill 755 during a legislative hearing in February. | Photo by Center staff

NEBRASKA

The Center for Rural Affairs was instrumental in passing three bills this year, including securing funding from the state's allotment of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) recovery funds.

As part of its ARPA appropriations bill, Legislative Bill (LB) 1014, the Legislature approved \$10 million for the Independent Processor Assistance Program, which follows up on a commitment made in 2021, when LB 324 was unanimously approved. The program will provide financial assistance to small meat processors across the state for buildings, equipment, technology, and workforce training. The funding request was offered as part of LB 755.

In passing its general budget bill, LB 1012, the Legislature increased funding made available to the Microenterprise Assistance Program from \$2 million to \$3 million. The change, originally proposed under LB 759, ensures that community lenders, such as the Center, can continue to provide needed loans and no-cost technical assistance to entrepreneurs to start or grow their businesses. The size of loans these community lenders can make also increased—from \$100,000 to \$150,000.

SOUTH DAKOTA

Energy policy is a top priority in South Dakota. The Legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 36, which allows the Public Utilities Commission to require financial security for solar decommissioning. SB 80 also passed, exempting electric vehicle charging stations from the definition of utility, which simplifies the process for electric vehicle charging station buildout.

The Center offered written testimony in support of SB 55 and House Bill (HB) 1322, which were both approved.

SB 55 appropriated \$50 million dollars in federal fund expenditure to be used for grants for the continued expansion of broadband infrastructure. The funds will help the state replace and recover a large portion of the \$75 million that was allocated from general funds last year.

HB 1322 amends the state's "home-processed foods law," which allows for the sale of shelf-stable baked and canned goods without a license. Among other changes, the bill allows for a broader range of products to be sold under the law and provides a low-cost food safety training program for producers to sell the full range of products outlined under the bill.



Women gather at Dawn Nielsen's family farm near Scribner, Nebraska, to learn about conservation. Dawn shared her story and experience at this May event, which was part of a collaboration with a University of Nebraska-Lincoln teaching/research project. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Women landowners showcase their land and legacy

by Liz Stewart

More than half of the farmland in the U.S. is owned or co-owned by women.

Whether the farmland was recently inherited, owned for years in a trust, or is going through a transition, women landowners need opportunities to connect with programs, resources, and one another.

The Center for Rural Affairs works to support women who are aspiring, beginning, or already farming through a variety of program partnerships, workshops, and resources. Since the 1970s, the Center has led learning circles in which participants are considered the experts on their own production, farmland, and conservation needs and are encouraged to talk about their experiences and goals to learn from each other.

In May, Dawn Nielsen, alongside Marilee Polacek, who both have practiced conservation on their farms and participated in past learning circles, presented during an event that showcased their knowledge and experience.

FARMING WITH CONSERVATION IN MIND

Growing up on her family's farm outside of Scribner, Nebraska, Dawn takes great pride in the land. Over the years, she has

observed how the neighbors have managed their land—bulldozing trees and dredging creeks and waterways—and she knew she wanted to retain natural vegetation and watercourses to protect soil and water quality and wildlife habitat on her own land.

In 2005, after her parents died, Dawn and her siblings sold 60 acres and kept the remaining 80. A local farmer took on farming part of that land, paying cash rent and putting the land in alfalfa rotation.

Dawn and her husband established a 2.5-acre riparian buffer along a stream and put in 1 acre of pollinator habitat. Both are part of the Conservation Reserve Program, and Dawn hopes other landowners will consider similar ideas.

“It has been an interesting process working with (not against) nature,” she said. “We now have beaver in the stream for the first time in my memory.”

COMING TOGETHER THROUGH SHARED OPPORTUNITIES

Dawn has attended the learning circles to learn more about conservation practices and to get advice on caring for their land.

Information, experience, and

resources are shared at each circle, allowing women to implement what they've learned into their own farm businesses or operations.

“I've enjoyed the few times I've been involved in learning circles,” said Dawn. “They seem to be more sympathetic with my view of the land and conservation than many men I've interacted with. Meeting other women and hearing their stories, frustrations, and successes helped me learn something new each time.”

