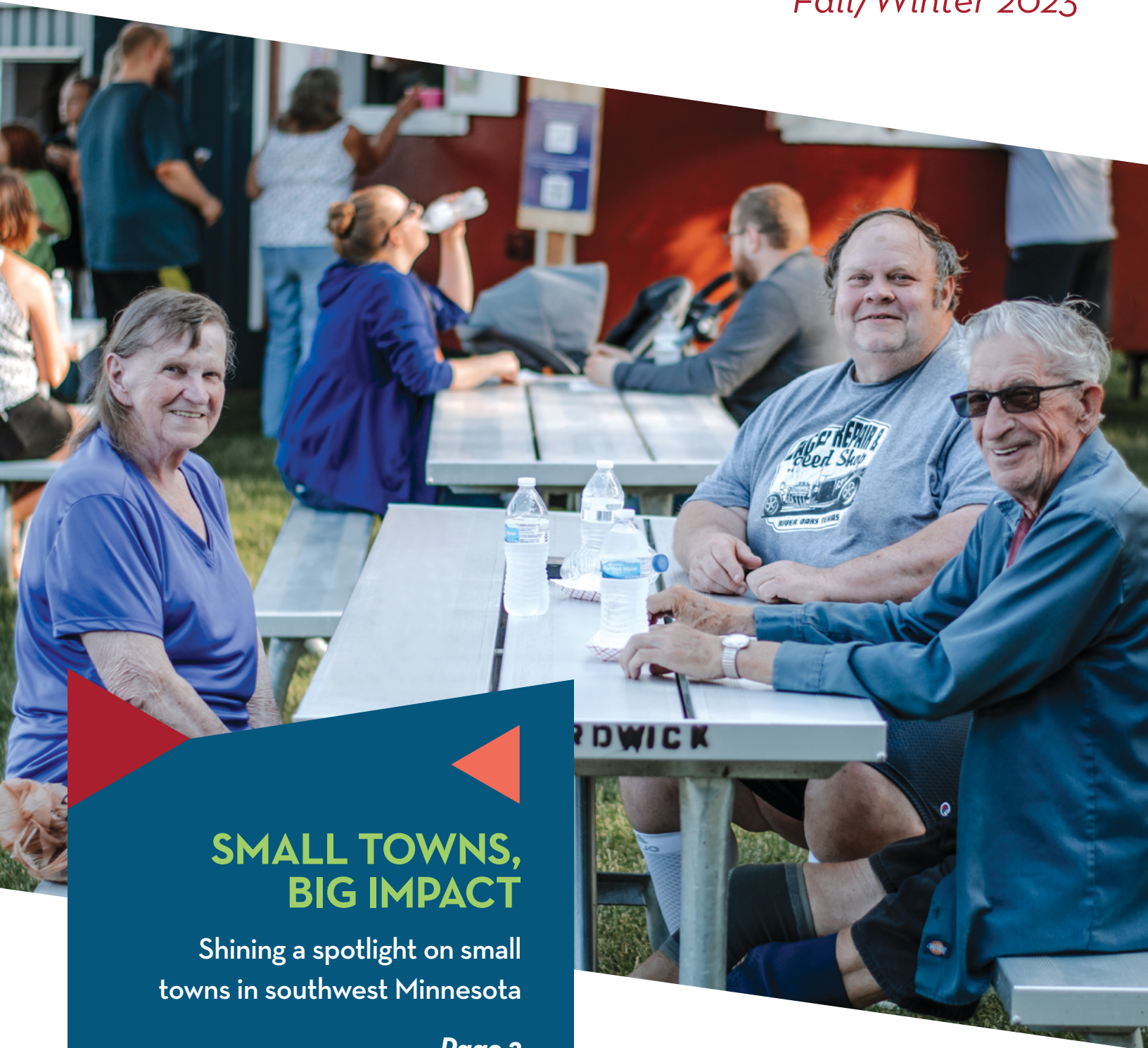


CONNECT

Fall/Winter 2023



SMALL TOWNS, BIG IMPACT

Shining a spotlight on small
towns in southwest Minnesota

Page 2

Pictured: An Age Friendly Communities Grant made it easier for
all ages to enjoy the park in Hardwick, population 191.



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION



Grant helps foster a small town for all ages in

Hardwick
Population 191

There's last-minute talk of rearranging the picnic tables at Milford Remme Memorial Park, and an urgent phone call about traffic cones to block off Main Street. On this warm summer evening in the town of Hardwick, volunteers are accounting for hotdogs and buns, scrubbing down the concession stand counter and taping up signs in a flurry of final preparations.

