

The Sarah Sinnett Story – Sidney Champion and E3 Lead *Sidney Entrepreneurship Stories*

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D. – January 22, 2024

About the Sidney Story...



For most Americans, Sidney is just one more rural community among thousands. Some may know of Sidney as the once home of **Cabela's Outfitters**. But Sidney is a community worth a deeper look as it reinvests itself one more time by focusing on and investing in entrepreneurial development. This story is part of a larger collection of Sidney stories and analysis. In these stories lessons are to be learned!

Sidney Story Collection...

Web Link

1. Sidney Story Collection by Don Macke
2. Sidney Case Study Executive Summary by Don Macke
3. Sidney, Nebraska – Entrepreneurial Community Case Study by Don Macke
4. Cheyenne County and Sidney Development Opportunity Profiles by e2 and Don Macke
5. E3 Assessment by the Sidney E3 team by David Iaquinta

Sidney Landing Page

Background Papers

6. What is a Community Champion? by David Iaquinta
7. The Sarah Sinnett Story – Sidney Champion and E2 Lead by David Iaquinta
8. The Cory Keen Story – E3 Champion by David Iaquinta
9. The Paula Abbot and Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center Story by David Iaquinta
10. The Melissa Norgard Story – Corporate Professional, Economic Development Director, Entrepreneur, and Mother by David Iaquinta
11. Stop the Swap Story by David Iaquinta
12. The eNavigator by David Iaquinta
13. The Alisha Juelfs Story – Navigator by David Iaquinta
14. The Amber Fields Entrepreneur Story with Jennifer Powell by David Iaquinta
15. Jillana Saunder... Entrepreneur – Savor and Grace – Sidney, Nebraska by Don Macke

Stories

16. *Community Champions...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-ecosystem-champions-with-pam-abbot-and-sarah-sinnett.html>
17. *Entrepreneur Navigators...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-navigators-with-alisha-juelfs-and-rachael-barry.html>
18. *About E3...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/exploring-e3-in-nebraska.html>

Podcasts

Thanks David...



At e2 we want to acknowledge the remarkable work of Dr. David Laquinta in conducting interviews, site visits, and curating many of these stories. Our **Sidney Story** could not be possible without Dr. Laquinta's remarkable work. Dr. Laquinta is a 50-year veteran college and university professor recently retired from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is an international expert in rural community economic development.

Listen to David's e2 **Pathways to Rural Prosperity** podcast from April 2022 focusing on "Community Resilience":

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/episode-33.html>.

SMIF Acknowledgement...



e2 would like to recognize support from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation in hosting e2 and our **Sidney Story**. SMIF is a leader in community-centered entrepreneurship through its REV Initiative.

For more information:

<https://smifoundation.org/programs/economic-development-2/>

Why Stories Matter...

For nearly 50 years e2 has been gathering and curating stories about communities across rural North America. These stories serve to inspire and inform other communities as to what is possible with entrepreneur focused community economic development. Stories matter in that they are relatable to community builders across the continent. Sidney's stories are compelling and illustrate renewal after a massive socio-economic crisis. For more e2 stories check out...

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/community-regional-case-studies/>

Questions and Additional Information

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The Sarah Sinnett Story Sidney Champion & E3 Lead

By David Iaquina, Ph.D.

*“It’s our job to take care of the community”
“Someone had to do something;
I just put myself there”*

Sarah Sinnett - Synopsis

Born in Sidney, Sarah is a mother, wife, former Cabela’s employee, and daughter of long-time resident parents with a history of involvement in the community. She describes herself as an *“Insurance professional by trade and rural prosperity advocate by hobby.”* Learning, as she assumed the tacit leadership of the local E3 team, she has emerged as a powerful force implementing the E3 model in Sidney. Importantly, she has not done this alone, but with like-minded strong players in the community who continue to will their vision into reality by consistent hard work, smart application of ideas from other communities, strategic application of modest outside resources, and an indefatigable commitment to pivot repeatedly to find solutions that work for Sidney.

