

Burr Oak takes 'leap of faith' with library project

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BURR OAK, Kan. — In fall 2014, the Burr Oak Community Library Board found itself facing a dilemma.

Seven years after remodeling and moving in to the north end of what was once the Burr Oak, White Rock and Rock Hills School building, they were again thinking about the possibility of relocating.

Conflicts with the current building owner had the board exploring all possibilities and options to keep the library and its services available to its patrons. If the library moved, where would it go? Would there even be public support for a new location? The board and concerned community members approached the issue much like Dr. Seuss, whose quotes adorned the walls of the library.

"Think left and think right and think low and think high.

Oh, the think you can think up if only you try!"

After all the thinking and planning, the board made the formal announcement in September 2014 that it would not be renewing its lease at their current location and planned to move in November. Board Treasurer Becky McNichols said it was a situation the library had been working with for a while.

"We had known there was a possibility of having to move eventually, but we had hung in there through the school closing, and different owners," she said.

The current building owner, Guy Daley, purchased the building in January 2013. After a time, irreconcilable differences arose between the landlord and tenants.

"There were disagreements about his dogs, and there were also safety issues that made conditions not favorable to continuing in that location,"

McNichols said.

She said the library board first looked into a vacant house and the downtown area as a site for the library. After determining these would not meet their need, board members began to make plans to raise the funds for a new building — or, as they call it, a "forever home."

With the city of Burr Oak's donation of four city lots across from the United Methodist Church on which to build the new structure, a plan was put into action.

"We just decided to take a leap of faith," she said.

Once the decision was made, McNichols said, things happened quickly.

"Everything just took off," she said.

Knowing funding was critical, the board submitted several grant proposals to both private and federal funds and

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Volunteer Anastasia Willitts reads to Claire Babson of Burr Oak, Kan., and Lily Walker of rural Esbon, Kan., during story hour recently at the temporary Burr Oak Community Library. The town's library board is making plans for a new building.

ROZ: Kansas' rural communities invest in helping young people find 'road home'

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"While I was at UNL, we took our turns parenting — David would have him for a week, I would come home over the weekend and then take Richie back to Lincoln with me. We did this for a year before I finally moved back to Mankato."

Reiter said the arrangement was taking an emotional toll on all of them, and so the decision was made to quit the graduate program at UNL and move to Jewell County. She and her husband were married July 27, 2013. Since then, then have added to their family with the birth of son Oliver in November 2014.

Reiter began working part time for Paul Wilson, CPA, LLC in Mankato. The job eventually became a full-time position.

After taking courses related to personal and business income tax preparations and passing all three parts of the Enrolled Agent exam with the Internal Revenue Service, she now is licensed to prepare tax returns.

Although the Rural Opportunity Zone program didn't bring her to the area, it was an important element to help her stay.

"My mom actually told me about a Facebook post she had seen on the Jewell County Community Development page," Reiter said. "A short time after that, Paul mentioned doing an employer-sponsorship for the program. That was a motivating factor in finishing my application and submitting it online."

Caleb Mahin of Formoso, Kan., is another participant in the ROZ student loan repayment program. Like Reiter, he is sponsored by a business — but the sponsoring business is his own insurance agency.

Mahin grew up in Courtland and is a graduate of Fort Hays State University, with a degree in health and human performance with a minor in business administration.

He is the oldest of five kids, and he said all of them are proud to be only 30 minutes from Courtland.

"We have a very close family, and that was a big reason I wanted to come back to north central Kansas," Mahin said. "I am married to Gayle (Wilson), who grew up in Mankato, and we are expecting our first child in October."

He said he began his insurance career by learning about crop insurance from Gayle's grandmother, Loretta Wilson, in Mankato. He spent a few years working in Heritage Bank's insurance agency and said he learned a tremendous amount about how a successful agency runs.

"I really liked the bank I was in, but I could not pass up the chance to move back home when I got the opportunity to take over Loretta's crop insurance business," Mahin said. "Since then I have expanded the agency to also offer property and casualty insurance."

He first moved back to Republic County and commuted from there. He initially applied to the ROZ program there and was put on a waiting list.

"About a year ago I bought a house in Formoso and then heard it was possible for businesses to sponsor themselves or an employee so they could get this incentive. I applied and last fall received my first payment towards my student loans last fall."

Both Mahin and Reiter said they had originally planned on living in a more heavily populated area to pursue career goals. Although the ROZ

program was not the determining factor in either one's decision to locate in Jewell County, it was an important incentive.

"Many people don't move back here because they believe they will make less money than they can in the city," Mahin said.

"I love being near my family and where I grew up," he said. "People are always willing to help each other out and are very friendly, especially in this rural area. I believe it is a great place to raise a family and it is also a great area to experience the outdoors. To me, these things are much more valuable than a high income."

Reiter agreed the ROZ program made it possible for her family to receive a benefit that goes beyond financial.

"I was raised in a rural community, as was my husband," she said. "I think it was both of our wishes to raise our children in a similar environment. Richie will be starting school in the fall, and I can honestly say I don't feel like he will be just a number as he would in an urban area. I feel that teachers in smaller schools take a genuine interest in each of their students and their success."

She said her original career path of obtaining a job utilizing her biochemistry degree would have probably resulted in a larger salary.

