

Dawn Gabel – Ag Hall

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

“Creating a classroom.” That’s something that teachers do frequently. Today we’ll learn about a Kansan who is creating a classroom for agriculture, but not inside a traditional school. This Kansan is leading a national center which provides a living experience to help people of all ages learn about agriculture. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Dawn Gabel is the new director of the National Agricultural Center and Hall of Fame in Bonner Springs, Kansas. The ag center, as it is sometimes called, has deep history in Kansas. Congress approved a federal charter for the ag center. It was signed by President Eisenhower in 1960.

However, no funds are appropriated to support the center, so it relies on private sector funding. Today the facility has grown to include 10 buildings and tens of thousands of visitors – but a lack of funding caught up with the center in 2014.

When the previous director left, the board decided to close for the 2014 summer months. Now a new director has been hired and the center is again open and active.

Dawn Gabel is the new center director. She has deep roots in rural Kansas. Her family homesteaded in Jewell County. Dawn grew up at the rural community of Courtland, population 322 people. Now, that’s rural.

Dawn’s mother had the café in Courtland. By age 10, Dawn was helping her there. “I heard the people of the town come in to have coffee and talk about what the town needed,” Dawn said. “If something needed to be done, they would step up and do it themselves.”

This community spirit led Courtland to form one of the first PRIDE committees, an independent cable company, community festival, and more. It inspired Dawn. “I saw that we could find people who would care and volunteer and support a worthy cause,” Dawn said. She even entered into a career working with nonprofit organizations at Hays.

Years later, she and her husband moved to Kansas City so as to be close to grandchildren. In 2015, she became the new director of the National Agricultural Center and Hall of Fame.

“I have the time of my life working here,” Dawn said. “We need to get the center back into the limelight.”

The ag center includes a huge collection of antique equipment in the Museum of Farming, plus a Gallery of Art, Agriculture Hall of Fame, 200 seat theater, National Poultry Museum, Smith house and barn, and more. In the center of the grounds is Farm Town USA, a recreation of an 1890s village complete with one room schoolhouse, hatchery, general store, and working blacksmith shop. The village surrounds a pond which was installed by the soil and water conservation districts. A miniature train circles the grounds.

The Smith house is a reassembled 1890s farmhouse. The Smith event barn has a modern kitchen and spacious facility which is available for rent for weddings, meetings, and exhibits.

The ag center hosts special living history events annually, such as the Barnyard Babies exhibit in the spring followed by a tractor cruise in May, Tractor Daze and touch-

a-truck plus a truck and car show in July, the International Linemen's Rodeo (which attracts some 5,000 people) in October and the Santa Express train ride in December.

In describing the work of the center, Dawn uses the phrase "creating a classroom for agriculture." All programming is family-friendly, educational, and builds appreciation of history.

"We do great things with kids," Dawn said. Field trips are frequent. For example, kids can wash clothes in a washtub and hang them on a clothesline to dry or shell corn to feed to the chickens.

The museum is also about the future. Dawn plans to have the facility digitized and modernized. "We want to be a shining star, a national facility hosted in the great state of Kansas," Dawn said.

For more information, go to www.aghalloffame.com.

Creating a classroom for agriculture. That's a part of the accomplishments of the National Agricultural Center and Hall of Fame. We salute Dawn Gabel and all the staff and volunteers of the ag center for making a difference in helping agricultural education come to life.

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