

## Post Rock 1 – Angie Muller

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

Sometimes it takes a spark to get something started. Today we'll learn about a spark which is indeed starting something, but this spark is spelled SPARC with a C. The SPARC program was launched by an innovative community foundation to encourage and support vital economic development projects in the region. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Angie Muller is executive director of the Russell County Area Community Foundation, an affiliate of the Greater Salina Community Foundation. She told me about the SPARC grant program.

Angie is a native of Russell. She earned a degree in economics from Kansas State University and a Master's degree in defense studies from the University of Reading in England. She went on to work with federal agencies and then non-profit organizations in the Washington DC area, but she had fond memories of home.

"I lived in exile (from rural Kansas) for about 18 years," Angie said with a smile. In 2010, she and her husband decided to move back to Kansas to raise their family.

In doing so, they joined a surprising but growing trend of an increase in young people in rural Kansas. In general, demographic data have demonstrated long term population loss in the rural regions of the state. However, according to K-State sociology professor Matt Sanderson, data show that the population of those in the 20-30 age category and the 30-40 age category grew by about 4% in rural Kansas from 2010 to 2017. Angie is pleased to be part of that rural re-migration.

"Our kids are very happy, they live next door to their grandparents," Angie said. "I love it," she said. When she moved back, she became executive director of the Russell County Area Community Foundation.

The foundation was formed in 2001 to create a permanent source of philanthropy to address current and future needs in the region through grant making and partnerships. "The foundation exists to preserve our rural way of life," Angie said.

Today, the Russell County Area Community Foundation has more than \$15 million in assets and 76 charitable funds created by various donors. The Kansas Health Foundation and the Dane G. Hansen Foundation of Logan have been key donors and partners in helping this foundation grow.

"Our board of directors got together and talked about how we could do even more," Angie said. "We were giving out lots of smaller grants, but we wanted to think big and do something really meaningful."

That led to the creation of a new grant initiative called SPARC: Strategic Partnership for the Advancement of Russell County. SPARC offered grants up to \$175,000. "We had three goals: Significant economic development, community collaboration, and long term measured impact," Angie Muller said.

After proposals were submitted, two finalists emerged. In the end, the Russell County Area Community Foundation board decided to support both, at different levels and stages. The Foundation awarded \$175,000 to Russell Development Inc. to develop 20 acres of commercial real estate along Interstate 70. Russell County includes about 30 miles of I-70, from the rural town of Gorham, population 348, to Dorrance, population 185 people. Now, that's rural.

The second project was not as far along and involved the development of a new tourism coalition for the Post Rock region of Kansas. The foundation decided to support that project with a \$25,000 grant.

"Our goal is to make this a vibrant community for years to come," Angie said. She is passionate about rural Kansas. "People are friendly, we have beautiful scenery and great schools," she said. "It's a fantastic place to raise a family and it's worth preserving," she said.

For more information about the foundation, go to [www.rcacf.net/](http://www.rcacf.net/)

Sometimes it takes a spark to get something started. In this case, it was a program named SPARC which is stimulating economic development in the Russell region. We commend Angie Muller and all those involved with the Russell County Area Community Foundation for making a difference with creativity and philanthropy. I'm thankful for their creative spark.

And there's more. As mentioned, one of the SPARC grants is supporting a new regional tourism initiative. We'll learn about that next week.

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