

What is a Community Champion?

Sidney Entrepreneurship Stories

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D. – February 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

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Defining a Community Champion – The Literature in Brief

In general usage “champion” is associated with success or achievement. Yet, champion as formal role goes back to Medieval England in the form of the King’s Champion. In this context the champion literally threw down the gauntlet at the coronation, challenging to trial by combat anyone who contested the monarch’s entitlement to the throne. While the role of King’s Champion still exists, in more recent times researchers have advanced many different definitions for champion derived from research in varied applied settings. These provide a guide to our current elaboration of the Community Champion definition.

The [Community Tool Box](#)ⁱ at the University of Kansas [Center for Community Health and Development](#) defines a community champion as... *“...anyone - a public official, a community leader, a concerned citizen, a health or human service worker, a volunteer - who works hard and well to start and/or support an initiative or intervention, to bring a program or idea to reality, or to otherwise improve the quality of life of a particular group or of the community as a whole.”* A more straightforward rendering of this might be, *“someone who volunteers within their own local community to promote and enhance community wellbeing.”*

In chapter 5 of [Turning the Tide on Poverty](#), Worthy, et al. (2018)ⁱⁱ examine the extant literature and find that people define a champion as someone *“who was enthusiastic, rallied others, and provided momentum and passion for the project.”* (Beaulieu, L.J., & Diebel, A. (Eds.), 2018)ⁱⁱⁱ. They conclude that a champion is *“a catalyst or sparkplug.”*

Studying the characteristics of champions in health care using semi-structured interviews in a grounded theory study, Demes, et al. (2020)^{iv} identify eleven themes...

“The characteristics and qualities of a successful champion ...[include]... eleven themes describing the characteristics and qualities of a successful champion: Communication and persuasion, proactivity, humility, horizontal and collective leadership style, sense of responsibility and accountability, go-ahead type, empathy, dedication and motivation, ability to inspire and motivate people, have a vision, and encourage learning.”

There is one last item to consider before settling on a set of characteristics to define a community champion. In the e2 approach used in the E3 initiative we are dealing with how the community champion moves the community toward a proactive economic ecosystem and community development overall. Thus, our champion is working in both an economic and a social space. True transformative change in a community takes place in both but especially in social space. Peter Drucker’s popularized phrase, *“culture eats strategy for breakfast”* applies not only to organizations but to communities as well. Most of the work on champions emphasized the economic space framing champions as

institutional entrepreneurs. Two studies allow a deeper consideration of the unique contributions of champions in social space, calling them *institutional champions* or *community champions*. Lounsbury (2004)^v identifies two characteristics that set an Institutional Champion apart from others enjoying similar or even more authority characteristics, namely, level of embeddedness and level of involvement. Based on field research in India, Patnaik (2019)^{vi} identifies five key characteristics:

1. Level of embeddedness which indicates how deeply the Champion is located in the rural socio-cultural structure and which engenders empathy,
2. Level of involvement which fuels motivation to act since she/he is immersed in the problem themselves,
3. Level of selflessness which “*engenders pro-social behavior*” (Bierhoff 2005)^{vii} due to the lack of a personal agenda (the most difficult trait to have),
4. Empathy which “*generates a mental model leading the champion to feel the same amount of pain that the community experiences due to a problem,*” and
5. Level of organizational ability which is the “*ability to manage people and resources in a productive way to achieve one or more objectives.*”

In our work we focus on the following characteristics of a Community Champion: Curiosity, Perseverance, Embeddedness, Involvement, Empathy, Innovative, Risk taker, Motivator (inspirational), Visionary. Political savvy, Ability to grow and pivot, Ambassadorial, and Role model. Central to any definition is that:

*Community Champions are role models of action in the
Service of ideals the community deems important.*

They serve to anchor the norms that guide our own actions and generate the hopefulness that attaining our ideals is possible. Champions are our north star. When centered on community well-being, champions alleviate the sense of isolation inherent to the human condition and illuminate the value of caring for others among whom we live, work and play.

But a definition alone does not fully explain just how one becomes a champion. For this we need to look at the individuals who have become champions, curating their stories and extracting common threads to enlighten us.

Becoming a Champion

An important observation has arisen from our story capture in smaller rural and Nanopolitan communities. Repeatedly we see that many of the most ardent community champions share the common feature of having left their community for a time only to return later to assume the mantle of champion. For many it has been attendance at an institution of higher learning. For others it has been a certain youthful wanderlust to “experience the world.” And, for others it has been time spent in the

military. Accompanying this is a second feature: the experience of growing up with a supportive family and welcoming community. This is not to say that this has been the route for all champions, but it is to say that it has been the route for a disproportionate number of them in our work. This said, the routes are varied and instructive.

Sarah Sinnett is Sidney's premier community champion.



