

Carly Whorton – Cecil K's

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Step inside the door. As you enter the store, you're surrounded by quality products and the tasty aroma of baking cinnamon rolls and frying chicken wafts over you. That's the vision of the owners of a new locally-owned grocery store in northeast Kansas. They're creating an experience with smells and tastes that might remind you of Grandma's house. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Carly Whorton is manager and co-owner of Cecil K's Hometown Market which opened on February 28, 2018 in Holton. Carly and her cousin Chad Bontrager grew up at Holton. She earned bachelors and master's degrees in agricultural economics at K-State. After graduation, she went to work for a software company in Texas, but she knew that she wanted her own business.

Carly took a year off to travel overseas. Then she got a call from her cousin Chad. The local grocery store in Holton had closed some months ago. Chad was interested in opening a new store there, and wanted Carly to partner with him.

The timing was perfect. "He offered me full creative freedom to design the new store," Carly said, so she took the position. "I feel like everything I've done has helped prepare me for this," Carly said.

As a teenager, Carly had worked at the previous grocery store in this building. When that store closed, all the equipment and furnishings had been removed, so the new owners were starting from scratch. Carly threw herself into the work. Her design included new flooring, shelving, coolers and freezers, plus new display cases for the deli, produce, meat and seafood, and more.

The previous owner had hired a painter to paint Jackson County farm scenes on the walls. Not only did Carly and Chad save those scenes, they designed the store in such a way that the murals stand out more than ever. For some customers, it was the first time that they noticed them.

What should the store be named? "Cecil Kern is Chad's and my great-grandfather," Carly said. "He and his wife Lottie ran a grocery store down in Iola before moving back here." Carly and Chad decided to name the new store Cecil K's in his honor. "Grandma teared up when we first shared this with her," Carly said.

"Cecil and Lottie farmed and had a big vegetable garden," Carly said. "People told me that they remember going to his place to get produce." Now those people are coming to get produce and other products from a new store named in his honor. Cecil's farm was located near the rural community of Denison, population 187 people. Now, that's rural.

The store is clean and bright. New, rustic-looking checkout stations were built.

Full service is a major theme of the store. The cashier unloads the carts. Workers bag the groceries and carry them to the customer's car. The meat counter customizes and handcuts meat for the customer. The bakery department takes custom cake orders and will decorate cakes while you wait.

"The response from the community has been awesome," Carly said. "There were 20 people waiting outside at 7 a.m. on the first day we opened," she said. Total sales on the first day doubled what their grocery supplier had predicted. "We've had so many

thank you,” Carly said. “The community couldn’t have provided us with a warmer welcome.”

Behind the scenes, the new owners invested in top technology. “We gauge customer demand in real time using the analytics in our computer system,” Carly said. The sophisticated refrigeration monitoring system is called Einstein. In the future, the store owners hope to implement online shopping, curbside pickup, and grocery delivery. The center of the store features a wide aisle which could accommodate a farmers market, local products, or special events.

“We want to create a luxurious, friendly experience that people can look forward to,” Carly said. For more information, find Cecil K’s Hometown Market on Facebook.

We commend Carly Whorton, Chad Bontrager and all those involved with Cecil K’s Hometown Market for making a difference with their commitment to the rural grocery business. They are creating an experience like a wonderful trip to Grandma’s.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.