"After moving back to Mankato, however, I was more concerned about spending quality time with my family and creating a home."

The incentive has also led to other successes.

"Living in Jewell County has allowed my husband to continue pursuing his career passion — farming

with his parents. Seeing how successful and happy that has made him is wonderful, and I consider it one of my achievements."

EARLY REVIEWS POSITIVE

After completing more than three years of the five-year program, Jenny Russell thinks the program across the 77 ROZ counties has been good for rural Kansas.

"It gives us something to offer potential people, it helps relieve some of the ever-increasing student loan debt burden, and it (allows) recipients to spend money elsewhere (like buy a house, have a baby, etc.) It gets people to think of Rural Kansas as an option again to move to after college and makes people excited that we want them back and we have a program to support that statement," Russell said.

Reiter said the program is needed in Kansas to help draw in young people as the older generation begins retiring.

"We are seeing a hit in the accounting and tax preparation field," she said. "Over the past couple of years, others in Mankato and the surrounding area have decided to retire. Their clientele are forced to find other professionals to assist them. If young individuals do not return to rural areas, people seeking out these services will have to move their business elsewhere. I'm sure accounting/tax preparation is not the only field experiencing this in rural Kansas."

COMMUNITY STRENGTHENED

Mahin said that although he does not know of anyone who has moved back to Jewell County just to receive

the incentive, he believes the county benefits in many ways.

"It allows people who get the payments to put the money towards building a better community," he said. "Instead of the money going back to Sallie Mae it could help with a house payment or starting another business."

He thinks the program clears the way for more people to pursue life in rural Kansas and Jewell County.

I think it helps take away one more excuse for people to not move back. I believe more people want to move back to this area but they see too many road blocks. This helps with at least one of those road blocks."

FUTURE OF ROZ

The original program ends in 2016, and hearings now are being conducted in the Kansas Legislature to determine if it will be continued.

Russell said she would love to see the ROZ continue as a tool to "recruit" people to Jewell County.

Both Mahin and Reiter would like to see the program continue in rural Kansas and assist others in making the choice to be rural.

"I definitely recommend everyone to apply for the program," Mahin said. "I am glad I did, and it has helped me to grow the insurance agency. Hopefully I will be able to hire an employee or two in the future, and I will be happy to sponsor them in this program as well."

Reiter said would recommend living in a rural area to anyone seeking an alternative to the city.

"There are so many benefits of living in rural Kansas," she said. "The ROZ Student Loan Repayment Program is one of the many!"

TRIBLAND events

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◆ Aug. 30: The Harlan Anglers Walleye Club will sponsor a half-day walleye tournament at Harlan County Reservoir near Republican City. Fishing hours are 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Fish will be weighed in and then released. For information call 308-920-0918.

SEPTEMBER

◆ Sept. 5: Free presentation and viewing night, Hastings College Sachtleben Observatory, 4725 S. Wabash Ave., 9 p.m. Participants can view the night sky using telescopes. Event is canceled if sky conditions do not favor viewing. Before visiting call the StarLine at 402-462-7378 to confirm the viewing is a go. The message usually is updated by 5 p.m. the day of the event.

◆ Sept. 5-7: Labor Day weekend will bring living history activities to Fort Kearny State Historical Park in Kearney County. Demonstrations will run 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and into the afternoon on Monday. The old cannon will be fired at 2 p.m. all three days. A Nebraska state park permit will be required for entry. The historical park, which occupies the site of an old U.S. Army post from overland migration days (1848-71), is west of the unincorporated village of Newark. To reach the park, travel 10 miles north of Minden on Nebraska Highway 10, then three miles west on Nebraska Link 50A. For information call 308-865-5305.

◆ Sept. 11: Up Close program, Hastings Museum, 1330 N. Burlington Ave., 10-11 a.m. Details TBA. Registration by the

Wednesday prior requested. Call 402-461-4629 or visit www.hastingsmuseum.org.

◆ Sept. 12: Preschool Playday, details TBA, Hastings Museum, 1330 N. Burlington Ave., 10-10:45 a.m. RSVPs required 24 hours in advance.

◆ Sept. 12: The second Saturday in September will bring Autumn Fest, a community celebration in Giltner. This year's plans include a barbecue cookoff coordinated by the Hamilton County Women of Power.

◆ Sept. 12-13: The Annual Milo Days will be under way in Carleton.

◆ Sept. 12-13: The Clay County Fairgrounds in Clay Center will roar to life with the 33rd annual Old Trusty Antique Engine and Collectors Show. Show hours are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sept. 12 and 8-5 Sept. 13. A tractor drive and trail ride will kick off the weekend. This year's show will feature Ford, Fordson and Ferguson tractors, plus Ford vehicles and century-old engines. Other features are heritage crafts, a flea market, demonstrations and displays. A parade is planned for both days. Additional activities include a horse show, stock and open tractor pulls, a pedal pull for kids, country barbecues, and a Sunday morning pancake feed and worship service. Shifting Sands performs at 7 p.m. Sept. 12. Impersonator and Branson entertainer Bill Chrastril will perform Sunday at noon. Country music will be performed "under the shade tree" all days both days. A quilt show will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. both days at the Clay

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