Growing up in Sidney, she left to attend college and went on to live happily in Omaha with no intention of leaving the city. Fate intervened when her husband was posted to Western Nebraska with the State Patrol. Back in Sidney she found her roots were solid and provided a comfortable quality of life for raising her family. Listen as she describes this transition in more detail...

"I'm committed to Sidney because of my family and everything else here. Honestly if it came down to say if Sidney got blown off the planet, ... I could move to a town like Ord, or Atkinson or O'Neill or Ogallala. ... As long as that community is welcoming to me, it becomes home. I would never feel that way in Omaha because I lived in Omaha for 10 years and I didn't feel part of the community of Omaha. I love Omaha and my husband's family still lives there. It's a different experience, but I didn't feel connected to it. You could get away with not taking care of the community because you soak into anonymity. But if I were to move to O'Neill or someplace else, I could see myself getting just as passionate about an O'Neill or any of those communities."

There are several important points here. Sarah returned to her home community where she had existing roots, although alternatives exist in the area. Sarah asserts that the passion she has demonstrated in Sidney with E3 and other community projects is a portable passion in that it would arise in any of a number of places sharing the scale of Sidney. She views it as her core disposition. Sarah implicitly attributes the difference in these places relative to Omaha as due to the different scale (size) of the places. When she talks about *"soaking into the anonymity of the city"* due to its size, density, and heterogeneity, she is tapping into a long-standing paradigm in urban studies (Wirth, 1938)^{viii} about the inherent anonymity of the city. She is also identifying the well-established social psychological principle of "diffusion of responsibility" wherein people feel less responsibility when others are present. Many researchers consistently observed a reduction in helping behavior in the presence of others (Fischer et al., 2011^{ix}; Latané & Nida, 1981^x). This pattern is observed during serious accidents (Harris & Robinson, 1973)^{xi}, noncritical situations (Latané & Dabbs, 1975)^{xii}, on the Internet (Markey, 2000)^{xiii}, and even in children (Plötner, et al., 2015)^{xiv}. The scale of life in smaller communities simply increases the potential sense of responsibility to attend to broad community welfare. In the city this is more likely to happen at the level of the neighborhood to the degree that it happens at all (Fischer 1975^{xv}; 1984^{xvi}; 1985^{xvii}). Underlying Sarah's willingness to assume the role of champion is a core motivation to be more than a bystander in her community. As Sarah says in her interview describing the situation after Cabela's closed...

“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.”

Scaling the response to help an individual up to the willingness to help or act on behalf of the community is a leap, but one that is warranted if we are to move the motivation beyond simple altruism and incorporate a more individualized view. Hortensius and de Geilder (2018)^{xviii} help broaden our understanding by linking bystander apathy to an underlying reflexive process...

“...involving emotion regulation, behavioral inhibition, and perspective taking mediated by the motivational system of personal distress.”

As evidence they cite studies of brain scans which support their integrative perspective. We expand on their definition of champion beyond the felt emotional need to help another individual in need. A community champion has a felt emotional need to help the community in need, or as Sarah says, *“Somebody had to pick it [the ball] up and do something with it. So, I just put myself there.”*

When Sarah identifies other places where she could see herself being as passionate about the community, she lists the E3 peer communities. In this she is articulating the value of the peer learning process and how it fosters value added to participants. She is expressing her awareness that other communities – while not Sidney – have their own unique and desirable contexts and configurations capable of igniting creativity and passion. And the places where she sees that to be possible are the very ones she has come to know through E3 peer-learning.

Bob Stowell and Gaylord Boilesen Longstanding Champions in Ord Nebraska. We explored the question of champions in Ord, Nebraska with others asking, *“why particular individuals are able to find that energy and creativity to impact a whole community, to get the development snowball rolling?”* Nancy Glaubke, CEO of the Valley County Health Care System, and community champion characterized Bob Stowell as having played a role of... *“wanting to be remembered for making a difference. ... His wellspring of motivation came from that [i.e., legacy].”*

Whereas Nancy characterized Gaylord Boilesen with the word *“visionary”*. This fits what we heard from Bob himself when talking about his motivation for attending to the welfare of Ord and from Gaylord when he talked about, innovation, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking. While Bob and Gaylord’s paths were quite different, both exhibit the paired influences of a strong quality-of-life experience in their youth with influential exposure in later years to life and worldviews outside the confines of their upbringing. For Bob it was West Point and the military and for Gaylord it was through involvement in a national organization. Yet, despite their individual journeys they have been linked like twin stars caught in each other’s gravitational pull of community well-being while remaining uniquely individual in their identities.



For Bob Stowell it was his military service after graduating West Point that expanded his horizons and developed his commitment to those on whom his life depended (community) and the leadership necessary to advancing the wellbeing of others and himself. Bob gives us insight into the impact leaving his home to attend West Point had on him. He describes his “*green as a gourd*” self as wanting to go back home in his first weeks in “*Beast Barracks.*” But he learned something that first year that would carry him through West Point, Viet Nam, law school, and ultimately life in Ord: he wouldn’t quit!

