

Cheryl Lyn Higgins – Neighborhood Initiatives

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

“Our state was created by pioneers who came here and built their homes. Then they got together with their neighbors and built their churches and their schools and their communities. We need to do that again.” Those are the words of Cheryl Lyn Higgins, a passionate advocate of rural communities. She is the director of a new initiative which is benefitting rural Kansas. This is today’s Kansas Profile.

Cheryl Lyn Higgins is Director of Neighborhood Initiatives for the Sisters of St. Joseph, a Catholic order based in Concordia. The Sisters of St. Joseph was founded in France in 1650. Wow.

In 1836, several sisters traveled from France to what was then the U.S. frontier. In 1883, they set up a school in Concordia and organized other schools and hospitals around the region. At Concordia, they established a motherhouse to serve as their convent and academy. In 1902, the cornerstone was laid for a new motherhouse, which is an awesome five-story brick building that now serves as headquarters for the Sisters’ activities and home for more than 30 retired Sisters. Other Sisters are living and working in other communities around the region.

“Earlier in the century, the Sisters ran orphanages and hospitals to meet the needs of that time,” Cheryl Lyn said. “Now they are working on how to meet the needs of our current time.” They are also concerned about the depopulation of rural communities. One way of responding to such community needs is a new project they call Neighborhood Initiatives, directed by Cheryl Lyn Higgins.

Cheryl Lyn is from Winfield originally. She was a newscaster and radio station manager in south central Kansas and northern Oklahoma before becoming the Chamber of Commerce director in McPherson and subsequently in Junction City. Among many other activities, she operated an outstanding community leadership development program.

In 2010, her son saw a listing for the position of Director of Neighborhood Initiatives for the Sisters of St. Joseph and encouraged her to apply. Ultimately she got the job.

“It’s a real credit to the Sisters that they genuinely want to serve the people in these communities,” Cheryl Lyn said. “And, they were willing to allow us to experiment with this position.”

The first part of this new outreach was to hold community conversations to identify the most pressing needs. Those needs varied, but a common theme was the need for leadership. So, Cheryl Lyn drew on her previous experience and designed a leadership development program for communities where Sisters are located, such as Ellis, Kansas, a town of 1,852 people. Now, that’s rural.

“Some people have been in leadership positions for a long time, but not enough new people are stepping up to serve,” Cheryl Lyn said. “The mayor of Ellis has been mayor for 15 years. In the last five years he has waited to file for re-election until the last possible day, in hopes that someone else would step up. And apart from elective office, we need others who will give their time and effort for their communities in various ways.”

In September 2011, a community conversation was held in Ellis. Subsequently a leadership class was launched, involving people from various walks of life and even including a high school student. “We have been so delighted with the results,” Cheryl Lyn said. “Class members are already working on housing initiatives and downtown revitalization, and taking ownership of next year’s program.”

It went so well that such leadership development is now being offered to any rural community in the region at no charge whatsoever. Participants do not pay any fee. Requests have come from as far away as Wellington. For more information, go to www.csjkansas.org/neighborhood-initiatives-2.

To Cheryl Lyn, local grassroots leadership will be needed to make a difference and fight the pattern of rural depopulation across the state. We salute the Sisters of St. Joseph for fostering such leadership. “There’s a wealth of opportunity in our communities: Buildings to be renovated, history to be preserved, and downtowns to be revitalized with small businesses,” Cheryl Lyn said. “Like the pioneers, we have the spirit to rebuild our civic, religious, and economic communities.”

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