Both landowners have been involved in a project through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) funded by a North Central SARE Partnership Award and led by Dr. Andrea Basche, of UNL, and Dr. Angie Carter, of Michigan Technological University.

Beginning in 2019, researchers followed progress of three women landowner/partners in working together to adopt more conservation on their land.

Student groups prepared farm improvement plans and conservation recommendations for these farms while communicating with both the landowners and tenants and trying to keep the goals of each in mind.

Marilee's story can be found at cfra.org/blog/marilee-and-katie-polacek.



Ciro and Maria Cortez opened the Yellow Taco Truck, in Nebraska City, in December 2020, with a loan from the Center for Rural Affairs. | Photo by Raul Arcos Hawkins

Yellow Taco Truck owner cooks his way to the top

by Liz Stewart and Carlos Barcenas

Ciro Cortez has worked in the restaurant industry since he was a 16-year-old dishwasher in California. Four months later, he was promoted to kitchen assistant, then to cook, and he kept rising through the culinary ranks until he was a chef in charge of an entire kitchen.

After becoming an expert in preparing cuisines including Argentinian and Italian, Ciro owned two restaurants in Florida. He sold those and was looking for a new opportunity when his daughter invited him to Nebraska.

“She told me there were good-paying jobs and I should give it a try,” said Ciro. “Within two weeks, I was working at the meat-packing plant and I started selling burritos there. The people I worked with at the plant liked them very much.”

Today, he owns The Yellow Taco Truck, in Nebraska City, Nebraska, which specializes in food from where he grew up in Mexico.

“I always had managers and bosses who pushed me to start my own business, especially for a taco truck, and I kept learning about that process,” said Ciro. “I am in love with the richness and vari-

ety of Mexican cuisine, probably because of my heritage, so I told myself in the future I want to have my own business, and I made it happen.”

He was able to buy his food truck with a loan from the Center for Rural Affairs, and he opened his business in December 2020.

Ciro and his wife, Maria, work full-time, serving tacos with meats including chicharron (pork rind), buche (pork maw), tripe, tongue, head, barbacoa (beef), chicken, carne asada (steak), carnitas (pork), al pastor (grilled pork), and chorizo. They also make burritos, tortas, and enchiladas, and they usually have a daily special like tamales or stuffed peppers, among others.

Center Latino Loan Specialist Griselda Rendon worked with the couple throughout the process of starting their business.

“Ciro and Maria have taken advantage of several of the Center’s trainings, both in person and online,” said Griselda. “They have taken courses on computer and accounting basics, social media skills, as well as attended the Center’s Restaurant Academy. They are now able to focus 100% on the food truck.”

Their next steps include renovating and improving a recently purchased house into a permanent location for their business, complete with three drive-through windows.

Ciro hopes to continue to expand, including event catering and a second truck. He knows he can count on the Center for further guidance down this path if and when he needs it.

“The Center helped me a lot with the startup business programs, their classes, and more,” he said. “I am grateful for their time and the way they explained things because it makes it easy to understand.”

For others looking to get into the restaurant industry, Ciro says, it helps to work as a team.

“My wife and I work together and attend Center classes together. My expertise is knowledge of the food and knowing how to prepare it, and my wife uses her expertise on the business paperwork,” he said. “Working with the Center motivated us and created excitement about starting the business. People tell me I have great seasoning and great-tasting food, and that motivates me to work even harder to move for-

Micro-dairy serves community with value-added grant

by Kalee Olson, kaleeo@cfra.org

Mallore Barnes knows a little can go a long way. Milking just four cows per day, she's supplying raw milk to 30 customers each week.

With support from a Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG), she's planning to do even more with her micro-dairy business. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the VAPG program helps agricultural producers expand their businesses through value-added products and services.

Mallore and her husband, Ty, own Smilin Ranch, a cow-calf operation near Gothenburg, Nebraska. After researching the health benefits of raw milk and acquiring a nurse cow from their herd that wouldn't take a calf, she decided to start milking it for her family's consumption. Before long, community members and neighbors joined in her interest in raw milk products. Raw milk has not been pasteurized.

