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Nebraska educator and city council member strives for inclusivity and community involvement

Cynthia Alarcón feels it's important to have people of all different backgrounds and cultures active in government office. She was inspired to get involved, and was sworn in as a city councilwoman in January 2024. | Photo by Kylie Kai

By Liz Stewart; Nina Lanuza, ninal@cfra.org; and Jessica Cabán, jessc@cfra.org

Education, representation, and conversation all mean a great deal to Cynthia Alarcón, and she strives to offer opportunities to explore each of them to her fellow residents of Columbus, Nebraska.

Born in Oklahoma and raised in Texas, Cynthia moved to Columbus in 2006 after earning her bachelor's degree from Morningside College in Iowa.

Since then, she has become a familiar face in the local education world, serving as an English as a Second Language paraeducator at Emerson Elementary and a bilingual adult advocate at the nonprofit Center for Survivors. Since 2009, she has been a Title IC Migrant Education Program coordinator for Educational Service Unit, and she earned a master's

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Inside this issue

Intercultural leadership is a mindset and commitment to building a brighter, more inclusive future

By Nina Lanuza, ninal@cfra.org

Growth and progress, especially in small communities, hinge on reliable leadership. As rural America becomes increasingly diverse, leaders should consider how to effectively lead and manage groups as they work toward a goal. To achieve this, leaders can develop intercultural leadership, but it takes thought and intentionality.

Intercultural leadership is the ability to effectively lead and manage a diverse group of people. Leaders with strong intercultural skills respect and celebrate their team members' cultural backgrounds and understand how to navigate cultural differences.

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

As I write this, it's county fair time in Nebraska. I don't know about you, but almost everyone goes to the fair around here.

Growing up in Burt County (the home county of the Center), Sunday's parade and Tuesday's demolition derby were the highlights. I would participate in the parade, first on a float with my Girl Scout Troop, then with the marching band in junior high and high school.

After the parade, I would run from the end point across the park to the Methodist Fair Kitchen. As a pre-teen, I would help clear tables. As I got older, I chopped up cucumbers for salad, until finally getting to scoop beans and corn onto trays.

The fair is also full of other activities. I've taken photos of 4-H shows for the newspaper; my favorite shots are of the tiny 6-year-olds presenting their big pigs or wrangling their sheep. And, taken part in the community events of bingo, admiring students' artwork, and riding some of the amusement rides (not all).

The fair is near the end of the summer, and provides a gathering place for the last hurrah of the season. I greet cousins, neighbors, and classmates. It's a great tradition.

What's your favorite fair memory or your favorite part of the fair? Let us know by tagging us on social media.

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These leaders foster inclusivity and create an environment where all team members feel valued and understood.

Our rural communities are becoming more diverse than ever. Leaders with intercultural skills are vital to celebrating diversity, navigating conflicts, and creating strong communities that feel welcoming and safe for all.

Benefits come in three ways: economic advantage, cultural enrichment, and building stronger rural communities.

Economic advantage: Embracing intercultural leadership can also yield economic benefits for rural areas. Diverse communities attract a broader range of talents and skills, which helps build a dynamic workforce capable of addressing a variety of challenges. Additionally, businesses that prioritize diversity and inclusion often experience increased creativity, improved decision-making, and enhanced customer relations, contributing to economic prosperity.

Cultural enrichment: Intercultural leadership enriches our communities by celebrating differences and fostering mutual respect. Through cultural exchange programs, community events, and educational initiatives, leaders can cultivate a more inclusive and vibrant community where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.

Building stronger rural communities: Intercultural leadership promotes innovation and creativity by bringing together diverse perspectives and ideas. In a rapidly changing economic and social landscape, this can help rural communities adapt and thrive.

The best leadership roles tend to happen organically. Follow your interests and passions to local organizations where you can volunteer your time or support the causes close to your heart. The more you care about an initiative, the easier it will be to stay involved.

You don't have to lead an initiative to be a leader within your community. You could simply welcome newcomers and help them to find their places. It's important to help new community members make connections in their new homes, and in doing so, you can establish yourself as a good leader.

Intercultural leadership is essential for building strong, vibrant, resilient rural communities. By developing a culture of understanding and appreciation for diversity, leaders can improve economic prosperity and enrich our communities to build a stronger, more cohesive rural America. Intercultural leadership is not just a skill; it's a mindset, a commitment, and a pathway toward a more vibrant and inclusive future for all.

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.

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degree in 2015 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"Columbus has become my home partly because of the opportunities and life changes I've made here, and I am proud to be an educator in this community," she said. "I ensure that all eligible students reach challenging academic standards and graduate with a high school diploma that prepares them for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment."

Cynthia volunteers at the elementary school her children attend and at Centro Hispano. She is also an active member of her church and, most recently, she was appointed to the Columbus City Council, representing Ward 1.