SARAH’S “ORIGIN STORY:” THE ROOTS OF A CHAMPION

“I grew up in Sidney. I went to high school. My parents are in town. When I went to high school I remember, “Gosh, I can’t wait to get away from this town.” I spent a little time in Hastings Nebraska and then I spent time in Omaha. I went to college and got a master’s degree, met my husband, fell in love, got married...all that fun stuff. I was working for a large company there, loved my job and didn’t want to leave. Then my husband decided to go into the state patrol, and part of that process when you’re a rookie is they say, “Hey, we’re going to move you anywhere in the state of Nebraska,” and they moved us back to Sidney. I cried all the way back. I said, “I don’t want to be doing this,” but now I say, “it’s the best thing that ever happened to us, and God knew it before I did.” I’m so grateful to be back and raising a family in this town. I think we’ve been back about eight years now.

When I came back to Sidney, I inevitably ended up getting a job at Cabela’s. I worked there for a long time and then transitioned of course into Bass Pro. I was one of the lucky people that still had a job with the transition. There are still a handful of people that are still employed by Bass Pro in Sidney. It wasn’t the best fit for me. There was an opportunity with another employer that was looking for local talent when they heard what happened. I was able to go on to lead an office at GL Huyett. They make and distribute industrial fasteners for distribution. I never thought I would sell a fastener, but it’s been a great opportunity for me. We started with a startup of I believe three of us in the Sidney operation two years ago and now we’re up to thirteen. We bought a building and we’re renovating it to fit up to at least twenty-five long-term. So, it’s been incredible for our business because there is so much talent in this town...still is. And it is salt of the earth human work ethic. I would say that you tend to find those people in the Midwest. So, it’s been a very strong cultural fit for us and very successful.”

Today Sarah transitioned to selling insurance to reduce her travel demands, and she and her husband own and manage properties in Sidney. Her seven-year-old daughter has a t-shirt business! Sarah's parents have been a foundational influence in her life by role modeling expectations and instilling the core value of commitment to community. Both parents have deep roots in Sidney's community development and see leadership as an obligation. As Sarah says...

"You have to know the way I was raised. You need to meet my mother and father. There's a reason I am the way that I am. They taught me, "it's not just work. It's not just life. It's our job to take care of our community." They still do, 100%."

Her parents' involvements have been complementary yet strategically parsed. On the one hand they reflect elements of more traditional gender roles with her father playing the more public advocacy/leadership role (instrumental leadership) while her mother has played a more behind the scenes (followership and expressive leadership) role. Yet, both have entered the public area in important leadership fashion expressing their individual interests and proclivities.

"My dad is involved in everything. My dad has been president of our community center since it was built in 1991. He's been on and off and on and off the board since the beginning. He got that thing built. It was kind of like his thing. My thing that brought me around was I got involved in redoing the city park and then I got with E3 and that was kind of my fire. I would say his was the community center. He is now also actively involved in the efforts of building our first local unrestricted community endowment. My dad is just a more of the social guy."

"My mom is more of an introvert, but she's doing just as much involved behind the scenes as my dad. My mom is on the school board. She's been a teacher, avid church volunteer, silent partner in everything my dad does, volunteering her time in the King's Daughters, and supports anything that will support kids. So, I don't know any different, I guess I would say."

When Cabela's left town, Sarah's instincts kicked into gear...

"I was always community minded and would volunteer, but hard times make or break leaders. A lot of people moved away, and somebody needed somebody to do something. There was a ball on the ground, and I couldn't just leave it there. Somebody had to pick it up and do something with it. So, I just put myself there."

Her formative experiences combined with her need to "do something" translated for Sarah into her park team member role in the development of Sidney's new all-inclusive playground and park for ... all children. As Sarah posted publicly for the community...

