

Basil Dannebohm

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

“When you are diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, you try to remember good moments. For me, those were in Ellinwood.” That statement is from a young professional who has been diagnosed with Parkinson’s but has found a rewarding life back home in rural Kansas. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

J. Basil Dannebohm is a young professional from central Kansas. He grew up at Ellinwood where he is the fifth generation of a family of genuine Kansas cowboys.

After attending Thomas More Prep in Hays and college at Newman University in Wichita, his career in marketing and public relations took him to Colorado and then California.

But something wasn’t right. He noticed that his hand was starting to shake. His handwriting became worse. His joints were becoming stiff. He had a tendency to fall forward.

For five years, Basil went through a battery of medical tests and procedures. Then an alert physician noticed the wear on the soles of his shoes. He was sliding his feet, not lifting them. That was the missing clue. The doctor realized that Basil might have Young Onset Parkinson’s Disease, which indeed proved to be the diagnosis.

Parkinson’s Disease is a disorder of the nervous system affecting a person’s movements. Although Parkinson’s is not curable and tends to get progressively worse, medications can help the symptoms.

The diagnosis hit Basil hard. Knowing what the future would eventually hold, he had to decide what to do.

“My heart kept coming back to Ellinwood,” Basil said. “There were so many people there who mentored me and encouraged me,” he said. “They really helped shape my career. They taught me that the right thing to do is to help a community grow.

“While I was in California, my grandmother would tell me about businesses which were closing back home,” Basil said. “I asked her about the After Harvest Festival and she said it just wasn’t the same. I almost felt that I owed it to this community to come back and try to help.” Basil decided to move back to Ellinwood. Along with standard Parkinson’s medications, he used a medical patch which helps his symptoms significantly.

Basil still gets emotional when he recalls his return to his native state. It was early on the morning of Kansas Day 2013 when he drove back across the Kansas line. “I crossed the border at sunrise and I had an overwhelming sense of peace,” Basil said. “I knew God was putting me in the right place.”

Basil became administrator of the Ellinwood Chamber of Commerce. He reinvigorated that organization.

“We have strong German heritage (in Ellinwood) so during the Christmas season, we originated the Christkindlmarket,” Basil said. They had a tree lighting, living nativity, and more. It was so successful that more than 50 vendors and some 1,500 people attended.

He also reinvigorated the After Harvest Festival. Basil interviewed oldtimers about their favourite parts of the festival from previous years and then reintroduced them

in new and improved form. “We dusted off old traditions and spruced them up,” Basil said. It attracted more than 5,000 people over three days. That is remarkable in a rural community like Ellinwood, population 2,269 people. Now, that’s rural.

Meanwhile, the local seat in the state legislature came open. Basil threw his proverbial hat in the ring. He met with potential opponents and went door to door in the district. In the end, Basil became the only non-incumbent candidate in 2014 who did not face an opponent in the primary or in the general election.

In January 2015, Basil will become the elected State Representative from his home district. His agenda is to work for his fellow residents of rural Kansas: The smalltown citizens, business owners, and farmers and ranchers who are the backbone of the rural economy. “Rural Kansas matters,” Basil said. He also wants to raise the awareness of Parkinson’s disease.

“When you are diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, you try to remember good moments. For me, those were in Ellinwood,” Basil said. We salute Basil Dannebohm for making a difference by following his heart back to rural Kansas, where he is helping create more good moments for others.

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