

Leadership Mitchell County

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

"What if?" That can be a powerful question. Today we'll meet a group of Kansans who essentially asked "what if" a version of a statewide leadership development program could be implemented in their home county. That led to the creation of a county leadership development program which is still going strong after 20 years. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Curt Frasier is an attorney at Beloit. In the 1990s, he was serving on the board of directors of the Kansas Agriculture and Rural Leadership or KARL program, a highly successful statewide development initiative for farm, agribusiness, and rural citizens. Several Mitchell Countians had participated in the KARL program.

One KARL graduate was Lucille Heller, then a teacher in Mitchell County. "Curt came back from the KARL board and thought we should have a program like KARL at the county level," Lucille said. "He brought together some recent KARL graduates like Doug Palen, Fred Severance and I to see if we could put together a program," she said.

A committee of KARL graduates and other volunteers developed plans, with help from a Huck Boyd Institute mini-grant and the local extension agent. The organizers also found a valuable resource in a K-State Research and Extension curriculum called LEADS – Leadership Excellence And Dynamic Solutions.

The notebook included sample committee structures, sample bylaws, and other materials that the program organizers could utilize. In 1999, Leadership Mitchell County launched its first class. Every year since then, the volunteer board of Leadership Mitchell County has provided this training experience for 15 to 20 citizens of Mitchell and then adjoining counties.

The class schedule includes an opening get-acquainted picnic followed by several sessions in and around Mitchell County. The first session is a leadership retreat at Mitchell County's Ringneck Ranch. Subsequent sessions include tours of various businesses in Beloit and surrounding communities. One eye-opening experience is a tour of the correctional facility in Ellsworth. The class makes an annual trip to Manhattan and Topeka, including visits with legislators and the Governor.

K-State faculty such as Dr. Barry Flinchbaugh have presented sessions to Leadership Mitchell County every year. Skill development components are built in to the curriculum, along with informative tours and networking opportunities. Class members are required to individually attend some local government meeting and to do a group class project. Class members take turns leading the sessions by taking notes and introducing speakers.

Session topics include leadership skills, tourism, corrections, agriculture, health care, education, government, economic development, and more. Class graduation is in the spring.

A quarterly newsletter, "The Connection," goes to alumni and donors. The curriculum has been infused with key leadership concepts developed by the Kansas Leadership Center in Wichita. Mark Palen, Mary Jane Chapman, and Carol Cordell were instrumental in this effort.

More than 300 Mitchell County citizens have participated in the program through the years. The program is led by volunteers on the board and committees, including several alumni.

The program strives to be county-wide, engaging people in the county seat of Beloit as well as outlying communities. Class members and board members have come from Beloit as well as other rural areas. These include Cawker City, population 463; Glen Elder, population 429; Tipton, population 210; and Hunter, population 57 people. Now, that's rural.

What are the benefits of the Leadership Mitchell County program? "There's social growth as well as skill development," Lucille Heller said. "It's brought the whole area together, which has had benefits for a lot of things in the community," Curt Frasier said. "The program lets them know that they're needed and gives them confidence and skills to step up," he said.

Lucille retired from teaching and became tourism director for Mitchell County in 2017. "I continue to volunteer with this program because working with these people is so energizing," Lucille said.

For more information, go to www.leadershipmitchellcounty.org.

"What if?" That powerful question led to the Leadership Mitchell County program 20 years ago. We commend Curt Frasier, Lucille Heller, and the many volunteers and class participants who are making a difference with their participation and leadership. Hmm. What if every county had access to a similar leadership program?

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