"My decision to get involved in city council was driven by a deep commitment to my community and a desire to make a difference in the community I call home," she said. "My background in education gives me the opportunity to contribute my knowledge in assessing, analyzing, and developing programs in a different capacity as a city council member."

Cynthia was sworn in as a councilwoman in January 2024 and has been working to create more community involvement in Columbus.

"Over the years, I have seen both the strengths and challenges of our city, and I believe that through proactive and inclusive leadership, we can address these issues effectively. It is also a great opportunity for community engagement and to learn about city government and be a part of conversations and decisions for community improvements."

Cynthia is aware her actions may inspire future generations, including her children, to want to serve their communities.

"It is exciting to see the diversity and inclusivity of our community represented in the workforce, business owners, police and fire department, city council members, and a number of agency boards," she said.

The Center provides resources, maintains local partnerships with organizations and community leaders, and supports events like this Language Justice workshop in Norfolk in May. The workshop, presented by the Center, was led by the Community Language Collaborative. | Photo by Kylie Kai

She was inspired to get involved in city government by another Latina council member, Kat Lopez. Cynthia feels it's important to have people of all different backgrounds and cultures active in government office.

"Representation matters as it reflects community diversity that promotes inclusive decision-making, advocacy, equity, and community empowerment," Cynthia said. "Communities need more women leaders, Latino leaders, young leaders, and leaders of different professions to create inclusive communities where all citizens have the opportunity to thrive and a feeling of belonging."

She's rooting for the next generation of leaders to take on a more active role in their communities.

"Know that you are not alone," Cynthia said. "Current and previous leaders are a great source of knowledge and support. In my experience, they are always willing to share and offer insight that helps in the learning process of city government."

To help others, Cynthia was a key in the formation of the Columbus Young Latino Professionals Association, which launched in June 2022 with a goal to empower Hispanic and Latino young professionals in the area.

In December 2022, a visioning session facilitated by the Center for Rural Affairs helped determine the association's programming for 2023. In addition, the Center sponsored the speaker and provided simultaneous translation for the group's Resume Building Workshop in August 2023. In October 2023, the Center sponsored a professional headshot session which brought in 34 professionals.

Cynthia encourages others to find their passion and work hard to achieve their goals, whatever they may be.

"My purpose is my family, offering them the very best of me and a community to call home," she said. "Life will always be busy, but if you have the opportunity to elevate your purpose, then step up and make a difference. It is not easy, but the reward is worth the effort."

The new Walthill Public Library opened in 2017 in the community's former fire hall. Leaders enlisted the help of the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, fundraised, as well as received money from the Community Development Block Grant and the Civic and Community Center Financing Fund. Walthill's story is not unique in environmental justice and energy equity challenges. | Photo by Kylie Kai

The Heartland Environmental Justice Center: empowering rural communities like Walthill

By Kjersten Hyberger, kjh@cfra.org

Nestled within UMÓⁿHOⁿ Nation lies Walthill, a small village with a big story of community resilience and progress. In 2017, Walthill opened its new public library, marking the culmination of years of hard work, determination, and collaboration.

The journey to move the library from an 800-square foot building with no storage and a propensity for leaking during rainstorms to the former fire hall was not without its challenges. The fire hall came with environmental concerns due to its historical use and the presence of asbestos-containing materials. But with the assistance of the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, the village navigated the necessary environmental assessments and abatement process, paving the way for repurposing the space into the new library.

The transformation of the fire hall into a vibrant community hub exemplifies the spirit of Walthill's residents and their commitment to enhancing their quality of life. Through fundraising efforts and money from the Community Development Block Grant and the Civic and Community Center Financing Fund, the village mobilized resources and raised more than $400,000 to turn its vision into reality.

The new library is bright and cheerful with big windows to let in natural light and reading nooks throughout. There is also a cafe area, complete with a demonstration kitchen and tables for classes, playing board games, or enjoying a snack. The library hosts events for students, families, and community members—from book clubs to cooking classes—as well as adult classes in collaboration with Nebraska Indian Community College.

Today, the Walthill Public Library stands as a testament to the power of grassroots initiatives and community-driven development.

Walthill's story is not unique. All across Nebraska, rural communities grapple with environmental justice and energy equity challenges, and this is where the Heartland Environmental Justice Center (HEJC) steps in.

The HEJC offers tailored support to address unique situations and needs. From navigating grant applications to facilitating community needs assessments, it provides valuable assistance at no cost. Additionally, the center offers expertise in policy analysis, technical support, and connections to resources and partnerships. If a community's needs fall outside of the scope of the HEJC, its team will work to connect it with the appropriate external resources and support networks.

If your community is facing environmental challenges or seeking assistance, visit cfra.org/rural-resources or email ruralleaders@cfra.org.