"I did my research to make sure it was safe, and that's when we started drinking it and haven't looked back," Mallore said.

While Mallore welcomed turning her hobby into a small business, there was one issue: She didn't have the space or equip-



Mallore Barnes obtained a Value Added Producer Grant to purchase equipment for The Milk House, a micro-dairy near Gothenburg, Nebraska. | Photo submitted

ment to properly prepare products for her customers. That's why she decided to apply to the VAPG program.

Mallore gathered the necessary paperwork to demonstrate good financial standing and outlined her long-term goals and list of eligible expenses. For The Milk House, this included an ice machine, stand mixer, packaging, and Square card reader, among

other equipment to help run her small business efficiently.

Because VAPG funding is awarded as reimbursements, Mallore is responsible for her purchases up front. However, each reimbursement frees up capital to experiment with new products, such as buying cultures to make yogurt and cottage cheese.

"The reimbursements are helping me gain more opportunities more quickly than having to wait to save money to buy something," she said.

As a rancher and mother, Mallore is keeping her long-term goals in check and doesn't plan to expand beyond what she can handle. At most, she imagines having a self-service shop for her customers to stop by for their weekly jug of milk or a pint of ice cream. However, she encourages other applicants to set their sights high, noting the diversity of projects and budgets awarded.

"It's 100% worth it," she said. "I can already see how it will help us in the future."

Producers interested in submitting a VAPG application are encouraged to contact their state Rural Development office for more information.

Investment in home construction, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

ter Free Press. Many small towns grapple with similar statistics.

Rural America has been slow to build new houses for various reasons, including lack of contractors, high cost of importing materials, slim profit margins, low population growth, and poor economies of scale.

Our aging housing stock is now

a challenge and an opportunity. Old homes tend to be more affordable to purchase but often come with a backlog of maintenance issues.

Recognizing the complex challenge, several Midwestern states made significant investments in workforce housing during their recent legislative sessions. Housing investment is also a priority for

the Biden administration, though legislative progress has stalled.

Ensuring affordable and quality housing for everyone who calls our communities home is a critical development strategy in small towns. As we move forward, the Center will continue to increase our focus on this cornerstone of community health and well being.



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

145 MAIN STREET, PO BOX 136 | LYONS, NE 68038-0136
CFRA.ORG | INFO@CFRA.ORG

Return Service Requested

07/22



Inside: Top Center award goes to Kleinschmits
Linda and Martin demonstrate lifetime of service

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Rural America needs investment in home construction and repair

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

Communities in every corner of the country now struggle with a lack of affordable homes, an ailment long associated with fast-growing urban areas.

I used to think that if the market would take care of any problem facing rural communities, it would take care of housing. If we could get jobs, education, and health care right, new homes would sprout like morel mushrooms in the spring. That was a naive view.

A lack of affordable housing hamstring rural towns' ability to attract workers and slows business growth. Quality housing is also linked to health and well

being, and home ownership remains a primary way working people build equity and ownership.

Small towns need affordable, quality housing for people across the financial spectrum. Solving this shortage will require multifaceted solutions, community involvement, and state and federal policy.

Building and improving housing takes money. Ultimately, we need public investment to make it happen at a meaningful scale.

For its part, the Center for Rural Affairs added single-family mortgage lending to our programs in 2021. We now make home ownership, rehab, and repair loans up to \$100,000 in rural Nebraska.

Home prices continue to rise even in rural communities that historically benefited from lower housing costs. You used to be able to easily find a modest older home in the rolling hills and plains of the Midwest for under \$100,000. Today, that's becoming a rarity.

Meanwhile, wage stagnation and inflation have pushed dreams of homeownership further out of reach for many.

Nearly half of Nebraska's homes predate the Nixon presidency. In the village of Stuart, 68% of homes were built before 1970, according to a recent report from the Flatwa

—SEE [INVESTMENT IN HOME CONSTRUCTION](#) ON PAGE 7