



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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

## Women's voices create representation in the changing needs of communities

BY LIZ STEWART



Kat Lopez serves her community of Columbus, Nebraska, both personally and professionally. She is part of a growing demographic of diverse women taking on leadership roles in rural communities. | Photo by Kylie Kai

**M**ore and more women are paving the way forward in their communities by taking on leadership roles. School boards, city councils, and other local government positions are being filled by women in rural America who offer their experience, passion, and heart to better their hometowns.

Kat Lopez, of Columbus, Nebraska, serves her community in numerous ways, personally and professionally.

As the communications director for Centro Hispano, a nonprofit organization that provides services in immigration, education, and business, Kat feels she is fortunate to have many opportunities for growth in her role.

“Our director is an incredible leader who is always looking

—SEE WOMEN'S VOICES IN COMMUNITY ON PAGE 3

### → Inside this issue

- 2 Editor's note
- 4 Native cooperative cultivates community
- 5 Business owners offer bilingual day care to residents of South Sioux City
- 6 Thunder Valley uses renewable energy to build community resilience
- 7 Staff Spotlight: Kayla Bergman named one of Iowa's 'New Voices in Water Quality'
- 8 From the desk of the executive director: Local meat lockers, keystone infrastructure

## Center applauds steps to make crop insurance more accessible

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESAH@CFRA.ORG

**T**he U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency recently announced changes to two crop insurance programs—Whole Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) and Micro Farm. The improvements will expand access to risk management op-

tions for thousands of producers, particularly those with small or diversified operations.

“Managing risk is an essential part of a successful agricultural operation, no matter its size,” said Kate Hansen, Center policy associate. “We commend the Risk

—SEE CROP INSURANCE ACCESSIBILITY ON PAGE 2

# Editor's note

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Weekly since March, I have taken a deep dive into the history of sustainable agriculture through a limited series podcast distributed by the Center for Rural Affairs, "Sustainable Agriculture Podcast with Ron Kroese." A new podcast is available each Wednesday, and I have the honor of completing the behind-the-scenes work of listening, writing a description, distributing to the various platforms, and promoting.

The podcast uses the audio of videos taped from 2015 to 2017, where Ron interviewed early leaders in the sustainable ag policy realm, including Ferd Hoefner, Wes Jackson, Ricardo Salvador, Chuck Hassebrook, Mark Ritchie, Lydia Villanueva, and more.

Each episode is unique and Ron coaxes out the best stories. My favorite episode so far has

to be Ferd's. In three hours—the longest episode—he explains the workings of every farm bill and legislation related to sustainable ag since the early 1970s. I learned so much.

Then among my top episodes are Kathleen Merrigan, former deputy secretary of USDA—I just want to be her friend; Lydia Villanueva who is such an inspiration as an advocate for diverse representation in the movement; and Don Bustos, a farmer in New Mexico. I absolutely love this quote from Don, "I like to tell people we still farm the same land our ancestors farmed 400 years ago, and we still use the same rituals and we still use the same tradition. We incorporate a little new technology that allows us to be economically viable."

Our last episode, of 38, will be published at the end of November. However, the podcast series will



remain available on all major platforms including Spotify, Audible, Apple, Google, and more.

If you haven't checked it out, there are episodes on organic, small farms, diversity, alternative ag, environment, conservation, food co-ops, food security, food systems, and more.

Links to the original videos, show notes, and resource links can be found at [cfra.org/SustainableAgPodcast](http://cfra.org/SustainableAgPodcast).

---

## Crop insurance accessibility, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Management Agency for making these changes."

WFRP is a unique crop insurance program that insures the entire revenue of an operation, rather than basing coverage on yields. It is often the best choice for diversified operations. Beginning in 2023, producers will now be able to insure up to \$17 million in revenue with WFRP, compared to \$8.5 million previously.

Other improvements include eliminating expense reporting to reduce paperwork, and allowing a

producer to report and self-certify yields.

Micro Farm, a subprogram of WFRP, is designed to better serve small operations. Beginning in 2023, operations with up to \$350,000 in approved revenue will be eligible for the program. The previous limit was \$100,000.

"The \$100,000 cap was not consistent with what a small operation looks like today," Kate said. "More than tripling the allowed revenue will do a great deal to improve access to this important

risk management program."

