

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

The refrigerator has gone out. What are we doing to do with all this frozen meat? Imagine storing it at your local community grocery store. Only in rural Kansas would a store open its doors for an individual in this way. Sure enough, it happened in rural Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Mark Wellbrock is owner of the Jetmore Food Center in Jetmore, Kansas. Mark is from Hays originally. He went to Fort Hays State where he was majoring in drafting and minoring in engineering. When he got married, he needed a parttime job. A friend got him a position in the meat department of a grocery store.

Mark found he liked the work. He did so well that the meat market manager offered him a full-time position with on-the-job training as a meat-cutter. Mark was accumulating student debt at the time.

"Instead of me paying a college, now these guys would pay me to learn," Mark said. The appeal of the inbound cash flow was powerful. Again, he did so well that a supervisor said, "How would you like to manage one of these places?"

Mark worked his way up through the ranks until he was working at a store in Amarillo. Then he had the opportunity to work with an independent grocer in Dodge City.

"I found I liked the independent store better than the corporate system," Mark said. He began looking for a store which he could own himself. After a long search, he heard from a friend about a store in the rural community of Jetmore. Eventually, in the fall of 2001, he became owner of the Jetmore Food Center.

"It was right after 9/11," Mark said. "This was the smallest community I'd ever lived in and the smallest number of employees of any store I'd ever worked in." Jetmore is a rural community of 933 people. Now, that's rural.

So how did things work out in this rural community? Mark made changes at the food store to respond to his customers' needs. Store hours were extended. Now the store is open seven days a week. Mark increased the selection of products, brought in hot foods to sell, and even arranged for a dry cleaner to pick up clothes at his store weekly.

The result has been strong and steady growth for his store. Employment has grown to six full-time workers and eight part-time workers, ages 16 to 72. Wow.

"We believe we've become a vital support system for the community by striving to meet community needs," Mark said. "It is essential to be a part of what's good for the community." Mark has been a part of the Lions Club, Economic Development, Extension, the hospital board, ABCD community development, and Hodgeman First which is an effort to unify the county.

Beyond that, Mark has learned about life in a deeper sense.

"You have neighbors who really know you," Mark said. "I've come to a realization of the connections among people, whether it's the little girl whose bike chain breaks in your street or the elderly lady who left her carlights on." When one man's fridge quit working, Mark temporarily stored his frozen goods in Mark's store freezer.

In Jetmore, Mark has seen people clearing snow from other people's driveways and clearing limbs from people's yards after a storm. After one windstorm, a tree fell in

the yard of an elderly woman and her young neighbor cut up ninety percent of the branches with a hand saw. Another woman was having back trouble and needed to go to Maryland for surgery. Someone anonymously purchased plane tickets so that her family could go with her.

“I appreciate daily life more now as a rural resident,” Mark said. “What I found out about rural communities probably changed my life.”

The refrigerator has gone out. What are we going to do with all the frozen meat? In rural Kansas, where neighbor takes care of neighbor, the Jetmore Food Center is making a difference by providing this service for its customers.

And there’s more. Another of Mark’s projects is about vintage baseball. We’ll learn about that next week.

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