Nebraska goat farmer shares experience and operation with aspiring agriculturalists

By Liz Stewart and Lucia Schulz, lucias@cfra.org

John Wallace was reared around agriculture, and, although he stepped away for a few years while he was in the military, farming has been his long-term plan.

In 2017, he started raising goats on his current operation, Olive Branch Goats, near Palmyra, Nebraska, because of lower predation risk. He hopes to eventually add sheep and cattle.

This year, he has been welcoming guests to his farm and offering his expertise to attendees of the Center for Rural Affairs workshop series "The Cycle of a Goat Dairy or Meat Operation," designed for those interested in starting their own goat operations.

John Wallace, a veteran, has been leading Center workshops for those interested in starting their own goat operations. | Photo submitted

Coming from a multi-generational animal agricultural background and growing up on a sheep ranch, John got his first taste of caring for animals at 8, when he got a dairy goat as a 4-H project.

Today, John owns 5 acres of land and wishes he had held out for a larger plot.

Having limited space makes land use a priority, and he said he watches real estate listings for more land to buy.

John has around 35 head of production does and is looking to scale that up to 50 head in the next two years.

He moves his products in several ways, including auctions and website sales.

John also sells to specific markets and has contracts with some bulk order buyers. He pays attention to overall trends, using U.S. Department of Agriculture market reports and evaluating price trends at different markets.

To those considering trying to make a living in agriculture, John said, it's a lifestyle that most folks who are successful are born into.

"If you don't have a background in animal agriculture, it could be very tough," he said. "I suggest working for someone else to get some experience before risking your own capital."

John also feels that finding a mentor to work with is important; preferably someone who's been in commercial agriculture for at least 10 years. He has been fortunate to be able to lean on his parents for support.

He follows several farms and ranches on social media, and is active in organizations that serve as knowledge- and experience-sharing venues, such as the Nebraska Sheep and Goat Producers Association.

John said he uses traditional risk mitigation and planning techniques.

"I have a personal doctrine of not making rigid plans, but instead ensuring options are available," he said. "Those options become contingencies and allow us to be flexible to reality. For example, if we experience a drought, I have the option of selling kids early, grazing our other property, irrigating select pastures, utilizing hay reserves, etc. Some of those options are also contingencies for other problems, such as an early or prolonged winter, a market collapse, or other unforeseen things."

John said there are realistic, and at times, harsh expectations to consider. Still, it's the best job he's ever had or could dream of having.

"Don't buy them or breed them unless you are ready to watch them die," John said. "If you're not comfortable with that, this is not the line of work for you. Make sure you have a day job. Don't let this be your only source of income, especially if you have a family to take care of. This life is challenging and rewarding, and it's always been the one consistent thing I wanted to do."

The Center recently took a look at the overall impact of utility-scale solar projects on agriculture land. In "Sifting through Solar," the author found that if all forecasted solar was built on farmland in the Midwest, it would occupy between 1.45% and 2.9%. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Center report: Solar development has minimal impact on agricultural land use

By Teresa Hoffman, teresah@cfra.org

As renewable energy development grows in rural areas, so do concerns about protecting agricultural land, especially from utility-scale solar projects.

The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that by 2050 solar will occupy 10.3 million acres of land nationally, 90% of which will be in rural areas. To address concerns about utility-scale solar systems occupying a large amount of prime farmland, some local and state officials have proposed and even placed restrictions prohibiting it.

Alex Delworth, policy associate with the Center for Rural Affairs, said the restrictions are concerning.

"They can be debilitating for solar development, not to mention raise questions about private property rights," he said. "In one instance, we found a county-level restriction related to prime farmland that eliminated 75% of potentially developable land in the area."

While utility-scale solar projects can look intimidating amid concerns about taking land out of production, a new report from the Center found their overall impact on agricultural land use is minimal.

"Sifting through Solar: Land-Use Concerns on Prime Farmland," written by Alex, discusses how restrictions are designed and forecasts solar development's impact on prime farmland in the Midwest region.

The Department of Energy predicts that between 210 and 420 GWs of solar projects are needed in the Midwest by 2050 to meet federal decarbonization standards. According to the report, if all of the forecasted solar was built on the region's prime farmland, it would occupy between 1.45% and 2.9%.

The report also addresses potential short-term impacts in Iowa and Minnesota.

Alex said if every acre currently proposed for solar development in Iowa was built on the state's top 14% rated farmland (90 Corn Suitability Rating, or CSR, and above), it would occupy 0.54% of the total acres. Furthermore, the proposed solar would occupy only 0.14% of the top 62% rated farmland (65 CSR and above).

The projected impact in Minnesota is also minimal. According to the report, if the number of acres currently proposed were located on prime farmland, it would cover less than 0.3% of the land.

Alex hopes local, county, and state officials will consider the report's findings as they decide the future of solar development in their area.