Coverage for both WFRP and Micro Farm follows a yearly timeline, corresponding with events of the growing season. If a producer files their taxes by the calendar year, the insurance period is the calendar year. If they file by the fiscal year, the insurance period is the fiscal year.

Interested producers should get in touch with a crop insurance agent to explore if either program is a good fit.

---

## PAPER & E-NEWS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit [cfra.org/sign-up](http://cfra.org/sign-up) or email [outreach@cfra.org](mailto: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.



## Women's voices in community, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

for ways for the team to develop and learn new skills to use in the workspace,” said Kat. “With these opportunities, it has opened the doors to join new boards, councils, conversations, and more.”

One such opportunity has been working with the Center for Rural Affairs, a close partner, to deliver business workshops and entrepreneur training in the Columbus area on site at Centro Hispano.

She also takes on leadership roles in her hometown of Columbus and the surrounding areas by being part of LeadDIVERSITY, a leadership class through Inclusive Communities out of Omaha.

“I have been humbled to, and continue to be, a part of local leadership roles,” she said. “I’ve taken part in amazing opportunities that have made me grow and utilize new skill sets in my work, and I actively look for ways to volunteer.”

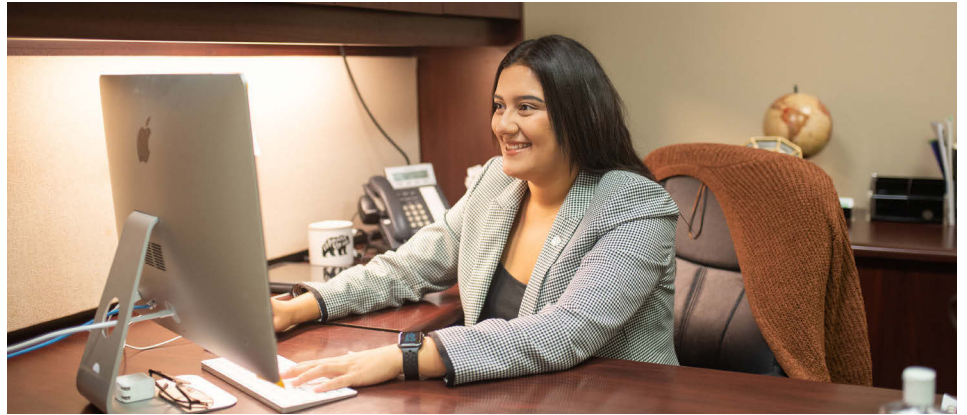
Kat recently graduated from a Leadership Columbus class, and has served on the local library board. She’s also running for City Council.

She believes it’s important for women to take on these roles, not only for themselves, but also to show others they can make a difference.

“Having women in these roles allows for a spectrum of experiences and voices to be heard,” she said. “It generates roles for us to have career development and growth, equity, and a diverse workforce.”

Hearing the voices of women in rural America is especially important to Kat, as she believes they are key to development.

“They are catalysts in the community in areas that are always



Kat Lopez believes women will feel more empowered to take on leadership positions as more and more women make their voices heard in rural communities. | Photo by Kylie Kai

evolving, such as economics and social justice,” she said. “This creates representation in the changing needs of the community.”

Women in these positions do face barriers, however. Limited network opportunities, less leadership development, and even unconscious bias all affect these women, but Kat believes society can help them feel empowered to continue leading the way.

“Even with the strides we take toward equitable treatment and inclusivity toward women, there are some challenges,” said Kat. “But there can be strategies to address some changes and evoke a successful environment for all.”

She believes communities can work together to elevate women starting at a young age. Kat says mentorship programs would be a huge benefit to young girls.

“Give girls an opportunity in leadership roles and let them take lead,” said Kat. “We look up to our role models, and mentorship programs have some of the best mentors. They give girls and women knowledge and access to many possibilities and networks.”

Kat is inspired to continue with her pursuit of leadership roles by her parents, who sacrificed much to help get her to where she is today.

“Coming to the U.S. from their home country of El Salvador, with no idea of what to expect, my parents gave my sisters and I the world,” said Kat. “Their tenacity to make sure that we created a legacy never goes unrecognized.”

She’s also motivated to make a positive difference in everything she does, in part to inspire others.

“Whether at work, home, or a social setting, I hope to always make a positive change—I want to leave an impression that inspires those around me,” she said. “I want my daughter, and my future generations, to always try and make a difference.”

With more representation, Kat believes women will feel more empowered to run for office, apply for jobs, and take on more roles in leadership positions.

