

Emily Mullen – Next Door

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

Down the main street of town comes the Christmas parade, including a combine covered in Christmas lights. That's a sure sign that this is happening in rural Kansas. Along the parade route, shops are open late – including a gift shop owned by an innovative young Kansas couple. In small town Kansas, wouldn't it be nice if we could do our holiday shopping in a local business? For example, right next door? Today we'll learn about this couple in rural Kansas who have opened a convenient gift shop – and it is literally named Next Door. This is a special holiday edition of Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Tyson and Emily Mullen who own and operate Grant County Drug in Ulysses, Kansas. Tyson serves as the pharmacist while Emily does the books.

Emily grew up on an Angus farm in south central Kansas where she was actively involved in the family show cattle business. She went on to Hutchinson Community College where she met Tyson in an organic chemistry class. "He tutored me in the class," Emily said. Apparently their chemistry was good because the two got married.

Tyson went to pharmacy school at KU where Emily got a degree in Human Biology and later received her nursing degree from Fort Hays State. In July 2013, they bought Grant County Drug and moved to Ulysses.

Next door to the drugstore was a building which had housed a now-closed hair salon. Eventually Tyson and Emily decided to buy this building also. "We really wanted to benefit the community," Emily said.

They decided to utilize this building as a gift shop to complement the pharmacy. Because of its location, they came to call it simply Next Door. Emily and some friends went to a big market in Dallas to acquire specialty products. In July 2015, Next Door opened for business in downtown Ulysses.

"This is a boutique store which carries a little bit of everything," Emily said. "We have baby gifts, wedding gifts, soaps, greeting cards, clothing, toys, and many other things." Emily and Tyson have two little girls of their own, so they are very aware of products that are well-suited to children.

The store carries brand name products such as Mud Pie and Under Armor children's clothes, Melissa & Doug toys, and much more. During the holidays, the store is beautifully decorated for Christmas.

"It has really worked out well," Emily said. "The pharmacy's waiting area is pretty small, so now customers can go next door and browse while they wait for their prescription. It's fun for people," Emily said.

This keeps people entertained while they wait and enables them to use their time productively. "Often people will browse through the store and pick up a card or a gift while they're there," Emily said. Emily also helps with community initiatives such as a "shop the town" project. When the local John Deere dealer hosted a ladies' night out at the dealership, Emily helped with that as well.

"Our community is very supportive," Emily said. "Our chamber director, Marieta Hauser, is great," she said.

One of the community's major projects is special events during the holidays, including a big lighted parade complete with Santa Claus. "Every float has to have lights," Emily said. One person decorated a golf cart to look like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Only in rural Kansas would one see a giant combine driving down the street while covered in Christmas lights. Ulysses is a town of 6,161 people. Now, that's rural. "We stay open late during the parade and for times like Black Friday and Small Business Saturday," Emily said.

So where are you doing your holiday shopping? Wouldn't it be convenient if you could do your shopping right next door? We commend Emily and Tyson Mullen for making a difference by enhancing their community through opening this shop. When it's time to shop in Ulysses, where does one go? Next Door.

And there's more. The Angus family in which Emily was raised is one of the leading Angus seedstock producers in the nation. We'll learn about that next week.

Wishing you happy holidays, for the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.