"I could not be prouder to be a part of how Sidney continues to redefine itself! After just one year of fundraising over \$700,000 was privately raised and invested back into the community by the people who live here! Thank you so much to our donors and the most amazing group of volunteers!"

On the heels of this work Sarah was struck by the isolating effects of the pandemic. She personally felt the loss of connection with her friends, neighbors and community, and she was looking to make a

difference. This led to starting *Sidney Connect* with her friend Cory Keen as a vehicle for reconnecting people. But action comes at a price as we hear from Sarah...

“People needed something to put value in and something to create value. We wanted to get something off the ground, and Cory and I worked to get something off the ground with Sidney Connect before E3 came around. I started that and we wanted to get something going, but I had no clue what I was doing. I was highly over-subscribed already. I wanted to create value, but I didn’t know what to do. There were so many times where I was like, Oh, I wish I hadn’t started this. I just want to quit.”

BUILDING THE ECOSYSTEM

Building the ecosystem is a challenge that Sarah has taken seriously and without pause. However, it has not always been an easy road. Reflecting on the early phase of E3 during the first six months, Sarah expresses her sense of frustration that things weren’t moving more quickly. Yet, she acknowledges that a number of factors played a role in this frustration...

“I did not like how the first 6 months of E3 went for us. And I think we actually lost a couple of people because of that. And I was very iffy about staying with it at that time. Also, we had a different leader of the group at the time. So, I would say that was part of it. But I also for me it was a big struggle in the beginning, because we wanted to do stuff, and we wanted to get off the ground. I think it wasn’t super organized, which is okay because it was an experiment. But then when I kept expressing, “Hey, we’re not getting anywhere. We’re not doing anything.” It was just, “trust the process.” And it felt like, “it’s not the process, there is no process.” ... It wasn’t until it was led by us ... [instead of someone else] ... that I feel like we started actually getting traction. So, I do think there are definitely opportunities within the first 6 months to rehab that a little bit. If we were to go to another 6 communities, I would like to revisit that, because I think we could have lost some people there with the first impression.”

While Sarah’s comments are well-placed, it is important to recognize that the entire point of the initial process is to move the team to a self-actualized functioning with coaches providing only support. Real solutions to ecosystem building have to be generated within the team since they know best the conditions on the ground, the impediments, the players and the needs and capacities of the community. The process is designed to create that self-awareness and the motivation to move them into the driver’s seat.

The initial struggle that Sarah depicts is a necessary step leading to the epiphany she describes once the team experienced the peer-learning benefits deriving from site visits and meeting individuals from other communities further along in ecosystem building. Once she experienced what a proactive community looked like and found conversation partners willing to provide answers and support, her light bulb went on. Most importantly she could see that these were people like herself and not experts giving her a fixed recipe for success. For Sarah the visits to Ord and Holt County and meeting Bob Stowell and others were a tonic...

“Then I got introduced to E3... [on the Ord visit] ... and that made all of the magic happen. It gave me the playbook for what I was supposed to do, how we were supposed to do it, the playbook, resources and network. That made the magic happen.”

For me, the magic was Ord and Holt County. and just seeing what could be done, what was possible, that I could dream so much bigger than what we were doing? It was all of that. And then you get around people that are like you and have your energy. So, you realize you're inspired by your peers. And these peers are here to support you. That is what kept this going.

We went to Holt County ... I got the opportunity to sit with Bob and get so much advice from him and Pam Abbott out of Ogallala. ... I said, "Some of our current leadership is poor. A lot of our necessary roles are vacant. What do we do?" Where do I start?" And they just sat there, and they almost gave me a playbook of what I needed to be doing. It was so immensely beneficial. I don't know how Bob did it without a sounding board or different people to turn to. He has been immensely helpful. The number one thing he came up with is he said, "I think you need to start an interlocal agreement for your economic development. That's what we did in Ord, and it was transformational. I said, "Okay, great. I don't think we're going to get there quickly. I think that's going to take time."