“During that year, I learned that I could hate about everything I could think of that was going to happen during the next day, but that if I took one day at a time, I could stand on my head, if necessary until it was over.”

Like Caleb Pollard, Bob and his wife, Jean, made a conscious decision to move back to the small place they called home growing up. And like Caleb and his wife, it was the generative connection that drove it. As Bob puts it...

“I remember Jean saying, I would like our kids, when they are running around the courthouse square, and if there's an 80-year-old man there sitting on a bench, I would like them to have the freedom to talk to that man, because they know him.”

Returning to Ord with his wife he adopted the same attitudes toward the community and grew into its premier champion, shepherding through voter approval of the controversial and ultimately influential 1% sales tax and so many other initiatives over the years in a conservative county. Having the capacity to be a Champion, however, does not fully explain becoming a Champion. For that we can see Bob’s motivation in his own words, words that echo those of Sarah Sinnett when she expressed her compulsion to act when “*the ball was lying on the ground*”.

“There was this ever-present feeling of hopelessness. ...Peoples' best friends went broke and left town. All the controversy, all the pain from the Farm Crisis, all the consternation, all the hateful words and letters, all the times when you just had a feeling of, 'I failed. This is failing.' ... "I never truly considered leaving. But we sure understood why people did.

It's kind of hard to describe the level of hopelessness. When your farmers leave, and when as a community we are almost 100 percent agriculture dependent, that's crushing. And then when the people you have relationships with, the people who have helped build the town, they leave, too...it is crushing. In Ord, we were lower than a snake's belly in a wagon track.”

Later in Ord, Bob would become involved in opposition to the attempt to ban books in the school library and remove an effective School Superintendent by members of the John Birch Society... “*I got drawn into it because I just felt like it was wrong. And it was*”. From this despairing start back in Ord, Bob built coalitions and championed the economic resurgence of Ord: building a new hospital, a new fire hall, a new school addition, a needed housing development, while renovating the high school, rebuilding the courthouse, reviving Main Street itself, and bringing new jobs to the area. All this time Bob worked with others like Gaylord Boilesen to recruit and mentor young entrepreneurs, find creative ways to effect

business transitions so as not to lose valuable services, and lead repeatedly by example. And how does this champion characterize the outcome?

“There's a cultural shift that has happened here and thank the Lord for the change. It did not happen accidentally. There were plenty of barriers and plenty of scars left along the way. But today, what has happened here is so important. It is so joyful.”

As Bob says, the entire process was not without pain, and this is a big part of what separates a Champion from a simple community booster. A booster simply extols the virtues of a community. A champion does the demanding work of making the community worthy of being boosted. There are many such examples in Bob's relationship with Ord but none so illustrative as getting the sales tax approved by the local voters. The story is well described in the *“The Long Drive Home”* curated to tell the Ord Story.

When a survey indicated that the referendum on his plan to implement the sales tax would not pass, Bob and a growing group of allies began to show up at every community group and meeting that would have them. With a PowerPoint presentation they gently and politely tried to educate and convince the residents of Valley County that passing a local sales tax was the right thing to do.

Bob built a coalition of advocates including members of the newly created economic development board and a small army of advocates. As Bob says...

“Everybody on these committees became an advocate, and that was key. ... There were older people, younger people, employers, employees and so forth...Now we were getting good guidance and good support from every segment and sector and community ... [in the county], ... and now we were ready to go out and deliver a consistent message to the public.”

Referring to the meetings themselves, Bob says...

“The heat was being taken out of this situation. We were answering the questions, and people were starting to think, hey, this might work!”

The group didn't stop with the meetings. They made a list of people they should contact. Bob sat down one-on-one with influential opponents of the referendum and personally called a group of the county's farmers who had been vocal opponents of the previous attempts to pass a local option sales tax. After those conversations, most of the farmers became neutral, and several became supporters. Two or three actually ended up writing letters endorsing the plan. In community meetings and in phone calls, the group of supporters sold the plan's details and batted down misinformation. But, even more importantly, they offered up a vision for Ord's future, a hopeful view that stood in stark contrast to so much of what Valley County's residents had heard and internalized about the area's decline. This was the antidote to the hopelessness that Bob described. This was building spiritual capital.

