

The Cory Keen Story – E3 Champion

Sidney Entrepreneurship Stories

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D. – January 11, 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

Sidney Landing Page

Background Papers

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

Stories

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

Podcasts

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>

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

Don Macke – e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

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The Cory Keen Story – E3 Champion

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D.

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“There's a way; we just have to figure it out.

*We just haven't figured it out yet,
but there is a way.”*

Cory Keen – Synopsis



Arriving in Sidney to work at Cabela's, Cory and his family have become valued members of Sidney's revival. Following the sale of Cabela's, like many others Cory was faced with the challenge of work opportunities. Struggling through some bleak times, Cory's ingenuity and integrity led him to pursue opportunities with the Lincoln-based Nelnet organization. This was not an easy road.

Discussions with the Nelnet about opening an office in Sidney to service western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming was a protracted and challenging task. [Nelnet is the parent company of Allo Communications that specializes in fiber optic internet service.] Sidney did not have a good integrated internet service and doing so seemed initially to be an intractable hurdle. Sidney is a community challenged by its uniquely spread-out geography encompassing three distinct quadrants: the city core, the north side separated by the railroad with limited access, and the commercial development adjacent to the former Cabela's and the interstate which lies more than a mile from downtown. Connecting the segments of the community would involve burying fiber over the long distances of open space without customers. The local market was inadequate to justify the cost. It was Cory and Melissa Norgard (Director of Economic Development at the time) who found the solution making use of space in existing electrical conduits already in place. This ingenious solution proved central to Nelnet deciding to open an office in Sidney and hiring Cory to manage it. Clearly, Sidney has benefited greatly from this enhancement.

Today Cory has created a terrific work environment in the Nelnet office facility that includes a variety of workstations for use by residents as well as support staff available for consulting. While part of a larger organization, Cory has brought his entrepreneurial skills to developing Sidney's infrastructure and facilitating access for other entrepreneurs in the community. Importantly, this is the same energy, creativity and support he has brought to the leadership of the local E3 team.

Cory's Origin Story

As Cory talks about his own background, he links it to opportunities and experiences in the community. Much of his personal narrative is preoccupied with his four children and their experience in the community...

“My family is from McCook, most of them originally from Germany. A lot of them still live in Germany, but I don't know where. ... They've invited me to come see them, but hard to do with 4 kids. You know

what I mean? ... I have a 16-year-old, a 13-year-old, a 5-year-old, and an almost 3-year-old. ... They're quite spread out. ... Even family vacations are difficult ... [with the kids] ... that spread ... [out in age]. You've got the, the teens that are interested in wild water parks and you got the littles that want to go to you know Mickey Mouse shows. So, it makes it interesting."

Cory graduated from High School in Brush, Colorado and took classes from Morgan Community College to refine his practical skills in an area he enjoys. Cory's educational experience is consistent with attitudes commonly found in more rural places, to wit formal education is not a good fit for all children...

"That was me. I did not go to college. I sat down in my basement and watched YouTube videos and took apart my radios and learned to solder. Attention ... sitting in a classroom for me was tough."

What about sports and recreational opportunities in Sidney for kids? How is it going?

"I think pretty well. I don't want to downplay the competitiveness. ... But it feels like most of our sports, ... are a little more recreational than hard core. It's certainly not Texas football in high school. ... Our community center has had 2 or 3 directors turn over which I think is normal. ... It's not a super lucrative position because our community center is a nonprofit. It's not bad, but maybe a little shallow. ... Some of the opportunities in the bigger cities we don't have here. For example, our high school doesn't do soccer. But there is a local gentleman that just said, I'm passionate about soccer and I'll teach it," so he does ... basically through donations from the parents. ... Both of my kids are in that. ... Tonight is my five-year-old daughter Hayden's first night of tumbling, so there are things like that here ... which is good."

Cory also speaks to the way organized sports are different in smaller more rural communities. It simply occupies as less time in children's schedules than it does in bigger cities...