This “wakeup” experience was shared by Melissa Norgard when she visited Holt County and Handlebend. Melissa owns Sam and Louie’s, a local restaurant with her husband who also operates their micro-brewery in the basement. Handlebend in O’Neil introduced her to a new concept for where she and her husband wanted to go with their business. As Sarah put it...

“So as part of the brewery and stuff going in there [the site visit to O’Neill]. Melissa ... was very inspired by Handlebend, and actively now promotes their business in Sidney by buying custom mule mugs for display in her brewery.”

The sometimes-painful road to collaboration required pivoting wherein Sarah had to confront her own complicity in unachieved goals and pivot in a variety of ways going forward. First by being brutally honest in her self-appraisal...

*“I’m a strong personality, so people seem to either love me or hate me, and rightfully so. I p***ed the Chamber of Commerce off four or five years ago because I was vocal with them, and I was trying to push the train up the hill the wrong way instead of collaborating with them. I was an a-hole to them and so they had a right to have a beef with me. So, they weren’t necessarily coming around in partnering with E3 even though I’ve grown.*

A Lot of people ask me, why aren’t you applying for this [the Navigator] position? First, that’s weird for me to create funding and then apply for the position myself. That’s weird. You need strong champions in the community and not just one person [Navigator]. Second, we needed somebody that was more mellow than me [laughs] to placate those relationships. Alisha is that glue. She came in and she has a strong relationship with the Chamber. She has a strong relationship with the city and county. She brings it all together in a way that I don’t think I could have.”

Second by recasting her self-presentation while staying true to the objective...

“I found that I couldn’t keep pushing up a hill that wasn’t going to let us go. I’ve done that before and it hasn’t gone well. I learned...what we’re going to do is just move this forward and people will want to get on board because we are providing value.”

Third by allowing others to take the lead. Referring to getting funding from the donor advised fund for the Navigator position, Sarah says...

"I would say I started it, but Alisha [the Navigator] has kind of sealed the deal."

Lastly, accepting the legitimacy of dissenter's interests rather than fixating on their opposition was also a necessity. Characterizing the Chamber and assessing their displeasure with her during early E3 discussions, Sarah says...

"It was fair. I think people wanted to see that we weren't just taking things over."

Distilling the Culture of Sidney – Pre and Post Cabela's

For the most part people view the sale of Cabela's and associated loss of jobs as a fatal blow to Sidney. As we have pointed out in other stories this is not entirely the case. There were positive outcomes for Sidney as well. For example, the housing market collapse resulted in opportunities for new residents to move to the city and the now displaced human capital was ripe for actualizing their entrepreneurial aspirations. Sarah points out another dimension of change that benefited Sidney centered on a distillation of culture. Not only was there an invigoration of entrepreneurial spirit, but there was also purging of negativity.

"I'll describe the culture of Sidney a little bit when Cabela's was still in town. Sidney's always been a great community ever since I've lived there. It's a great place to raise your kids. It's local. Your commute might be 5-10 minutes, but you still have... a few great amenities that have come into town. You rarely have to go out of town, but if you do have to go out of town, you can easily make a weekend trip out of going to a bigger community. ... When Cabela's was here and when they got really big there was this culture - because they had to recruit so many people to town for all of those roles. There was a lot of I hate Sidney in the town because it was a spouse maybe that was relocated with somebody that was employed by Cabela's or something like that. It was not the town that they wanted to be living in. They were just all over the "small town."

We lost some good people, one of my best friends moved away - I understand it's a hardship and everything else like that and different things happen. The beautiful thing that came out of the Cabela's move ... there is no more of that negativity because everybody that is in Sidney has fought to stay in Sidney and has created new opportunities for themselves. The benefit that we have in this town now is the people that are here are 100% cheerleaders of the community.