Passing the sales tax was more than just legislation that would provide economic resources for community development. The very process of getting it done had transformed people's sense of hopelessness into one of achievable hope because the process proved to the community - and to Stowell himself - that if they put in the work, they could accomplish big, hard, meaningful things together. Speaking about the effort to get a successful vote and the resulting influx of sales tax money

to fund Valley County's resurgence, Bob says... *"If I had to pick one single turning point, it would be this. It changed everything."*

This was the work of a Champion, not just a booster. Bob lives all ten characteristics of a community champion:

Curiosity, Visionary, Innovative, Political savvy, Motivator (inspirational), Ability to grow and pivot, Ambassadorial, Risk taker, Perseverance, and Role Model

He sought an answer to hopelessness (curiosity). He developed a plan (visionary) and the tactics necessary to implement it (innovator). He was deeply rooted in the community (embedded), experiencing the same pain of lost friends and closed businesses in town (involved), and motivated to do something (empathy). He mobilized support (political savvy) and inspired his troops (motivator/inspirational). He grew through the process and changed course as needed (ability to grow and pivot), He carried his message to the opposition (ambassadorial) under personally risky circumstances against hardened opponents (risk taker). And through it all Bob remained steadfast in the mission (perseverance) and effective in his actions while conducting himself with grace and generosity (role model).

His motivation was to have a community that would be healthy for his children, that he could be proud to be a part of, and that was durable in the long term. He used all the skills he had developed as a commander of men in the military, as a defender of individuals in the legal system and as man of principle with regard for everyone. These are the defining traits of a community champion.

Gaylord Boilesen had a slightly different pathway to becoming a champion in Ord. For Gaylord it was through involvement in a national leadership training, service, and civic organization, the Jaycees. While he never relocated from Ord, he had an active involvement in the Jaycees that involved significant travel and brought him into the national spotlight and the brink of the national presidency.

Gaylord describes his experience with the Jaycees and how it served as his route to an enhanced self-understanding and expanded worldview. As Gaylord tells it, on the one hand... *"I always joke about how I'm still here because I never saved enough money to leave. I mean, I love this area."*

While on the other hand when talking about his Jaycees experience, he says, *"It gave me a lot of courage that I didn't have before. When I went to the Jaycee convention, I had to stand up and speak to about ten thousand people. ... it gave me a lot of courage...and it got me a lot of new experiences. I had the privilege of going to Washington D.C. and meeting a couple of our national presidents and so, I guess I was never afraid."*

I was state president of [the Jaycees]. That's where I got a lot of it [courage to lead]. I actually contemplated running for national president. And my dad kinda said, "I'm not going to tell you not to, but I'm going to tell you, you need to make up your mind whether you want to be in a family business or pursue something else." Because I was pretty much gone from work for a couple years when I was a state president in Nebraska. I was gone a lot. And, when I was national vice president the next year, I mean I was on the road a lot. And I decided then, "nah," I thought maybe I was going to stay home and stay in Ord.

The way I got involved in the city was I was disappointed in some of the things that were going on, and so I decided, "I'm going to run for the city council. Instead of setting here and gripe, I'm going to see what I can do." So, we went out and got some things done. With the Jaycees at that time, we got some parks going. And the Jaycees furnished a lot of labor, and we got the city to buy some stuff. We would parley it to get some organizations... [to contribute.] ... So, that's kind of how I got involved, and I always tried to bring other people to help. They were the ones who took the credit. It wasn't the city thought of this. It was the Jaycees are doing this. The VFW has always been pretty supportive. They built the swimming pool for Ord. I've seen those things in the past and tried to work them into the future. So, I was involved in the city for probably 10 years, I guess. Then we started expanding our business, and to be honest I kind of pulled myself back and said, "it's time for somebody else." But, if they needed help with something, I would donate some time. I quietly did some things in the background, but was not involved at all up front."

Gaylord's roots in Ord were stronger than the allure of the Jaycees national presidency. Instead, he made the conscious decision to build his life where his heart was, becoming Ord's second most important and long-term champion. Gaylord sums it up this way... *"If you take care of people in Ord, they'll take care of you. If you treat them right – and I was used to that."* The idea of *working in the background* is a common feature that we see in champions. That is not to say that they aren't out front in advocating for the community, simply that they don't seek the credit for their contributions. They create the space for others to experience the warm glow of accomplishment secure in their own identity and contribution.

Other stories of champions we have curated illustrate slightly different routes. Caleb Pollard in Ord and Aubrey Patterson in Hutchinson did not become champions in their respective hometowns. Rather it was quality of life they experienced growing up in small rural communities that became a portable and enduring preference.

Caleb Pollard's rural imprint was deeply rooted as an emerging champion.



Caleb's early life on the farm ultimately informed the active choice he and his wife made to seek out an environment that mirrored the intimate community experience they had growing up in small places.

"[In]... my teenage years I moved four times from the ages of- of ten to eighteen. And I felt pretty unsettled. I felt – I don't wanna say homeless, but – very, very much like someone who did not have a home which they could call their own. ... [T]his plays a really important part into why we came to Ord. ... [T]he big thing for me is I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere or was from anywhere. ... I loved living on the farm. It was very hard for me to leave when I was a kid. [G]rowing up on a farm I felt like was a real central part of who I am today and helped drive a number of the reasons why I'm a business owner and why I choose to actually try and provide some form of opportunity for local producers with the value-added manufacturing they... [bring to our] brewing."