Continued on page 4



SMALL TOWN SPOTLIGHT

Scott Marquardt

Our region is home to 156 amazing communities. I often talk about the hope, passion, resiliency, and people of our towns with two-digit and three-digit populations as I describe our region to people throughout the country. In this issue, we showcase and celebrate three incredible stories from our communities with under 1,000 in population. You will definitely enjoy these stories of active aging, local volunteerism, shifting demographics, multi-generational engagement, welcoming communities and entrepreneurship to provide critical community products and services. These stories are excellent reminders of why Southwest Initiative Foundation was created, and how we are honored and humbled to be a trusted partner, investor and catalyst to leverage the power of local philanthropy and the importance of regional approaches for economic development and community engagement.

Thank you to our partners, donors, funders and friends who share our vision of a region where all people thrive and our collective hope and passion for the future of rural. Your support is critical for us to provide the capital, engagement and resources that our amazing communities throughout the region need to advance their own hope for the future of their small towns. Critical issues and priorities such as child care, business succession and retention, entrepreneurship, development of new leaders, workforce recruitment and others face our rural communities every day, and our region will be successful with your continued support. Thank you!



Age Friendly Communities is deployed by a local Community Leadership Team. In Hardwick, that was (from left) Lorna Bryan, Alice Hansen, Tammy Johnson and Joan Kindt.

Continued from page 2

Tonight, they're celebrating. It's Jubilee Days, the annual town festival, but this party is a special addition. It's a dedication of upgrades to the park. With the help of an Age Friendly Communities grant, there's now a sidewalk to the shelter area and restrooms, making them more accessible for wheelchairs, walkers and strollers. The restrooms have new raised toilets, grab bars and a skidproof epoxy floor. A new handicap-accessible bucket swing hangs in the playground, and nearby is a new enclosure where kids can play gaga ball. The Hardwick American Legion added to the project, with money to install a new pickleball court and two new park benches.

"These projects have revitalized our park and brought new energy into our community. The park's usage has increased this summer, and we are sure it's going to be a family favorite for years to come," local volunteer and community leader Alice Hansen told the crowd gathered for the dedication.

The Age Friendly Communities program helps small towns

in Minnesota become better places to live for people of all ages. The program helps communities identify existing assets that are age friendly, as well as areas where they can improve. Grants of up to \$10,000 are available to help communities implement projects that will make a positive impact for everyone.

The program is led by the Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, with funding from Southwest Initiative Foundation. So far, 19 communities have participated, completing local projects to improve things like accessibility, nutrition and social activities for older adults.

AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Adrian • Balaton • Beardsley • Bird Island
DeGraff • Echo • Eden Valley
Hardwick • Kerkhoven • Lamberton
Lynd • Madison • Maynard • Milan
Pipestone • Porter • Tyler • Vesta • Winsted

Surveys sent to Hardwick area residents indicated they were interested in improving their health and recreational opportunities. The town has no walking trail or fitness center. Enhancing the park was the winning idea, with the goal to increase its use. The Age Friendly Communities survey also inspired a group exercise class twice a week in the community building.

"When our communities support older adults in healthy and successful aging, everyone in southwest Minnesota benefits," said SWIF Vice President of Community Impact Nancy Fasching.

Age Friendly Communities is deployed by a local Community Leadership Team. In Hardwick, that was Alice Hansen, Joan Kindt, Tammy Johnson and Lorna Bryan. This core group of volunteers is a tightknit circle of friends.

"Our kids grew up together. We all go on vacation together. We all kind of have a good pulse on what's going on with each other," said Tammy, who raised a family with her husband in Hardwick and serves as the city's clerk.

Volunteers are the engine of civic life in any town, but especially in small towns. Research by Ben Winchester at University of Minnesota Extension estimates that one in 34 must serve in leadership positions in some rural areas, compared to one in every 143 residents in major metropolitan counties. At last count, Hardwick's census was 191 with 94 households.

"When you have a town of 200 or less, you all have to pitch in," said Joan, who is the fire department secretary and treasurer in addition to a job with the Minnesota Department of Health. "Everybody has different talents. We just pool them together."

Joan lives right by the park and can hear the thump of basketballs on the court all day long as she works from her basement office. She's also in the weekly pickleball league, which she said is well attended.

"People come from quite a distance to play," Joan said.

Lorna was born and raised in Hardwick, where she attended the nearby elementary school, now closed and turned into a residence. Talking about the park, Lorna notes the baseball diamond that used to host league games and is still maintained.

"I played softball here for 40 years," said Lorna, who works as a church secretary and, Joan points out, is a great organizer with an enduring passion for the town.

Alice is a retiree who gives her time to volunteering. She grew up in nearby Luverne and likes to see the many young families who make Hardwick their home today.

"You make (your town) important to you. You want to keep making things better for you and for the younger generation. We need to have different people involved," she said.



Anna Haas came to the park dedication with her son Karsten, who is 9.

