

Marci Penner – brainstorm 1

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

There's a storm forming in south central Kansas. Looks like a strong one. But there's no need to take cover and there's no alert issued by the National Weather Service. This isn't a thunderstorm. It's a brainstorm – specifically, a big rural brainstorm, generated from the creative mind of rural advocate Marci Penner. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Marci Penner, whom we've featured before, is an author and founder of the Kansas Explorers Club, the Kansas Sampler Foundation, and the We Kan! initiative. Marci, based at Inman, has long been an advocate of rural Kansas.

Marci and others came up with the idea for a special type of gathering. It wasn't a conference or a seminar. It came to be called the Big Rural Brainstorm, and it was held in Newton in February 2012.

As articulated by Marci, the goal of the gathering was to “bring together people from every aspect of rural life in order to find common possibilities and create innovative grassroots solutions that are achievable, especially by volunteer-led communities.”

As with other Marci projects, it was driven by possibilities. The planners asked, “What if we brought a couple of hundred passionate rural Kansans together, stirred up the energy, and looked at common issues from a completely different point of view? What if we all were committed to a “renewed rural” and we amped up our collective energies and focused on ideas that could result in grassroots action--some by the time we leave? What if the room was full of PowerUps to mix with all those who have been working at this for years? And, what if we had a lot of fun doing this?”

Those questions led to special type of gathering. This was not your grandfather's conference. It was different from the meetings put on by representatives of government agencies. This was planned by private sector, non-profit rural advocates. Instead of one big corporate sponsor, there were lots of small sponsorships from individuals and local businesses.

Some 200 rural Kansans attended the Big Rural Brainstorm. They came from Kansas communities large and small. People even came from communities as small as Olsburg, population 189; Morrowville, population 164; and Morland, population 159 people. Now, that's rural.

As promised, it was different from just another conference. Here is a list of the keynote speakers:..... Oops, there were no keynote speakers. All participants had the opportunity to speak up, network and brainstorm together, in groups large and small.

The Big Rural Brainstorm began with self-introductions of people who described why they love their rural communities. The format which followed consisted of diverse breakout sessions, StandUp reviews, appointments, and group discussions on particular rural topics. Discussion topics included rural housing, utilizing the elderly, technology, rural tourism, foodies, linking inventors and investors, education, rural grocery stores, and more. Participants were encouraged to think big and bold. Of course, there was food and fun along the way, including Lost Trail Root Beer floats.

The Big Rural Brainstorm definitely brought together diverse perspectives on rural issues, but what about that element of action which is all-too-often missing from the conferences people attend? Marci and the planners had ideas on that as well.

They organized the program so that, on the final morning, many participants were invited to come forward and declare specific action steps they would take when they returned to their home communities. A sampling of those actions included starting a community garden and community foundation, developing a rural entertainment network and internship programs for businesses, and doing an inventory of PowerUps.

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

The storm has cleared over south central Kansas. It was a strong one, alright, but it wasn't a thunderstorm or tornado. It was a brainstorm. We commend Marci Penner and all those involved with Big Rural Brainstorm for making a difference by stimulating creative thinking and moving people to action. Besides rain, that's the type of storm we need in rural Kansas.

And there's more. A major part of the Big Rural Brainstorm had to do with PowerUps. What are PowerUps? We'll learn the answer to that question next week.

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