[As a kid on the farm] ... I remember, I would get bored sitting in the cabin of the tractor of the combine with my dad, and I would just jump out, ... take off and ... go play. I had no toys. I had no Gameboy. I had no cellphone, no TV, no electronics. It was totally analog. And those are things that as I became a parent, and I saw what future might lay in front of my children, I said, "I'd like to have a little bit of that analog experience for my kids" because – I don't think human beings, I don't think this is [only] an issue with kids, I think it's an issue with all ages – we are too plugged in. I think that analog experience is really important and that was one of the big reasons – another one of the big reasons – I moved out here. I didn't want my kids to grow up ... being raised on their own in their own house where their only companion was ... their ability to connect with technology. I wanted my kids to be able to ride their bikes around town and roam town like I was able to when I was a kid."

The connection between Caleb's formative experiences on the farm and his subsequent desire to recapture the quality aspects of that life for his children and in his work are self-evident in his words. But it is the addition of his more worldly experience at university, as an economic development director and as a father, that gave him the perspective to see a practical pathway to actualize his lifestyle in Ord and grow into a champion. Together, his past and his expanded worldview and leadership skills form the bedrock of his role as community champion today. Caleb's motivation to prioritize the value of quality of life and balance it with his need to survive economically comes through clearly in his following description.

"There was about a two-year time period where I was starting to get legitimately interested in moving to a small town. And another piece was that my wife and I had work commutes that were really interfering with our family life. [W]e weren't really happy with the neighborhood dynamic of where we were living. We were the youngest people in our circle of friends to have kids and so all our friends either left after college or lived a vastly different life than we did. [W]e felt pretty isolated and alone and didn't really feel like we belonged.

I was really intrigued in [Ord and Valley County] because I found it really aesthetically beautiful, and I knew that there was a lot of really great opportunity for access to natural resources and natural wonders and hunting and fishing. And I also enjoy flatwater paddling, just sitting on the beach, and drinking a beer. I mean, I enjoy a little slower pace. ... [O]nce I started talking to people ... and started getting friendly with the executive director of economic development here in Ord, I said, 'Hey, if you ever decide this isn't for you and you move on to a different career, when you're thinking about someone to come up here and run the show, why don't you give me a call and I'll take a look at it and see if the timing's right.' And that's exactly what happened about two years later.

We recreate out in isolated places. We spend a lot of our time- when we go out on vacations, we don't go to the city, we go to places ... where we can continue to recreate in very rural, isolated places that are renowned for their natural beauty. [O]nce ... [my wife] ... came out here and became familiar with the area, she was very much in favor of making the move before we decided to make the move."

Caleb's path is unique in another way since he has grown beyond the role of Champion by assuming the role of Navigator over a broader region encompassing Ord. His combined roles as entrepreneur, champion, and navigator have greater impact through E3, embracing communities across Nebraska.



Aubrey Abbott Patterson exhibits the portability of experience in a champion.

Aubrey Abbott Patterson (Hutchinson, Kansas) describes her path as more an accident of career progression that took her into a field that she really didn't know but within which she could grow personally and professionally. After graduating college with a degree in Political Science and Leadership Studies Aubrey pursued a graduate degree in Philanthropic Studies and Nonprofit Management. Here is how Aubrey describes her final steps to Foundation work.

"My ability to build trusting relationships and help [others] reach their own goals was really what I wanted to put to use. So, I went to school at Indiana University studying philanthropy and non-profit management. While I was there, they placed me at a community foundation as a graduate assistant, and I was really [upset] about it as that was not what I wanted to do. I was placed at the Central Indiana Community Foundation, and ultimately it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was placed with a woman who was a program [officer] and she was darn good at her job. She taught me what the community foundation could do for the people in a community and how to do it. I quickly realized that the community foundation is where the action is and that I could be involved in all kinds of things and know all kinds of people. I wouldn't have to choose one organization for which to do fundraising, rather I could do broad-based community development."

Now Aubrey knew what she wanted to do and had developed the skills to do it. It simply happened to be Hutchinson Kansas which shared aspects of the culture she experienced growing up, albeit in a larger place of some 40,000 residents. As Aubrey describes it...

"When I think about my role here, it's not so much that I was invested in Hutchinson in the beginning because I moved here in 2004 and ... I only thought I knew a lot about Hutchinson. Really, all I knew was the Mall and the theater and the Cosmosphere because I had visited as a kid. But I hadn't lived here as a kid or an adult, and living in a place is different than visiting a place. I was moving here as a young newlywed with a 3-month-old child in tow. My parents lived in Hutchinson too, but they only moved to Hutch a few years prior. So, this was a new place for me.

[I'm from] ... Larned, just west of here. But it's not here. That's why I said I knew the Mall and the theater and the skating rink, because, you know, when I was a kid, we'd come here on the weekends."

Today Aubrey has matured into one of the main champions in Hutchinson/Reno County as evidenced by the many accolades curated from entrepreneurs and power brokers in the community. In this extended passage Aubrey describes her road to becoming a Champion in Hutchinson.