“Take the chance,” said Kat. “Barriers are meant to be broken and we could be the ones who set the tone for many, many future generations of fearless leaders. Be the somebody that makes someone feel like somebody. Because like Bad Bunny said, ‘éxito es 50% visión, 50% esfuerzo’ (success is 50% vision, 50% effort) and we cannot do this alone.”

“HAVING WOMEN IN THESE ROLES ALLOWS FOR A SPECTRUM OF EXPERIENCES AND VOICES TO BE HEARD. IT GENERATES ROLES FOR US TO HAVE CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH, EQUITY, AND A DIVERSE WORKFORCE.”

—KAT LOPEZ





Members of Ohe-láku, or Among the Cornstalks, say the corn they grow has very little to do with the corn. “It has everything to do with the spiritual connection to the food and rebuilding our community in Oneida.” | Photo submitted

## Native cooperative cultivates community

BY LIZ STEWART AND JUSTIN CARTER, JUSTINC@CFRA.ORG

Corn is key to connecting Oneida Nation families to their ancestors.

Fifteen families have come together to form the Ohe-láku Cooperative, in Wisconsin, in an effort and desire to become more self-sufficient.

“One of the biggest things we learned was that we’re not meant to grow corn by ourselves,” said Laura Manthe. “We’re meant to grow corn together, like our ancestors before us.”

When community members gathered to talk about experiences growing corn in their backyards, they discovered similarities.

“The soil quality is low, so the corn doesn’t reach maturity,” said Lea Zeise. “If the corn does reach maturity, the raccoons wipe the whole garden out in one night. So, we tried an experimental, one-year pilot of growing together on a couple of acres.”

What resulted was Ohe-láku - Among the Cornstalks, a corn-growing and trading cooperative operated by volunteers. Members log their hours and at the end

of the season the corn is divided by the number of hours invested. New members join as apprentices, referred to as “Under the Wing.”

“The corn that we grow has nothing to do with the corn,” said Lea. “It has everything to do with the spiritual connection to the food and rebuilding our community in Oneida.”

They chose the cooperative approach with an informal structure because of their deep level of trust, as well as to share the responsibility and benefits.

Several resources aided in the development of the cooperative, which include a small Farmer Rancher grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education. In addition, the cooperative formed relationships with organizations like Intertribal Agriculture Council and Braiding the Sacred. They received a grant from the Great Lakes Commission, and have been offered support from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, which provides free land leases.

Rather than selling the produce

for money, Ohe-láku members use traditional methods of bartering.

“We have enough corn now that we can trade with other people,” said Laura. “We’ve traded for salmon, bison, honey, and maple syrup. When you... trade it, you stop and think about what you’re doing, the work that went into what you’re asking for, and the work that goes into what you’re offering. You get more of a connection.”

The co-op members say none of this would have been possible without the relationships and friendships they’ve made along the way, as well as the dedication and hard work of all the members at harvest time. To keep things running smoothly, members have monthly meetings at which they can all share thoughts and ideas on the best way to run the co-op.

“Everybody’s input is really important because everybody has a gift in the way that they see something,” said Lea. “We try to make sure that everybody’s input is a part of every big decision that we make as a co-op.”

# Business owners offer bilingual day care to residents of South Sioux City

BY LIZ STEWART

All parents want their children to be safe and happy—and to receive a good education. When Reyna Sibrian couldn't find a day care that offered that kind of atmosphere for her kids, she decided to open her own.

With hopes of providing a home-like environment and a bilingual curriculum for children from infants through fifth grade, Reyna, her sister Blanca González, and their mother, Joaquina Rojas, opened Bambino's Daycare, LLC, in South Sioux City, Nebraska, in February 2019.

"I've always had that desire to open my own day care, more than anything because I have my own kids, and I wanted them to go to a place where I knew they were being taken care of in the same way I would," Reyna said.

With a small business loan and coaching from the Center for Rural Affairs, the three women purchased the building where they run their day care. Veronica Reyes, loan specialist with the Center, helped them with the loan process.

"The three of them are dedicated to the business," said Veronica. "Their passion, drive, and hard work have made them grow into successful business owners."

Reyna attended business and advertising workshops and got one-on-one business counseling through the Center.

"If I have trouble with anything, Center staff finds someone who knows about it to help me," said Reyna. "They give good tips, and offer helpful information."