You still have some naysayers. You still have some people that aren't all on the same page. But even with the park project the thing that I saw, it started really negative with people going and saying, "No way in heck are you going to raise that much money. You guys are naïve." Some of which was local leadership making those comments. That group's reaction to the dissent was what was so inspiring to me. Instead of giving up, the leadership of that project said, "watch me." And they did it. That's probably been what's most inspiring to me. It's just, "You don't have to believe it. You don't have to come along. I'll get other people on board that ... will support it and once we're successful we'll prove to you that you want to be involved too." That's ... a lot of what that project taught me."

WHAT ABOUT WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE?

Many new residents came into Sidney from the front range and elsewhere due to low housing costs following the sale of Cabela's and the pandemic. The large stock of available housing and quality of life factors were a significant draw. Yet newcomers are a resource that could be actively pursued since they bring with them human and economic capital. They bring skills, experience, financial capacity and often a desire to be involved in their new community. Unlike in Ogallala where new arrivals are mostly geographically separated at Big Mac, in Sidney they are interspersed throughout the community itself. Intentional recruitment as volunteers with specific tasks in mind rather than global asks to be part of e3 might be successful. Making individual connections and building relationships should be the primary goal. When asked *"How well and how intentionally is the community engaging in outreach to newcomers?"*, Sara Sinnett provided an excellent description of the old-timer/newcomer conflict that often operates in situations like this. And she weaves the woof of her narrative into the warp of her own experience with surprising candor...

"I think we could be better quite honestly. There is a little bit of stigma here that "if you move here from Colorado, we don't want 'cha." I think we could be better at that and include more individuals in everything we do. I will also say the tolerance ... [is strained by what] ... the community will not stand, and it's somewhat justified. We've had a lot of people move to Sidney – for the cheap housing or something else – from states that vary significantly from the values traditionally held in rural Nebraska. Some newcomers have attacked the way we do things here without knowing the context and they get shut down very quickly. Whether that's right or wrong, I wish more of those situations could develop into discussing and understanding rather than accusations. asking, "Why do we do it this way here?" versus saying, "It needs to be like where we're from and this is how we did it." I wish it was more a conversation than "this is how it needs to be" with one another because I think that would come across a lot better. ... Because you don't want to get into the idea that, "This is the way we've always done it." We should include other ideas. I think it's the approach of "You're doing it wrong" that's shutting down those conversations instead of the content that's being addressed. So, I do think that is shutting down some new outside voices that would have maybe been welcomed if they had a different approach to how they did it.

In a way I think conflict is healthy. For me, a great learning opportunity I had becoming an adult is, "I can't be an a-hole. I needed some conflict Some individuals were mean to me because I was an a-hole and I needed that. Sometimes there need to be consequences to your actions. This I will say time and time again, "What I said was not wrong. How I said it was absolutely wrong." That was a tough lesson I needed to learn. So, in a way it's kind of okay that people are getting bulldozed because they're not approaching it the right way.

*What needs to happen is a voice of reason to say, "Hey, I hear you. You have valid points. Here's how it went sideways. What do we need to do to come back around?" But once it hits a certain point, and with some people in town I think it has now, it's almost just a p***ing match. ... I don't think either side is willing to budge. Now – not ten years ago but today – I'm the first person to say, "I'm far from perfect. I screw up all the time, but I just need you to tell me that. If I don't hear it from you, then I assume everything is fine." I think for some people here they're so far in, that I don't think it is recoverable for some people at this time."*

There are nonetheless hopeful indications for Sidney in this area as Sarah points out. After describing a new resident, Amber Kirkman, who started a 100-women group to provide philanthropic support for people in need in the community because that was something she was part of in her old community. More to the point is the example of how she sees her role in meetings today...

“The community just had a meeting for the strategic planning, and there was someone you wouldn’t have expected at that meeting who has been a naysayer and negative person. ... Some people were complaining about him, and I just looked at them and said, “Hey, I’m glad he’s using the appropriate avenues. I’m happy he’s here. Like maybe he was just trying to go through it the wrong way. Let’s give him a chance. Sometimes it just needs to be kind of shutting that down a little bit too.”

