

## Lea Ann Seiler – Hodgeman maker space

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

Here comes a package of nasal swabs, important tools in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. These aren't from some government stockpile or overseas supplier. They were manufactured on a 3D printer, as part of a project inspired by an economic development specialist in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Lea Ann Seiler is the economic development director in Hodgeman County. She grew up near Manhattan, attended Riley County High School and then K-State where she met and married her husband Gary. They moved to Hodgeman County where Gary became the ag teacher and they started their family. In 2008, Lea Ann became economic development director.

Among many other projects, Hodgeman County participated in the Network Kansas youth entrepreneurship challenge. "I saw that our kids, and even our local businesses, needed access to tools and supplies which they could use for projects," Lea Ann said.

After seeing Jim Correll's Fab Lab, the fabrication laboratory at Independence Community College, she wanted a similar facility in Hodgeman County. "It was harder to replicate without a community college, but it was worth it," she said. She called it a maker space.

Lea Ann started gathering equipment and looking for a location. After the local schools consolidated, the former high school in Hanston became available. Hanston is a rural community of 206 people. Now, that's rural.

That building is now the Elk Plaza Business and Community Incubator. The gym and weight room serve as a community fitness center, the home economics classroom and concession stand are a licensed commercial kitchen, and other classrooms are rented to various business clients. The maker space is now located there as well.

Hodgeman County Economic Development held summer entrepreneurship camps for students at the maker space. They worked with everything from legos to 3D printers and heat sublimation equipment, thanks to grants from ITC and Network Kansas. Lea Ann was encouraged by Marci Penner's Kan-Start program to raise funds for more equipment such as a laser engraver. Funds were raised and the laser engraver is now in Hanston.

Meanwhile, Lea Ann was serving on the local emergency management team. Among others, that team included the county health officer, a local pediatrician named Dr. Kristie Clark. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, Dr. Clark mentioned that there was an extreme shortage of nasopharyngeal swabs. Lea Ann wondered if the 3D printer could produce them locally.

After a lot of research, Lea Ann and Dr. Clark got the print files and list of equipment needed to 3D print the swabs. Dr. Clark made arrangements to have them sterilized and packaged at the Kansas Department of Health and

Environment. But just as they prepared to begin production, they found that their liability insurance would not cover them.

Then Lea Ann realized that various dentists were already using 3D printers in their practices where the medical liability coverage was already in place. Dr. Clark made more contacts and two dentists took on the idea. They are now mass-producing hundreds of the needed nasopharyngeal swabs on their 3D printers. Lea Ann has gone back to 3D-printing face shields and facemask extenders, so she continues to help.

Congressman Roger Marshall recently commented about this effort: “Kansans’ pioneer spirit has taken on a new entrepreneurial endeavor to combat COVID-19....I am very proud of the leadership and innovation these Kansans have shown in bringing this project to fruition,” he said.

“Southwest Kansas has been hit hard by the pandemic,” Lea Ann said. “I’m thankful that we’ve been able to get these (swabs) produced,” she said.

Meanwhile, Lea Ann looks forward to reopening the maker space. “Our kids and our local businesses need the opportunity to get that experience here,” Lea Ann said. “We can create and learn together. I see a greater need than ever for maker spaces across the state,” she said.

For more information, go to [www.hodgemancountyks.com](http://www.hodgemancountyks.com).

It’s time to leave this maker space, which inspired a project to provide vitally needed nasal swabs to fight the coronavirus pandemic. We salute Lea Ann Seiler, Dr. Kristie Clark, and others who support the maker space. They’re not just making products, they are making a difference.

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