"Implementing rules that work with solar development rather than limiting it will open up economic opportunities for rural residents who want to voluntarily lease their land," he said.

Renewable energy projects also generate tax revenue for counties, schools, and emergency services as well as create rural employment opportunities.

Read the report at cfra.org/sifting-through-solar.

Tribal food sovereignty, continued from page 8

Umóⁿhoⁿ Nation land and develop a program called Nation Nourishment. Delberta's children got involved and eventually were hired as Center seasonal workers.

Nepthys Justo, former Center garden coordinator, said the educational opportunities have made a huge difference.

"We're empowering them and providing a path toward food sovereignty by teaching them how to grow their own food," she said. "We go around and do education throughout the season to keep the gardens going. There's even classes about how to prepare your food, as well as canning and freezing classes."

Purusing food sovereignty

Honoring and preserving culture is a huge part of pursuing food sovereignty in Tribal communities. While the work is not easy, Delberta said, she does it to honor her ancestors who struggled so she could live today.

"I try to live my life every day to the fullest," she said. "It's hard work, but it's very fulfilling, especially when you're able to bring it full circle. Put it in the ground, bring it home to your family, cook it for your family, and see your family enjoying it; the idea that this is our food, this is what our ancestors ate, this is what they brought to the world."

She added how important it is to learn from and understand history, part of that being what their ancestors ate.

"I'm always talking to our students about the history of the corn, squash, beans, and bison, of reclaiming our Indigenous wisdom and how powerful and knowledgeable our ancestors were, that they lived here sustainably on this land for thousands of years," said Delberta.

Self-sufficiency is necessary, and these communities are working toward that goal, said Santee Sioux Nation member and former Center orchard specialist Todd Runnels. He notes they have cattle and buffalo, but they need to know how to butcher and store them.

Miranda Roberts, Center community foods associate, helps plant tomato and pepper plants with a goal of growing ingredients to make salsa. This workshop was held in Santee. | Photo by Kylie Kai

"To me, being sovereign means being self-sufficient, where we have everything we need right here in our community," he said.

Successful initiatives

Center-sponsored projects with the best results have often been related to education, both community-wide and in schools. Services such as topsoil cultivation, offering workshops on how to harvest food grown in backyard gardens, and more have been received well by community members.

Healthy eating initiatives through Niobrara Public Schools have also been successful and approved by the toughest critics: the kids. Students have been able to come to school over the summer and learn to make healthy, traditional foods for themselves.

They have also had the opportunity to taste different foods throughout the school year.

Future projects

Community members envision a variety of projects that could help them continue to work toward food sovereignty. Projects could include dedicating space for a centrally located orchard to receiving more training.

Many would like to see garden expansion happen. Ezra Lyons, Center summer staff and member of the Umóⁿhoⁿ Nation, offered the idea that larger gardens equal healthier living.

"I hope we continue to go bigger every year and have our gardening lists grow until each and every one of our Tribal members understand that this is a better way to live," said Ezra. "If you grow food right in your own yard, you know where it comes from so you know it's good for you. I see that for our people, a healthier food system."

To learn more about this work, visit cfra.org/native-communities.

CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS
145 Main Street, Po Box 136 | Lyons, NE 68038-0136
cfra.org | info@cfra.org

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Solar development has minimal impact on agland use
New report focuses on solar projects on prime farmland

Community, culture, and collaboration create a path toward Tribal food sovereignty

By Liz Stewart and James Canning

Much of the Center for Rural Affairs' work with Native communities focuses on developing and nurturing food systems. To move forward in these efforts, staff work alongside the Santee Sioux Nation, the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, the Umóⁿhoⁿ Nation, the Winnebago Tribe, Little Priest Tribal College, and Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC). Together, they support food sovereignty and business development in the communities of Santee, Niobrara, Macy, Walthill, and Winnebago, Nebraska.

The Center offers activities and projects to promote and encourage cultural traditions, improve diets, and support families growing fruits and vegetables. Recently, partners involved in this work shared their thoughts on what has been accomplished so far and looked ahead to what's next.

Empowering communities

The partners agree the most effective ways to move toward food sovereignty are through offering opportunities for employment and education.

"The way that we engage [community members] is to try and find their interests and offer them different classes to help empower them through education," said LaVonne Snake, NICC instructor and Winnebago Tribe member.

Lani Moran-Samqua, NICC staff and member of the Umóⁿhoⁿ Nation, said the Center has made a big impact through its actions, including tilling gardens for community members.

"Everyone can say, 'We need to start a garden, we need to have food sovereignty,' and when you ask how to do it, no one knows," said Lani. "When the Center's programs came along it put movement behind the words."

Delberta Frazier, former Center summer staff and instructor at Isanti Community Schools, said the collaborative projects they worked on were a game changer. She worked with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension and Center staff to put in a garden on

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