



# ANNUAL REPORT

2025-2026



CONNECTING &  
CELEBRATING  
MCCOOK

MCCOOKFOUNDATION.ORG



# MISSION

MCFF is connecting and impacting our community through intentional investments of time and financial resources



**By Matt Sehnert**  
**MCFF Chairperson**

# BUILDING MORE

Strong communities don't happen by accident. They are built on trust, relationships, and the ability to work through differences.

## A Closer Look at Communication

One area that MCFF is actively exploring is communication. It's no secret that our community, state, and nation are struggling in this area. New communication platforms—especially social media—often encourage people to say things they wouldn't say face-to-face. As a result, conversations become polarized, and it's increasingly difficult to disagree without condemning or dismissing one another.

Last month, I spoke with the Youth Change Reaction (YCR) McCook High School group about coming of age during a time when it has become acceptable—sometimes even celebrated—to demonize people who think differently. They see national and state leaders who degrade, discredit, and vilify those with opposing views.

I told them that this hasn't always been the norm.

There are examples of leaders from different religions and backgrounds working together for the common good. I showed the students a photograph of President George W. Bush welcoming President-Elect Obama, with presidents Bush, Carter, and Clinton present—leaders who strongly disagreed on policy.

During that meeting President Bush told President-Elect Obama: "I want to thank the President-elect for joining the ex-Presidents for lunch. And one

At the McCook Community Foundation Fund (MCFF), we steward philanthropic resources to help make our community an even better place to call home. Often, the grants support visible, brick-and-mortar projects like the YMCA and the Sports Complex. We are proud to be part of these important investments in McCook.

But MCFF's work goes well beyond buildings.

Over the years, grant funds have supported technology projects at McCook Public Schools, helped organizations like CASA and the Family Resource Center, and fostered arts. These projects may be less visible than a new facility, but they are just as important to the health and vitality of our community.

## Thinking About Community "Infrastructure"

In addition to funding programs and projects, MCFF's thinking revolves around what we call community "infrastructure."

This isn't about water pipes or streets. It's about the underlying fabric that helps a community function well—things like leadership development, volunteer support, welcoming and belonging, and community engagement.

# VISION

Making McCook an even better place to call home

## FUND ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**Matt Sehnert**

Chairperson

**Dale Dueland**

**Jeff Gross**

Vice Chairperson

**Amanda Engell**

**Sean Wolfe**

Treasurer

**Gavin Harsh**

**Peggy Been**

Secretary

**Linda Taylor**

**Cynthia Huff**

Past-Chair

**Pam Wolford**

**Dennis Berry**

**Ronda Graff**

Coordinator



# THAN BUILDINGS

message that I have and I think we all share is that we want you to succeed. Whether we're Democrat or Republican, we care deeply about this country. And to the extent we can, we look forward to sharing our experiences with you. All of us who have served in this office understand that the office transcends the individual. And we wish you all the very best. And so does the country."

That spirit of respect matters.

### What If Southwest Nebraska Led the Way?

This raises an important question for us closer to home. What if McCook and Southwest Nebraska became known as a place where people engage in conversations and debates respectfully? What if curiosity became more common than condemnation? What if asking questions and trying to understand another point of view were seen as strengths, not weaknesses? What if disagreeing didn't automatically mean assuming the other person was stupid or evil?

This kind of communication is also infrastructure. It's the kind that makes communities resilient, welcoming, and unique. It's the kind that could make our corner of the world a model for others—and an even better place to call home.

We can emulate one of our forefathers, George Norris who accomplished great things for our country by collaborating with people who often had different points of view.

### Looking Ahead

In 2026, MCFF—along with community partners—will be working to foster opportunities that encourage curiosity, learning, and understanding of different perspectives. We hope to create spaces where people can find common ground, disagree respectfully, and remember that we are neighbors first.

Because in the end, we have far more in common than what divides us.