"What I did know was community foundations and fundraising or development. That's what I was passionate about, community foundations, and this town had a strong community foundation. I knew that's what I wanted to be part of. I would say that my commitment in the beginning was proving the

community foundation model and what it could become. How it would work. How it could become even better, more powerful, touch more lives, and make a place better.

Honestly in the beginning it didn't matter to me what the place was, but that has changed over time. I've been here almost 20 years now. and I have 3 kids who've grown up in Hutchinson. So now I think I am probably closer to a champion for the people and this place, but in the beginning I was a community foundation geek, who wanted to prove that it worked.

I think about the first few years that my husband, Lance, and I were here. We both loved our jobs. He was the Director of Operations for the Boys and Girls Club, and I was working here at the Community Foundation. We loved our jobs, but we did not have good friends in Hutchinson, because it was hard to meet people. We had a little baby and no kids in school yet, which is a pretty natural way to meet people. We weren't strongly connected to Hutchinson, and we could have left at any point. But we got involved in Leadership Reno County and people started paying attention to us. I think that was the turning point, when the community and it's people start to invest in you. We had ideas of things we wanted to see happen, and I felt like this community said, "yes" to our ideas. One of those ideas was a young professional's organization.

It wasn't just us but also with friends who we'd met. Through Leadership Reno County we started pitching the idea of an organization that would bring young people together, and older professionals in the community said, "Yeah, we'll help you make that happen. We'll sponsor it. We'll champion it for you. We'll send our employees, and we'll sponsor them." I think about that and how much belonging that gave us and such a boost. This community will help us do things and get involved and make this a place where we want to be. I've seen that happen since then for others in this community, too. It wasn't just us. So, that's what I've tried to do, help other people along the way, whether they're in my community or in the community foundation field. If they're trying to make something better, I want to help them do it."

Aubrey points out an additional aspect of being a Champion for those whose role results from portability, i.e., bringing an understanding of the culture of a place from a different home community which has a similar culture. As an "outsider" the champion faces the additional hurdle of being taken seriously, of not being stereotyped as an outsider, and of having to wonder if you belong or when you will belong.

"[There are] questions you ask yourself along the way. You know, I'm not from this community. What do I have to do to belong? It's funny that now that I have 3 kids, and they're all Salthawks, which is our mascot... now, I'm from here. Yeah, how many kids do you have to have to belong? And how far do they have to be through the school system before you belong?"

Caleb Pollard also raised this issue for himself when he came to Ord as the economic development director...

"I think that people saw [that] Bob {Stowell} is originally from this area and I'm not. So, I think part of it was, "Oh, who's this big city kid that's coming in to, you know, do these grand things.' That wasn't the case at all. I wasn't a big city kid. I had lived in a city ...[that's]... certainly not very big. I lived in rural places or on the farm longer than I'd ever lived in a city. And I thought that people might appreciate that when I came here to do my work because I was coming here with a fresh set of eyes, but some people

don't appreciate that. I don't understand why you wouldn't want, um, intelligent people to move to your community and contribute in a meaningful way."

So, while portability of things like an appreciation for the quality of life in a place is real, obtaining it does not come without a price. Champions on this path have extra hurdles to surmount.

Diversity of Champions

There is a last dimension to consider when thinking about champions and that was highlighted by Jackson Swearer, Navigator for Hutchinson and Reno County Kansas. When discussing his role of outreach to smaller communities around Hutchinson, Jackson spoke to the importance of bridging not just with small communities in Reno County outside Hutch but also to communities within Hutch. This was not much of an issue in our much smaller environments but emerged as significant within the larger city of 40,000 where it is possible to have multiple communities each with sufficient critical mass to exist in some degree of social isolation from the core community. In this context Jackson identified Dave Sotelo as a champion within Hutchinson and as an important and necessary conduit to the Hispanic community. As Jackson said in our interview...

"Champion is the perfect word for ... the random EcoDevo people whatever their job title is for the small towns all around the county. A perfect person in Hutchinson would be Dave Sotelo. He's the human relations officer for the city. ... He's my main conduit into the minority community generally and specifically the Hispanic community here. ... Connections like that are really valuable."

When Jackson goes on to say just why such connections are key to his work and important for the whole community, he is really talking about bridging social capital within the city and the role champions play...

"It's a challenge for us to talk about, but we try to do a good job with it. This is another area where I think there is an opportunity for bridges to be built and connections made. Because the sorts of challenges that poor white rural people, who want to be entrepreneurial, face are different but similar to the challenges that Hispanic people in the city, who want to start a business, face. If we could get those two groups of people ... [focused on] ... what they have in common rather than what they have different, I think we would make a lot of progress on a lot of fronts. We are up to that in a very intentional manner. ... Like our entrepreneur business basics class where we talk about that in a way where we are being inclusive to both groups of people.