New community leaders are stepping up to the plate. Anna Haas came to the park dedication with her son Karsten, who is 9. The pair pitched a baseball back and forth while they waited for the party to start.

"Hardwick has always been a part of our family heritage. Now that I have two young kids of my own, I want to continue to build this to be a more family friendly community," Anna said.

Anna joined the Hardwick Community Club three years ago and is active in the local Denver-Go-Getters 4-H Club. Her husband, Thomas Haas, is mayor of Hardwick. In small towns like hers, Anna said grant programs like Age Friendly Communities are key to community improvements, noting there are also area community foundations and funds that donate to the annual town festival and other projects.

"It's great to see all the improvements the Age Friendly Communities grant has helped with. We really appreciate the opportunities this funding creates," Anna said.

More opportunities are on the horizon for Hardwick. The city recently purchased nine acres for a new development to be divided into three tracts. One is reserved for a new firehall and township hall, and there will be one for commercial development. The third will be zoned residential.

"This is exciting for our little town," Tammy said. "The possibilities and opportunities that come with this land are going to breathe a breath of fresh air into Hardwick and the surrounding community for generations to come."

Welcoming Week in Kerkhoven unites neighbors new and old

Population 805

Minnesota is seeing major demographic changes, including increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Residents of color compose 22 percent of Minnesota's total population, according to Minnesota Compass. This varies by age: 34 percent of our state's youngest residents (age 0-4) are of color, compared to 7 percent of residents 65 and older.

In southwest Minnesota, many newcomers are Hispanic or Latino. Alma Contreras moved to the United States 14 years ago from Mexico and now lives in Murdock with her husband and their three children. She likes that the community feels safe, and she knows or recognizes most people in the small town. Still, it's been quite an adjustment.

"I feel like at the beginning, when I arrived here, I didn't see many Hispanic families or immigrant families. It was a little difficult for me because I had to learn how the system worked by myself, how the health system worked and how the school worked. I had a lot of questions," Alma said.

Alma has worked at the Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg School District for eight years in preschool and as an interpreter. In the last six years, she's noticed more Hispanic families arriving in the area. Based on her

own experience, Alma tries to help bridge the language barrier for newcomers. She's part of an organization called Conexiones.

"Our motto is connecting immigrants with the community. We provide information and resources to new people who move to the area," Alma said.

In September, Alma represented Conexiones along with its executive director Autumn Macias at the Swift County Area Community Welcoming Week celebration in Kerkhoven. This community-led event is in its third year, celebrating diversity, advancing inclusion and bringing people of different backgrounds together around their shared values. It's one of several activities across southwest Minnesota supported by Southwest Initiative Foundation through its membership in the Welcoming America network.

At Kerkhoven's Welcoming Week event, a community resource fair featured more than 50 nonprofits, businesses and organizations representing the surrounding Swift County area - from the LifeLink helicopter to local 4-H members. There were prizes, bounce houses and lots of friendly faces, with about 450 people filling the small town's park.

Organizer Annelle Guillemard has coordinated Welcoming Week in Kerkhoven for the past two years. She grew up in the area and moved back after teaching in Los Angeles. She knows many local families - including Alma's - from 20-plus years working at KMS Public Schools. Annelle got involved in Welcoming Week after an organization the Southern Poverty Law Center designated as a hate group purchased a nearby church, which she says is an ongoing challenge to building cross-cultural relationships.



From left: Paulina Velazquez, Cristina Lopez, Alma Contreras, Annelle Guillemard and Than Than Kyaw took part at the Swift County Area Community Welcoming Week celebration.

"Welcoming Week is a way to pull people together. The ultimate goal is to get to know people. Possibly you've lived on the same block with them, and you maybe don't know who they are. This is my small way to try to change that," Annelle said.

"It makes the town or the area more inviting," Alma said. "I feel like Kerkhoven's event was just perfect because families can see all the resources there are in the area."

Establishing a welcoming culture in any community requires ongoing, consistent work to foster equity and inclusion. In many ways, Welcoming Week provides an opportunity to cultivate the awareness and energy that's needed to sustain those year-long welcoming efforts.

This is the fourth year SWIF has supported Welcoming Week in the region, bringing together neighbors of all backgrounds to build strong connections and affirm the importance of welcoming and inclusive places in achieving collective prosperity. Other southwest Minnesota communities celebrating this year included Glencoe,

Granite Falls, Marshall, Willmar and Worthington.

"Each community creates its own unique celebration reflecting the local community spirit. It doesn't have to be a big event. It can be something small and grow from there," said Than Than Kyaw, SWIF Community Engagement Specialist.

"Simple things make a difference," Alma said.

Is your community interested in hosting a Welcoming Week event next year?

Contact Than Than at thanthank@swifoundation.org or (320) 552-0158.