### Call to Action

Community infrastructure does not build itself. We invite you to be part of this work—by supporting MCFF through your philanthropy, participating in community conversations, and helping model the values of curiosity, respect, and engagement. Together, we can invest not only in projects, but in the relationships and "infrastructure" that will shape the future of McCook and Southwest Nebraska for generations to come.

**"Because in the end, we have far more in common than what divides us."**





# MCFF GRANTING CAPACITY CONTINUES TO GROW

McCook Community Foundation Fund has granted more than \$2 million since its inception in 2001 to dozens of organizations and projects in McCook and Southwest Nebraska.

MCFF gave its first grant in 2003 for \$1,000 toward playground equipment at the newly-built McCook Elementary School. In 2025, MCFF distributed more than \$250,000, which included several smaller grants along with multi-year grants to the YMCA Capital Campaign and the City of McCook's sports complex.

During 2025, the McCook Fund Advisory Committee spent countless hours discussing the goals of MCFF. And while the granting capacity continues to grow year-after-year, there are more good ideas than there are dollars available so the volunteer committee continues to discern the focus of MCFF and where the most impact can be made in McCook and Southwest Nebraska.



Recent MCFF Grant Recipients (from top): CASA for Matthew's Place, Family Resource Center, Fox Theatre Marquee, Picnic Tables in Norris Park, SWNE Genealogy Society Digital Scanner & Humane Society Dog Kennels.

## 2025 GRANTS

City of McCook	Sports Complex	Community	\$500,00.00
Heritage Square	Sutton House Feasibility Study	Community	\$36,000.00
6th Floor Project	2026 Operating Expenses	Arts & Culture	\$5,000.00
Prairie Plains CASA	Matthew's Place	Community	\$15,000.00
McCook Public Schools	Construction Class	Education	\$3,300.00
McCook Public Schools	Bison Days	Youth	\$4,000.00
Community Chest	SWNE Big Give	Community	\$2,000.00
City of McCook/Beautify McCook	Norris Park Improvements	Community	\$2,700.00
McCook Public Schools	NORE Science Trip	Youth	\$3,000.00
McCook Community College	CNA Project	Education	\$5,000.00
6th Floor Project	2025 Operating Season	Arts & Culture	\$10,000.00
6th Floor Project	Youth Docents/Intern Project	Arts & Culture	\$1,250.00
MAG Training Center	Building Renovations	Youth	\$20,000.00
SWNE Genealogy Society	Microfilm Scanner to Digital	Community	\$4,000.00
McCook Humane Society	Matching Grant - Building Renovations	Community	\$25,000.00
Family Resource Center	Community Hygiene Cupboard	Community	\$4,000.00
Learn & Return Scholarship	FAC Grant in honor of Pam & Greg Wolford	Education	\$25,000.00
Keystone Business Canter (MEDC)	Technology Upgrade	Community	\$4,622.25
Summer Hometown Interns	Grants for Two Interns	Youth	\$6,000.00



# PLANNED GIVING AND PHILANTHROPY CONTINUE AS PRIORITY

As the transfer-of-wealth continues in Nebraska and specifically Red Willow County, MCFF has a long-term focus on planned giving and is active in the Five-to-Thrive program with the Nebraska Community Foundation.

In 2025, MCFF was part of several programs to promote planned giving and philanthropy in the community.

During MCFF's Ladies Legacy Night, a small group of women are brought together to talk about planned giving and creating a legacy for their family - along with wine and appetizers.

MCFF plays an active role in the Southwest Nebraska Big Give. In 2025, MCFF provided a grant for an additional power-hour to encourage online giving, recognizing the importance of non-McCook residents to the Big Give's success.

MCFF is one of eight organizations which are part of the McCook Philanthropy Council, a collaboration of the local non-profit organizations that shares resources and works to create a culture of giving in McCook and Southwest Nebraska.

And MCFF kicked off 2025 by recognizing those who had included MCFF in their estate plans, including Matt and Shelly Sehnert, Jeff and Diana Gross, Jessica and Heath Bortner and Sean and Becky Wolfe.