"It's a lot easier to get around. I can get across town to the soccer field in 5 minutes. I can get to 3 of our schools from my house in 5 minutes. I just feel like that time alone is less. That being said, I mean a lot of it is traveling ... [to events]. When there is a game or something, you're on the road for an hour and a half to the nearest next big school that you're competing against. But I have a close friend with kids my age that lives in Dallas, Texas, and it sounds terrible. He's constantly gone and ... [doing kid's] ... sports, to the point where he can't even do vacation. He's like, "I don't think I can make it. We have this and this and this, and this, and this going on." It seems ... all consuming."

Today Cory is busy and does not accept that excuse when he hears people say they don't have time to work on behalf of the community or they challenge him saying,

"You must not be doing your job. I always figure it out. I run two businesses on the side. And Nelnet full time. On the side I have a mobile app development company. I have a couple of websites that I sell products on, coffee and stuff like that."

Cory's can-do attitude rests on a simple philosophy that he summed up when talking about the challenges E3 faced early on when dealing with public entities like the City, the Chamber, Tourism, etc.

"I do feel that tension between E3 and the other entities because it does feel like ... [they're just making excuses.] It seems like a lot of the pushback we get is, "We've tried that or already." I tell Sarah, "I don't

do well with excuses. There's a way we just have to figure it out. We just haven't figured it out yet, but there is a way. I always say we reserve the right to get better."

Today Cory manages the national website for Nelnet which services student loans nationally. His job and the impact it has had on Sidney due to the installation of citywide fiber optic internet is a good example of one of the elements that make Sidney a Nanopolitan place as opposed to rural. As Cory tells it...

"I am responsible for the Nelnet.com management account, the overall website. That's my responsibility. We are on calls with teams spread across the U.S., ... Denver, Lincoln, east coast, Pacific Coast. We have team members everywhere. I just happen to be in Sidney Nebraska which is so weird to think about. Something that big being out of Sidney Nebraska. It's kind of cool."

Sidney Schools

Cory speaks favorably about Sidney schools, something we explore more thoroughly with innovative teachers and the Vice Principal elsewhere. He also contrasts the Sidney experience to schools in the other E3 communities...

"My son is in robotics. We have a robotics club in town, and that, that does well. The year before last Sidney hosted the regional tournament and then the state tournament is at the Ashland Air Museum. [We have] ... FFL, First Lego League. ... Our schools are super innovative ... and have a lot of different things going on.

The schools ... [have] ... super unique ... programs. They even set up a medical room ... [for students] ... interested in going into nursing or something like that. They have ten 3D printers, and they hired a local gal to teach CAD in our high school. She was a CAD designer at Cabela's and designed the stores and those type of things. ... There's a work-to-school or a school-to-work program where they teach trade school things with the local business. The idea of keeping our children local and giving them inspiration to come back to Sidney and build a life here is something I think schools are driving. From the conversations I've had from the other E3 communities, that is not a thing. I think that separates us or adds a little uniqueness because our schools are being proactive. It doesn't sound like these other communities have ... [similar initiatives]. ... It's unique. If you talk to these other communities that are in this ... E3 pilot. When we talk about our schools and some of the stuff they're doing, they just look at us like we're aliens. They just can't believe it. They're like, "Really?" I think it's really cool."

When Relational Human Capital and Bridging Social Capital Meet

Considerations of human capital often fixate on the practical skills that an individual has such as accounting, drafting, software use, etc. What is under appreciated are the soft skills or relational skills such as collaboration, conflict management, creative thinking, and the like. When these skills combine with outside agency, bridging social capital is the result, as Cory describes the process by which he and others found a cost-effective solution to bring optic fiber connectedness to Sidney. In his words we see relational human capital at work, exactly the skills that are central to the E3 group and process that would follow. Collaboration, creative thinking and sharing credit are all evident. The results are

undeniable. Cory was hired by Nelnet (Allo's parent company) as Retail Innovations Manager, Sidney got citywide fiber optic infrastructure, and bridging social capital is established which can be tapped in the future for example to support the High School Entrepreneurship Challenge...