We had major misstep with that when we marketed the class the first time. We were trying to find a good word for everybody, and we picked "unlikely entrepreneurs." What we were going for was a less academic word than "under-resourced" and what we got was a mildly offensive term that's also just inaccurate. It's wrong. Because actually black women are more likely to be entrepreneurs than any other group of people. Since we were talking about minorities, and women, and rural people, they are all more likely to be entrepreneurial than the average person from the city. So, "unlikely" wasn't the ... [right] ... word, and we went away from that word. But the idea that those sorts of people have more in common than they have different as it relates to starting a business is really powerful."

Jackson also expands on his relationship with Dave Sotelo...

“If there is anybody who I would consider a peer doing similar work – and this is going to sound a little weird – the person that I connect with personally on that level is Dave Sotelo, because of what he does for the city. He navigates people through discrimination complaints. It’s very different, but it’s also navigating people who aren’t used to dealing with systems through the systems and dealing with populations who aren’t always engaging with government type systems. He’s probably the person I talk to most about just how to deal with people.”



“My role is to create a Hutchinson where everyone belongs and thrives.”

Dave currently serves as Director of Strategic Growth for Hutch following a three-year stint as a Human Resources Officer for the City of Hutchinson. Born in Mexico and raised with two cousins by his grandmother and an aunt, he fled Mexico to escape death threats and violence. His path to Hutchinson was a perilous and uncertain journey with many setbacks along the way. Throughout, extended family has been his life preserver. However, it has been hard work and an optimistic outlook, respecting all others, which has led to his success and recognition as community champion.

Two attempts at undocumented immigration as a minor led first to repatriation and subsequently a month and a half in an unaccompanied-youth detention center in the U.S. Because his parents were in the U.S. as undocumented, he was adopted by and released to an aunt and uncle living in Hutchinson. Here he completed his education, mastered his English language skills, and built a new life. Today he is an established member of the larger Hutchinson community and serves as a champion for the Hispanic community.

Dave’s path to community champion is one that grows out of his experience growing up between two cultures. His is a story of marginalization, but one that rejected powerlessness, embraced membership on Youth Philanthropy Council in High School, and benefited from the support of another champion. Here’s how Dave describes it reflecting on the importance of his high school experience.

“For the Hispanic kids I was their white friend. For the white kids I was their Hispanic friend. Yes, I was like their pet project or atonement, but it was really great because the Philanthropy Council came, and I met Aubrey and Kari. Aubrey and Kari were influential in my life at this time. But there were times when I was like, “What are they after? What is their interest? I don’t think I ever felt this way from the HCF group. Certainly in ... high school politics that was so visible.”

Dave Sotelo’s experience shows us another pathway to becoming a champion. As discussed above, for others it was quality of life considerations growing out of the influence of parents, the pull of extended family, and the perception of what would be best for their children. All of these factors speak to generative impulses based in family. For Dave it was bicultural experience that led to his return to Hutchinson and ultimate emergence as a community champion. It was his pursuit of an authentic identity that motivated him. By reclaiming his early identity, he restored his whole self, and he has done this in the context of his whole community.

“When you come here ... [from Mexico], ... it’s clearly different. [In high school] ... you hang out with your group, and the moment you start stepping outside of that, you get questioned. ... For the Hispanic kids I was their white friend. For the white kids I was the Hispanic friend. ... I think they were right that I was losing something. I was definitely becoming a little bit different. ... [After high school] ... I went to Conception Catholic Seminary in Northwest Missouri even though I went to public schools. There was a lot of self-reflection at that time. I was sort of learning, “Oh man, I really lost this really important part of me.” Actually, I didn’t really lose it; I was not embracing it. The craziest thing now, those same friends ... [from high school] ... and their parents are coming to my office needing assistance. That’s the beauty of it.”

Dave illustrates his role as champion in the way he parses his official role as a Human Resources Officer for the city of Hutchinson. While the position ostensibly calls for enforcement of discrimination complaints or as Jackson frames it, *“navigating people who aren’t used to dealing with systems,”* Dave sees it in much broader terms inspired by his identity as a community champion. He is a friend to, an advocate for, and an empowerment facilitator within the Hispanic community.

The Friend Role. As a friend Dave says...

“[A] person that’s affluent, ... has a network of people that they can access and tap into to set up a good structure in a legit business. The people I’m working with don’t have that friend. So, the way that I am advocating is for Startup Hutch to become that friend these people don’t have. I see my role at the city as being that friend that people don’t have.

There is some financial incentive ... [for people to take an Entrepreneur Business Basics class], ... but I don’t think that is as beneficial as these folks just networking with each other. That to me is a win. I think it’s a great thing ... [that a couple of folks] ... are actually doing a legit business ... but the rest of the class has come to me for one thing or another. Or I am seeing them now engaged in different things. My assumption is the more you are connected to things and the more you show up to random things, the more apt you are to stay here and for your kids to just have a thriving future in our community. So, I count that as a win. It’s hard to tell that story and translate it into numbers. It’s becoming clearer that for direct services, I am that friend that people in an affluent community might have.”