Since opening, the women have expanded their business and occupy a second building—one housing children 6 weeks to 4



Reyna Sibrian couldn't find a day care that was a good fit for her children, so she decided to open her own. Reyna, her sister Blanca González, and their mother, Joaquina Rojas, opened Bambino's Daycare, LLC, in South Sioux City, Nebraska. | Photo submitted

years, and the other with kindergarten through fifth grade.

They own and operate the day care together—in equal parts. Joaquina takes care of all of the cooking, providing hearty, home-cooked meals. Blanca works on staffing and scheduling. Reyna handles the legal aspects of the business and advertising, all while overseeing the older children.

Reyna, Blanca, Joaquina—and their eight full-time and three part-time employees—strive every day to make sure the children are as safe as possible and loved and treated like family.

"We try to make it as fun as possible for the kids, but also very homey, so when they walk in they feel at home," said Reyna. "All our curriculum is bilingual. Even babies have a curriculum here."

To anyone who is considering opening their own business, Reyna suggests doing what you love.

"Whatever it is you're going to do, make sure you have passion,"

she said. "My passion is to keep the kids happy, well-educated, cared for, loved, and to give them a fun, safe environment. If I didn't have that passion, I would have quit a long time ago. Recognize your 'whys.' Keep them in big print and remember why you started and why you're doing it."

The business owners have their eyes set on expansion, and hope to combine their different age groups into one building. They know they can trust the Center to assist when that time comes.

"The Center really helped us out a lot," said Reyna. "Everyone we've worked with has been super nice, super helpful, and anything we need help with, they're there. I'm so glad we found the Center. We'd have been lost without them."

*Are you considering opening a business in Nebraska and don't know where to start? Visit [cfra.org/lending-staff](http://cfra.org/lending-staff) and contact the loan specialist in your region.*





Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation has installed solar on buildings throughout its 34-acre development on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Renewable energy is a natural extension of the Indigenous way of life, which honors Unci Maka, Mother Earth. | Photo submitted

# Thunder Valley uses renewable energy to build community resilience

BY HEIDI KOLBECK-URLACHER, HEIDIKU@CFRA.ORG

**A**t Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, located on the Pine Ridge Reservation, renewable energy plays an important role in a vision to build resilient communities while reducing environmental impact.

Chance Renville, project manager at Thunder Valley, said using renewable energy is a natural extension of the Indigenous way of life, which honors Unci Maka, Mother Earth.

“As Indigenous people, we have always lived in a sustainable way. Never taking more than needed, being mindful of our environment and resources,” Chance said. “With renewable energy, we are providing a safer, healthier environment for our communities and families while getting back to who we are as a people.”

To accomplish the organization’s mission of empowering Lakota youth and families, Thunder Valley has eight initiatives, two of which are housing and home ownership and regenerative community development. These prioritize the implementation of renewable energy in the community’s buildings, and

contribute to the long-term goal of becoming a net-zero community.

Thunder Valley has installed solar on many of the existing buildings located on the organization’s 34-acre development.

“We are continuously looking at ways to reduce our footprint while also generating renewable energy,” Chance said.

This includes undertaking a feasibility study last year to examine the organization’s long-term planning and implications for becoming a net-zero community. They also developed an environmental sustainability strategic plan with actionable steps for improving their existing facilities and future buildings.

For South Dakota’s communities to fully reap the benefits offered by clean energy, Chance said the state’s renewable energy policies need improvement, and should focus on incentivizing individuals and organizations to move toward clean energy.

“Renewable energy is not the way of the future, it’s the way of now,” he said. “We have to stop thinking of renewable energy as a ‘new’ thing and really embrace it

and make the changes necessary to save Unci Maka for the next seven generations.”

Chance points specifically to the need for a statewide net metering policy. South Dakota is one of only three states in the nation without statewide net metering, which allows the owners of distributed generation systems, such as solar panels, to receive retail credit from their utility for the excess energy they transfer to the grid.

“We need policies that promote net metering and a more fair buy-back rate,” Chance said. “The residential solar energy tariff proposed by Black Hills Energy in South Dakota last year is frightening, and that would have taken us a step back instead of forward.”

Thunder Valley hopes it can serve as an example for any community working to become more sustainable and energy independent.

“We have big goals for this community,” Chance said. “We know it will take a lot of work, but as Indigenous people, resiliency is who we are so I know we will get there.”

Learn more at [thundervalley.org](http://thundervalley.org).