"So, we called Brad Molene. He comes to Sidney, and it's Melissa Norgard ... who at that time was the Director of Economic Development, David Scott, the city manager, Brad and I ... sitting ... [in the Nelnet office]. ... [I said], "There's an unlimited amount of money in the world. I'm hearing that there's a \$2.5 Million dollar gap; how do we find it?" So, we're talking about different ideas and donor funds, "People might pay for it if we beg for money." [There are] all these different ideas. Finally, I said, or Melissa ... said, "Hey, wasn't ... the city working on burying the electric service? We get ice ... and the power goes out, so the city's been working really hard at burying all our power. "When that power is being buried, is there extra conduit, by chance, or is it just enough to hold the wiring?" David said, "no, there's definitely extra conduit and I don't know to what extent. We'd have to map it out." ... Brad said, "Map it out and send us a map. We'll see if that helps in any way."

Long story short, the ... power manager of the city mapped everything out where we needed to run extra connectors because Sidney is so spread out. ... There was basically enough ... [space in the electric conduit] ... to cover ... [the fiber optic cabling]. Long story short, it got approved and Allo ... built out ... the up to 2.3G system. Conversation. Just conversation, collaboration, communication. ... Bridging outside of the community. ... And Brad's out of Imperial Nebraska [population 2022], so he gets it, too. He's from a small town so it's easier ... [for him] ... to relate."

Cory reflects back to detail how the meeting came about and exactly how he understands the role of social capital...

"If you think about ... [bridging social capital] ... people want to do it. Inherently, they want to help another person, right? So, when I reached out to somebody ... [at Allo] ... and didn't even know what to say, "I have an idea, and I think we can do it, we just need to think differently about it." ... This was a cold call. ... He didn't even know me, but he was like, "Yeah, I'll drive ... [five hours] ... to Sidney, Nebraska." And I'm like, "What?" He's like, "Yeah, ... I love the idea. We want to come there. We want to be involved. And if you have a way that you think that we haven't thought of to figure it out, I'm interested." Nobody's ever been like, "No, we're not interested." Most of the time they're interested."

Cory also talks about how transparency was his guide working with the City, the Chamber and Tourism. This is a clear demonstration of how binding social capital has to be built between entities within the community, not just with entities outside the community before it can become the basis for bonding social capital...

"Word got back to the city that we talked to the Chamber. And the city was like, "Oh, you guys have a hidden agenda." So, I set up, I set up a meeting with the city invited the Chamber and Tourism, and the city was like, "Why are they here?" And I said, "You guys complained about transparency and hidden agendas. Therefore, I'm having a meeting with all of you guys now. So, everybody's always invited." This morning we did the same thing when we met with the Director of Economic Development for Morris County, Kansas. Guess who was invited. The E3 team, the City, the Chamber, and Tourism. Everybody showed up, and it was a great meeting and good conversation. So, what I was saying to you about a month ago, it feels like we're kind of moving together as a larger group now, which is great."

Where was E3 in Sidney at the Start of Year 2?

Cory describes the energy and action of the team...

“Sidney has taken action. We've spent hours and hours and hours on E3 already. It's insane. As a matter of fact, we met with the commissioners yesterday and presented it to them. and they all thanked us. The county commissioners thanked me, Sara, Liz, Melissa, Jamie, Makaylie. We were all there. We had a group representation of seven. [One commissioner said], ... “We understand this is all volunteer time and you guys have put in hours and hours. Not to mention hours on E3 in Sidney, but hours away to Ord, hours away to Holt County, and hours away to learn from O'Neill.” I called and talked to the director of economic development from O'Neill to try to understand the areas in other communities that are doing well to drive progress forward here. We just had a meeting this morning with Tourism, the Chamber and our city manager, David. We met this morning for a full hour to talk about interlocal agreements, “How do we drive change forward? How do we have better cooperation and cohesiveness?” Whether that's through an interlocal agreement or something else, it doesn't matter, right? We all recognize we could do better, everybody.”

A year later Cory simply said...

“I can't think of how many hours we've all spent helping others. Sarah and I were texting today about things nonstop. Sometimes it feels like it's not recognized, and people don't understand how much time and effort it takes. But it is a lot of time. There's no stopping Sarah. Her stamina is stupid!”