The Advocate Role:

“I end up being like the auditor ... [or] ... system analyzer where I end up helping like with the childcare task force. Right now, we’re doing some work on workforce development. After this I have a meeting at the county where they are distributing the opiate settlement monies. I serve on the Chamber board. I serve on the United Way board where I can kind of push some advocacy system work that I think might be beneficial or even just culture change. My voice at the table is important because I get to see day to day some of the struggles people go through.”

The Empowerment Facilitator Role:

“The last part of my role has been, if you show up at enough spaces where people hang out, where people are part of – friends I went to high school with or their parents that I know have a lot of potential to be engaged or are engaged in the system but currently aren’t or they are, but they need more

legitimate support behind them – [and they are not responsive to getting involved at the moment], two months later, ... [I can say] ... Hey, I've got this really good training at the Kansas Leadership Center, that might help you understand that leadership belongs to everyone. You don't need a title or a position. You just need to act and do.

What I've seen is that people gain confidence in their ability to lead and be engaged. When their voices are not being heard, try to think about some interventions within the system to make sure that happens. ... So, just connecting, plugging people into the system because the last thing I want is to be the only person tackling this on my own. ... If I can find more partners in that work, I think it's essential."

Dave's experience helps demonstrate that being a champion is a matter of identity in that it becomes habit because it is who an individual knows themselves to be. Surely there are roots for it in the individual and that it is fertilized by supportive others, but fundamentally it both helps a person become whole and becomes a core aspect of who a person knows himself or herself to be. [Read more about Dave's experience in the Dave Sotelo Story.]

Wrapping Up. An important overriding observation emerges from these narratives. We often hear our friends in rural communities expressing two seemingly incompatible positions regarding how they should counsel their youth. On the one hand is the attitude that all kids must go to college or university to be successful. On the other hand, we increasingly hear the attitude that kids don't need a college education and should just stay "home". In both cases we see the speakers as expressing concern for the wellbeing of both their children and the community. Both families and communities wish by and large to hold on to their children. Most parents want to be an active part of their kids' lives and that is easier when they are close. All communities want to hold on to their young since they are the future actors and human capital that will make the community successful. However, we see framing the choice as *"leave and go to college"* or *"stay because you don't need college"* as a poor strategy for parents and communities, and the Champion narratives support our view.

It is apparent that what is most important is that parents and communities instill a deep appreciation in children for feeling connected, valued, and loved despite any challenges that life throws at them. This is done not simply by parents but by caring adults and institutions throughout the community. It is the nature of adolescence that young people will feel oppositional to family and community as they progress to adulthood. This is simply the job description for effecting the separation necessary for independent identity. To fully know themselves as individuals, children must experience some separation from their internal child. This will look different for each person as we can see from our narratives. Some will use formal education as a vehicle. Some will use involvement in organizations that take them away from the community for periods of time. Some will simply travel without a clear course of action. What is important is that young people reach early adulthood with an emotional center rooted in the family and community and a belief that the community will welcome them back when the time is right. Equally important is that the community provides meaningful pathways for young people to develop the leadership skills necessary for transitioning their ideals into practical outcomes.

Therefore, we would encourage avoiding the false choice of "to go" or "to stay" often invoked in communities. By emphasizing the right things, a community provides a healthier pathway to adult maturation. Just as we advocate agency and local control of community development, so to do we

advocate for the agency and individual control of personal adult development. The children will be healthier adults whatever route they choose to expand their worldview. The community will be far better positioned to be able to reach out intentionally to their young folk who have moved on but who are now at a stage of life where generational perspective encourages them to link their own past to their children's future and their own parents' needs. Additionally, it also positions a community to see that the gifts they have given to their young may return in the form of similar gifts given by other communities to their young, since quality-of-life preferences are portable as our narratives illustrate.

The last point here is to revisit the characteristics identified by Demes, et al. in their work on champions in health care. They identified the following important characteristics: Communication and persuasion, proactivity, humility, horizontal and collective leadership style, sense of responsibility and accountability, go-ahead type, empathy, dedication and motivation, ability to inspire and motivate people, have a vision, and encourage learning. We agree that these characteristics are exhibited by the champions in our interviews as is evident from the narratives we have included. However, when it comes to inspiring sustainable, proactive communities, the precursors for being an effective community champion are exposure to an accepting culture when growing up that roots their quality-of-life preferences and exposure to a broader perspective and range of worldviews than what they experienced growing up. The former rests on adult role modeling of responsibility for the community and matching desirable quality-of-life preferences with the culture of a place. The later rests on exposure and comfort with varied worldviews and an acceptance of the need to balance the competing demands of public and private life as individuals mature through the life cycle. These are the fundamental identity elements rooted in a person's lived experience.

Endnotes

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