Who Gets the Credit?

This is a constant challenge when systems undergo change. There is a strong likelihood that individuals will want to lay claim for success. While individuals do play key roles, most real change is a byproduct of the efforts of many participants. Failure to recognize this often undermines the community spirit necessary for continued progress and involvement. Bob Stowell is just one example of a community champion who has avoided this pitfall as we have demonstrated in the Ord Story. Sarah’s ascendancy to true champion came by channeling her inner Bob Stowell. While recognizing her own contributions she allows them to take a back seat to the role played by others concerning who gets the credit in Sidney.

“Jana Jensen is our NCF representative, and she has been a steward. We have been trying to get our own unrestricted endowment off the ground for 20 plus years and haven’t done it. It just launched this fall thanks to Jana and some other people in the group.

I can’t say enough how lucky I am. People have helped me a lot - and I won’t say that I don’t work hard, because I do – but I wouldn’t be able to do any of this stuff without this community. That’s kind of what feeds my fire to make me more passionate about it. One of the things that does that for me is the donor advised fund. The ask was not hard at all. They’re completely anonymous. I don’t know who they are at all.

Wendell [Gaston] is the representative for the fund. I told him what I was going to ask for, so he was kind of plugging it for six months before we were ready to say this is coming. So was Jana. By the time I put pen to paper and realized how much we needed. I made the ask to Jana and Wendell. They had already socialized the “what and why,” and Jana got it approved. So, it was not hard at all. I had done other donor advised projects where they realized I’ll get done what I say I’m going to do. So, I think that was an easier way to get it through because they know my track record. I’m tremendously grateful to have a fund that is just, “if it is good for the community, they’re going to seriously consider supporting it.”

Wendell Gaston has played many roles in Sidney over time. He is someone who, having been mayor along with many other public roles, was a part of the older establishment group.

Twenty years ago, when he was mayor, he admits that he couldn’t have seen the kind of value E3 is talking about. However, today from outside government, he sees the value of the E3 approach and the

need to support it. He is an example of the intergenerational bridge-building that is necessary to make the overall E3 initiative and entrepreneurial ecosystem building successful. As such, he is a valuable member of Sidney E3 as a mentor to the E3 team and liaison to older city cohorts who often control necessary resources and effect policy as Sarah's comment underscores.

Where is Sarah today terms of E3 in Sidney? Reflecting on the learning process involved in E3, Sarah emphasizes the key roles played by site visits and semiannual plenary meetings with the six counties...

"I'd say I thought the process of peer learning was beautiful and how it was set to take place every 6 months. It was a cadence, so you might be losing some fuel or losing some steam or some kind of loss, and then it brings you back kind of to your center. So, meeting with the other communities, I thought was just beautiful and so helpful."

And Sarah sees the work of E3 as significantly different from project specific volunteer work...

"I've learned a lot, especially with E3 versus other volunteer work that I've done. When we were fundraising and rebuilding our public park, that was, "push really hard; get it done." And then it's done. E3 and ecosystem development is never done. So, that's been a realization for me. It should have been intuitive, but just a realization for me that, "hey, this is never gonna go away."

This graceful acceptance that ecosystem building and community development are never done is important. It fuels both the equanimity necessary to sidestep mission fatigue and reinforces the need to stay realistic about one's own capacity to go it alone. It is a challenge that is never finished. Rather it is an ongoing process that requires attention in the here and now as well as taking steps to ensure perpetuation and success in the future. Sarah also has a clear understanding of what it takes to be a champion...

"The biggest thing from a champion perspective is it has to be somebody from the community. It cannot be somebody from the city, or the Chamber or the County. It has to be a community member because they have the network, they have the relationships, they have the influence because it's not just part of the city. It has to be somebody that cares about the community that's going to make others care about it too."

Sarah's story is elaborated in her extensive comments included in the accompanying narratives on the Champion, the Navigator, and the E3 Assessment.