The transfer of wealth will only grow in McCook and Southwest Nebraska, so MCFF will continue to work with community members on how planned gifts can benefit the communities where they live and keep a focus on philanthropy to make McCook an even better place to call home.

During the 2025 MCFF annual celebration, former FAC members and recent planned gift donors were recognized, including (from top right) Kay Flaska (2005-2010), Jessica and Heath Bortner, Shelly and Matt Sehnert, Diana and Jeff Gross, Becky and Sean Wolfe and Tom Buresh (2010-2014).



# NEW MCCOOK VOLUNTEER OF THE MONTH PROGRAM LAUNCHES

Most volunteers don't serve their community for the recognition. They don't do the work for the glory. And they don't give of their time for a pat on the back.

But that doesn't mean that the time and effort that volunteers give should not be recognized.

The McCook Philanthropy Council created a new program in early 2025 to recognize local volunteers: the McCook Volunteer of the Month.

Made up of eight local non-profits, the Philanthropy Council works together to promote an environment of giving. While their primary focus is on financial giving, the Philanthropy Council also recognizes that donations of time and expertise are just as important to a growing and thriving community.

To kick off the new program, the McCook Philanthropy Council selected **Don Harpst** as the first recipient of the McCook Volunteer of the Month award in **February 2025**.

Other recipients throughout the year were:

**Mark Friehe, March 2025**

**Jeremy Shaw, April 2025**

**Dixie Bethell, May 2025**

**Joyce Anderson, June 2025**

**Judy McCune, July 2025**

**Bruce McDowell, August 2025**

**Barb Bortner, September 2025**

**Sharon Bohling, October 2025**

**Grady Riemenschneider, November 2025**

**Linda Graff, December 2025**

The McCook Philanthropy Council selects the monthly recipient for the McCook Volunteer of the Month award as part of MCFF's McCook Volunteer subaccount.

The only requirement is that the nominee must be a resident of McCook or Red Willow County. Please provide information about the nominee along with where and how they volunteer in the community.



# YOUTH CHANGE REACTION CONTINUES TO EVOLVE



Since Youth Change Reaction formed in 2009, the youth group for the McCook Community Foundation Fund has progressed and grown - both literally and figuratively.

When YCR formed more than 15 years ago, students were selected as they entered their freshman year with three chosen through an application process. To get more students involved - as well as those who might not understand what YCR is as 9th graders, YCR now accepts students at all grade levels and includes those who have a desire to make their communities better for themselves and other young people.

How they are making an impact in McCook has changed too by taking on new projects while continuing with events they have been part of since the inception.

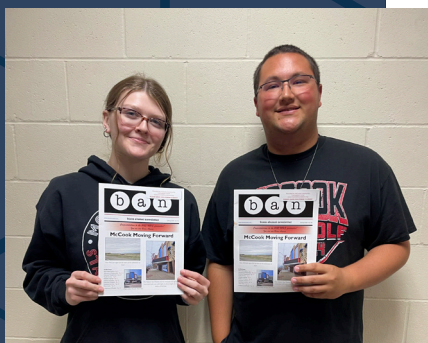
For example, YCR helped with the Nebraska Community Foundation's first Youth Summit in summer 2025, which brought young people to McCook from across the state. Guided by NCF's Becky Boesen and Chloe Higgins Carlson, the students learned about Asset Based Community Development by exploring the

assets of McCook, as well as each of their hometowns. They experienced a special showing of the movie, "Top Gun" at McCook's "Cars Under the Stars" at the Red Willow County Fairgrounds. And they met with NCF's Board of Directors as part of their quarterly meeting in McCook.

YCR also continues to help with annual events, serving as guides for the 6th-Grade Heritage Tour, which takes students through the historical buildings in downtown McCook; and simply hanging out with students at the elementary school during lunch and recess. And Cars Under the Stars is used more every year with a showing by YCR at least once a year, as well as movies by other organizations.