About 450 people stopped by Welcoming Week to enjoy games, prizes, activities and a community resource fair.

Entrepreneur fuels community in

Watson
Population 182

A larger-than-life heifer wearing a red handkerchief tied around her ears, tongue in mid-lick, is stamped on the vehicles parked across from Sunshine & Whiskey Filling Station. It's hard to miss the promotion for Salty Heifer's Off Sale, attached to the filling station. Autumn Lee owns both businesses, and she's a standout in her own right.

"Autumn has been a community role model for years even before becoming a multi-business owner," said Tesa Siverhus-Maus, acting director for the Montevideo Area Chamber of Commerce. "With being heavily involved in various youth activities, clubs and committees that support our communities, she not only creates lifelong connections but also forms lifetime relationships. She does not see roadblocks on her path of creating a successful business, if a plan doesn't pan out, she takes it as a challenge and finds a way to make it successful."

Autumn's entrepreneurship story has a few chapters. She and her husband, Jason, raise

soybeans, corn and cattle on Jason's fourth-generation family farm north of Watson along with their blended family that includes three daughters.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, they spent a lot of time in close quarters on the farm, and Autumn started looking for ways to branch out. She has an ag business degree and experience as an office manager, and she decided to buy the local liquor store and gas station in October 2020. Her goal was to use the prime location to grow, not only as a business strategy but also to give back to the community.

Watson, population 182, is near Lac qui Parle Lake on the Minnesota River. The town's claim to fame is the Goose Capital of the U.S.A. Tourism doesn't bring in the money it used to, still Autumn loves how neighbors look out for each other here, and she sees opportunity.

"We're right by the lake, on a state highway. There's no reason this place shouldn't work," Autumn said. "Local people said please keep the groceries and the gas; it's so much more convenient than driving to Montevideo when you need milk or bread. So, I redid some shelving within the gas station side, and we actually didn't lose any products."

Filling the need for food and fuel was just the beginning. With help from Southwest Initiative Foundation's (SWIF) loan programs, Autumn squared off the building and replaced an old garage with an addition. SWIF works in partnership with banks and credit unions, economic development organizations, nonprofit lenders and private investors to create and retain quality jobs, foster entrepreneurship and help communities – large and small – compete in a global marketplace.

"Especially in some of our smallest towns, entrepreneurs like Autumn are the heartbeat of these places. They create jobs, invest in local economies and make our communities vibrant and unique," said Southwest Initiative Foundation Business Finance Director Amy Woitalewicz.

SWIF's loan helped fund an additional 490 square feet, which gave Autumn an office and allowed her to rent out space and create a new business in town – Studio 59 hair salon. The stylist has been so busy she had to give up her other part-time job, Autumn said.

But there were even bigger changes in store thanks to Autumn. She applied for a Minnesota Department of Agriculture AGRI Biofuels Infrastructure Grant to add ethanol products, and a grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Higher Blends Infrastructure Incentive Program to bring in biodiesel, with room for tractors and semis to fuel up. The upgrades meant installing all new tanks, lines and dispensers, replacing what had been there since 1994.

From two part-time employees at the start, Autumn has grown to employ up to seven part-time workers. Sunshine & Whiskey Filling Station is also an Amazon Hub Delivery location, receiving a van of 50 packages every day that are delivered by local drivers.

"Growth comes with challenges, but we're figuring it out as we go," Autumn said. "We're not done growing."



Autumn Lee owns Sunshine & Whiskey Filling Station and Salty Heifer's Off Sale in Watson, population 182.

Free Customized Business Resources, Online Anytime

Have a great business idea, but not ready for a loan? You can still access business resources anytime for free with Initiate Prosperity: Powered By Southwest Initiative Foundation. Get 24/7 access to virtual content on topics including business start-up, money, marketing and management with an account. Initiate Prosperity is available to anyone in southwest Minnesota.

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Our work is not possible without the thousands of partners who made a gift to the foundation during our Fiscal Year 2023. This list below includes the names of those who supported our general endowment, organizational operations and legacy gifts that serve our mission. Each gift is an investment in the future of communities, neighbors, families and businesses in southwest Minnesota, and we are honored to receive them.

In addition to this list, we thank all partners who supported southwest Minnesota through our specific programs, community foundations and other funds. **We're grateful to all!**

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**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
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Local community foundation helps Clarkfield thrive

Clarkfield Area Community Foundation (CACF) is one of our 31 affiliate community foundations. Since 2010, CACF has granted nearly \$150,000 to support community projects in Clarkfield and the surrounding area. Local advisory board members are proud of the impact the grants have made, and they're looking forward to the foundation's next big project - fundraising to renovate the town's pool.

Read more about the Clarkfield Area Community Foundation at swifoundation.org.

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