# Staff Spotlight: Kayla Bergman named one of Iowa's 'New Voices in Water Quality'

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESAH@CFRA.ORG

For her work to advance water quality and conservation goals, Kayla Bergman has received the New Voices in Water Quality in Iowa award.

The Center for Rural Affairs Policy Manager was one of 15 Iowans honored by the Conservation Learning Group based at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in the areas of creativity, innovation, knowledge, sense of community, and future potential.

In her nomination, Center Policy Associate Kate Hansen said Kayla had demonstrated success in all those areas. For example, in the area of innovation, Kayla connected rural constituents, farmers, and local elected officials with their state and federal lawmakers.

"Kayla has led or co-led several forums and community conver-



Kayla Bergman

sations across Iowa," Kate said. "Recent examples have included hosting a U.S. senator on a farm tour to discuss conservation, a Rural Resiliency Forum in Madrid, and a Resiliency in Agriculture event in Washington."

As chairwoman for the Story County Soil and Water Conservation District, Kayla's leadership has been beneficial to creating a partnership with the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office.

"Thanks to Kayla, our monthly meetings are much more efficient and beneficial, so that we can meet the mutual goal of putting conservation on the ground," said Doug Ruopp, district conservationist with NRCS in Story County.

She's also led efforts to improve communication with landowners about financial assistance available to plant cover crops as a way to improve water quality and promote the Water Rocks! educational program at local schools.

"With her efforts, we are helping to educate our youth on the importance of conservation and water quality," Doug said.

## Meat lockers, infrastructure, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

The Center for Rural Affairs is working with a coalition of partners to address each of these areas. In 2021, the Center worked with Nebraska legislators to craft and pass the Independent Processor Assistance Program. This year, we led an effort to win \$10 million in funding for the program. The first round of grants totaling \$4,914,247 has now gone out to 64 small Nebraska meat processors.

These awards are an investment in building the rural communities we want to live in.

The Center engaged in helping win a similar program in Iowa that

includes an education program to teach butchery. Nationally, we supported USDA programs to provide grant dollars and technical assistance to small meat processors.

In addition, the Center has made two loans to local meat processors through our small business lending program. One loan helped to reopen a shuttered locker that also obtained a USDA inspection certification. A second loan helped upgrade equipment in a small multi-generation value-added meat processing business.

At least 10 states have used

federal pandemic relief funding to invest in small meat lockers. Additional states had some level of support in place for meat processors pre-pandemic.

We're heartened that this sector is receiving long overdue public investment. We will continue to bring policy change, technical assistance, and lending support to the sector because we understand that local food processing infrastructure is a cornerstone of a vibrant and sustainable rural future.

Find more information and resources at [cfra.org/resources-meat-processors](https://cfra.org/resources-meat-processors).



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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

*Return Service Requested*

11/22



## **Women's voices create representation in communities**

Kat is serving her community professionally and personally

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# Local meat lockers, keystone infrastructure

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

Last night, I made lamb burgers, seasoned with garlic and topped with tomatoes from my garden. In my basement, across from canned peaches, I have a freezer filled with a whole lamb and part of a grass-fed cow.

Living near a local meat locker like the Oakland Meat Processing Plant, it's easy to take access to quality meat from local growers for granted. It's also easy to take for granted how vital that meat locker is to the local community.

Small meat lockers—independent businesses by definition—help anchor small town main streets. They provide jobs and a retail outlet for affordable and

quality local food. Independent livestock farmers rely on them to process their animals into marketable products. And, as the pandemic illustrated, they're a critical pillar of a resilient food system in times of crisis.

Small meat lockers saw a flood of demand when big slaughterhouses were bogged down under COVID-19 worker health challenges. As the national meat supply chain faltered, small lockers kept serving local customers. However, local farmers who depend on small lockers suddenly found themselves waiting months for an open slaughter date.

Truth be told, the challenges for small meat lockers started long

before the pandemic. Consolidation in livestock production, retiring owners, and aging facilities had already shuttered many small-town lockers. It is common for local farmers to drive an hour or more to find custom slaughter and processing.

Our local meat lockers need and deserve our support and assistance, including access to loan and grant capital to upgrade facilities, education for the next generation of owner-operators, technical assistance in generational business transfers, and champions in statehouses and Congress.

—SEE MEAT LOCKERS, INFRASTRUCTURE ON PAGE 7