Entering 2026, YCR will continue to focus on these larger projects but will also make impact in smaller ways with "Baskets of Sunshine," little gifts - usually yellow - to brighten someone's day. All to promote and encourage positive change in their community.





**B.A.N.**

# MCFF SUBACCOUNTS MAKING MCCOOK AN EVEN BETTER PLACE TO CALL HOME

MCFF oversees dozens of subaccounts, providing non-profit status for numerous organizations and projects, as well as resources, time and energy to make them a success. Just a few highlights from 2025 include a new subscription service for the Bison Alumni Newsletter, Celebrate McCook expanding Beautify McCook's impact in downtown McCook and the Southwest Nebraska Big Give reaching record levels.



**BEAUTIFY MCCOOK**

## BISON ALUMNI NEWSLETTER GOES OLD SCHOOL

In 2025, the Bison Alumni Newsletter went old school, returning to a printed edition for the twice/yearly newsletter. For a suggested \$20 yearly donation (more is always welcomed), a full-color, printed copy of BAN is mailed to your actual mail box at your home or office.

Three years ago, the McCook Community Foundation Fund, which has the subaccount for BAN, began paying to have printed copies available around the community.

With those copies available, we have heard from others that they would like a printed version for themselves. While everyone will still have access to the email version of BAN, the printed option is now available.

For more information or with questions, please visit the MCFF website at [mccookfoundation.org](http://mccookfoundation.org).

## BEAUTIFY MCCOOK CELEBRATES WITH ONE PROJECT AT A TIME

More lights and more flowers adorned downtown McCook in 2025, thanks to the effort of a group of local volunteers who are working to bring beauty and color through Beautify McCook. The group came together several years ago to oversee the installation of lights along the skyline of downtown McCook's buildings. Since then, lights have been added in Norris Park with the hope of more lights along Norris Avenue and Santa Claus Lane. The group has also added planters on the corners in downtown McCook during the summer and into the holiday season. Funds for the group are through MCFF's Celebrate McCook subaccount.



**SWNE BIG GIVE**

## SWNE BIG GIVE REACHES RECORD NUMBERS

If organizers for the 2025 Southwest Nebraska Big Give had to sum up the day in one word, it would be "impressive." The one-day of giving on Nov. 6 reached a new record in 2025, with \$410,855.49 in donations for 45 organizations in McCook and Southwest Nebraska. Additionally, the number of donations reached record levels with more than 1,200 individual donations, surpassing the 954 donations in 2024.

Along with individual donors, the Big Give is made possible because of generous sponsors which provide matching funds for the organizations including the Graff Charitable Foundation, MNB Bank, Community Hospital and First Interstate Bank.

While donations cannot be made after the one day of giving, the Big Give website is still available at [swnebiggive.org](http://swnebiggive.org) with a complete list of the organizations, the goals and their totals.

The Southwest Nebraska Big Give is organized by the Community Chest, a committee of local volunteers. As they wrap up the 2025 event, plans are already underway for the 2026 Big Give, which will be Thursday, Nov. 5.



# SUMMER AND MCCOOK TRADITION COMING TO AN END

By **RONDA GRAFF**

The season for the McCook Aquatic Center came to an end Aug. 13, wrapping up its first full season after opening in July 2024. For more than 80 years, the original McCook pool operated in the same location until it was replaced with a modern pool.

One constant at the old pool and now the new pool is a maroon van parked nearby with Bill Donze sitting inside and a sign outside promoting 25-cent snow cones. Most people know him simply as Mr. Bill.

Whether you think he is crazy for sitting in a vehicle registering 120-degrees on the interior or odd for selling candy to kids by the side of the road, Mr. Bill is the constant every summer.

But those summers with Mr. Bill peddling Little Debbies and Slim Jims through the open van doors are coming to an end.

For those who don't know, Mr. Bill has cancer and faces a grim prognosis. He is very open about the fact that his chances of being around next summer are slim. He is fighting the disease with all the modern methods and says that when those options run out, he'll consider all the alternatives. But even if, as he puts it, he can find something on the internet to help him, there is only a small chance he'll be around to serve snow-cones to kids next summer.

