

## Donna Pearson McClish – Common Ground

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

“Common ground.” That term typically refers to shared values. Today, we'll learn about an initiative where the name applies to people who are literally using their farmground or garden acreage for a common purpose, to help feed the needy, elderly and others in their communities. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Donna Pearson McClish created this initiative known as Common Ground Producers and Growers Mobile Market. Donna grew up in Wichita where she lives today.

“My dad was a truck farmer,” Donna said. “In 1968, my folks bought a 40 acre farm northeast of town.” Today, the city of Wichita has grown entirely around it. On this acreage, her father raised vegetables and had a community garden.

“My mother rounded up the neighborhood children and would teach them canning and sewing,” Donna said. She also raised 12 children, of whom Donna is the oldest. Today, Pearson Farms continues to raise produce for the community.

“One summer my brother came to me and said we had extra produce that year,” Donna said. “‘What should we do with it?’ he asked. I said, ‘Well, we could start a farmer's market,’” Donna said.

The Pearsons contacted the Sedgwick County Extension Office to get advice about opening a farmer's market. They met with Bev Dunning, the county extension director at the time. “It turned out that she had worked with my mother on our front porch, teaching canning and sewing many years ago,” Donna said.

Shortly after that, Donna was on her way to a church meeting when her phone started buzzing. “You need to get a newspaper,” she was told. When she stopped for a paper, she saw the lead article was about Bev Dunning retiring from Extension – but that wasn't what caught her eye.

“The first sentence of the article said that Donna Pearson McClish wants to start a farmer's market, according to Bev,” Donna said. “Oh my, we thought we were just exploring alternatives,” she said. But that public comment gave Donna and her family the nudge they needed to proceed with plans for their farmer's market which began on their farm.

The farmer's market was visited by a friend of Donna's who worked with senior citizens. She commented that her clients had received USDA-issued senior market vouchers which are only good at farmer's markets, but had no transportation to get there. “Could you bring the produce to our senior center?” she asked. Donna consented and the mobile market was born.

It turned out that a committee of senior health center staff had been working for two years on a solution to the unused senior market vouchers. Donna set out to gather produce and bring it to the senior centers.

“In 2014 we started with 11 senior centers where we delivered produce,” Donna said. “Now it has grown to 33, and we visit most centers two times each month.” Many of these are low-income, senior citizen high rises. These include

multiple centers in Wichita, as well as more rural locations such as Haysville, Newton, Hesston, Andover, and the town of Clearwater, population 2,431 people. Now, that's rural.

This initiative is called Common Ground Producers and Growers Mobile Market. "We work with a network of growers within a hundred miles, so the food is local," Donna said. To the extent possible, no herbicides or pesticides are used. Her grandson helped with deliveries and now trains other youth to assist. They distribute fruits and vegetables such as beets, greens, corn, watermelon, cantaloupe, okra, tomatoes, and more.

It's a win-win situation. Senior citizens get local, healthy produce and growers have an additional outlet for their production. "It's a lot of fun and a lot of work," Donna said. "We want to expand and we are always looking for more growers," she said. Donna is also active in the Kansas Black Farmers Association.

For more information, go to [www.facebook.com/commongroundpg](http://www.facebook.com/commongroundpg).

Common ground. In this case, growers are using their ground to produce healthy food for the common benefit. We commend Donna Pearson McClish and all those involved with Common Ground Mobile Market for making a difference with this initiative. The results are uncommonly good.

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