Everyone has a Mr. Bill story.

One of my favorites involves Mr. Bill parking his van alongside Norris Park when the pool wasn't open. My mother-in-law lived across from Norris Park at the time and backed into Mr. Bill's van. As Dolores was going slow, it caused just a small dent but she wanted to pay to have it repaired. Mr. Bill refused to have it fixed and declined to take any cash for the damage. Instead, he would only accept the money for it to be used for free snow-cones for the kids. I believe kids didn't have to scrounge quarters for a snow-cone all summer long.

And the timing was especially important as the chances to visit with Mr. Bill are very limited, with a McCook tradition coming to an end.

Visiting with friends or reaching out to someone you don't see often doesn't just apply to Mr. Bill.

When my father-in-law Pete Graff was nearing the end, I asked my own dad to go visit him with me. My

dad's response was that he would wait until Pete felt better. Of which I responded that there wasn't going to be a better time. We visited on a Monday and Pete passed away later that week. There is never a perfect time. There is only now.

That opportunity existed because we knew time was short. And the same is true with Mr. Bill. But we don't have to know someone is dying to reach out or make a connection. We don't have to be on our death-bed to try something new or reach for a far-off dream. Again, there is no perfect time. There is only now.

Mr. Bill plans to operate his candy van up until the end, as long as he is able. He could be sitting in the unforgiving heat next summer if his body allows it, but this may be the last time our kids get to experience the "25-cent snow cones since 1982."

Mr. Bill and his candy van is one of those things that makes McCook unique and if you have the chance, stop by his van, just to say "hi." To say we appreciate you watching out for our kids. To say thank you for making McCook a place where it is O.K. for our kids to buy candy from a guy sitting in a van in a parking lot. And do it today because there is no perfect time... there is only now.



Every week, MCFF shares a column in the McCook Gazette and on social media, covering a wide-range of topics. The column about Mr. Bill in August 2025 drew wide-ranging responses locally and from across the state.

# MCFF CONTINUES TO ADD SCHOLARSHIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

McCook Community Foundation Fund continues to increase the number of scholarships it awards, with nine scholarships awarded for the 2025-26 academic year in spring 2025. An additional learn-and-return scholarship is awarded throughout the year and yet another new scholarship is planned for 2026, thanks to generous donors.

## HAAG SCHOLARSHIP

The Bernard and Nelda Haag Scholarship, worth \$1,000, was given to Kendall McKinzie, a 2025 Hayes Center High School graduate, attending South Dakota State University; and Jalen Collicott, a 2025 McCook High School graduate, who attends McCook Community College.

## FASSLER-NEUMANN NURSING SCHOLARSHIP

The Barbara Fassler-Neumann Nursing Scholarship provided six scholarships for a total of \$6,000. The scholarship may be awarded to recent high school graduates as well as those currently practicing medical professionals who have resided in the area for at least four years.

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One scholarship, worth \$1,500, was awarded to Cadence Magnuson, a 2024 McCook High School graduate, who attends Fort Hayes State University.

Four students each received \$1,000 to further their medical education. They are: Addison Knoll, another former MHS graduate, is now studying at the University of Nebraska Medical Center; Natalie Roberts, a 2024 MHS graduate,

now attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Logan Barenberg, a 2020 MHS graduate, who attends Creighton University; and Sara Peterson, a former MHS grad, who attends UNMC.

And Leah Spencer, a 2023 MHS graduate, received \$500 to further her education at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

## WEILAND MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

New in 2025 was the Frank and Marion Weiland Memorial Scholarship, started by their grandson Doug Keith of Cozad. Frank served many roles in McCook, including a teacher at the high school and the first pool manager for the original McCook city pool in 1938. Weiland Field was also named after him.

With a focus on education, the first recipient of the Weiland Scholarship was Grace Wilhelmson, a 2024 MHS graduate, who attends UNL.

## LEARN AND RETURN SCHOLARSHIP

MCFF has also started a new Learn and Return Scholarship with a focus on those who intend to return to McCook after their schooling. They will sign an agreement with the MEDC to stay in the community or they will have to pay back their scholarship funds.

The first recipient of the McCook Learn and Return Scholarship is Lucas Gomez-Wilson, a McCook graduate who will return to his alma mater as a teacher.

## NEW SCHOLARSHIP

In the spring of 2026, MCFF will award a new scholarship in the name of the George and Lois Tiller family, who gifted funds to MCFF to benefit young people. A complete list of scholarship recipients over the years is available on the MCFF website, [mccookfoundation.org](http://mccookfoundation.org).



KENDALL MCKINZIE



LOGAN BARENBURG



JALEN COLLICOTT



SARA PETERSON



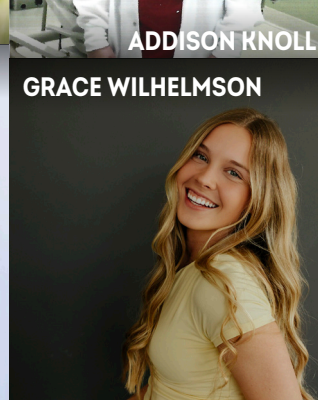
CADENCE MAGNUSON



LEAH SPENCER



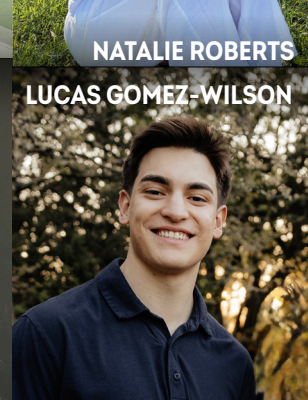
ADDISON KNOLL



GRACE WILHELMSON



NATALIE ROBERTS



LUCAS GOMEZ-WILSON



# EAST-END EVENT BRINGS TOGETHER FORMER AND CURRENT RESIDENTS

OMAHA - McCook has many former residents and recent graduates living at the eastern end of Nebraska. Recognizing that fact, MCFF has begun hosting an East-End Event on the day before the Nebraska Community Foundation's annual fund training when the event is held in the eastern end of the state.

In November 2024, MCFF hosted former McCook residents at Lazlo's in downtown Lincoln. In November 2025, the gathering was held at the Embassy Suites in LaVista. Both years, former McCook residents turned out to reminisce about their time in McCook and to catch up on what was happening in their former hometown.

Current Mayor Linda Taylor shared all the great things going on in McCook from the new aquatic center to the sports complex. City manager Nate Schneider got to catch up with former classmates, while explaining how the new complex will also include housing and retail space. And MCFF Chair Matt Sehnert covered just a few things MCFF had been doing, including the Big Give, scholarships and grants distributed the past few years.

On the day following the East-End Event, McCook FAC members and fellow McCook residents attended the NCF annual fund training and banquet to learn more about how to make their communities even better for their friends and families.

No firm plans are in place for the next East-End Event, but with the NCF annual fund training in Kearney in 2026 and back in Lincoln for 2027, there is a good chance another East-End Event will bring together former and current McCook residents again.

# EAST-END EVENT

LAVISTA  
NEBRASKA

AN EVENING OF

GOOD FOOD



GREAT COMPANY



MCCOOK NEWS







McCook Community Foundation Fund honors those who have made an indelible mark on our lives and in our communities. MCFF recognizes donations made “in memory of” someone who has passed away and “in honor of” someone who is doing great work in our community to make McCook an even better place to call home.

Donations were given in 2025 on behalf of the following:

**In Memory Of**

Roland Anderiaska  
Ethyl Siegfried  
Agnes Gross  
Steve Sines  
Lester Bieker  
Marlin Springer  
John Kugler  
Allen Strunk  
Dr. Corinne Phillips-Ward  
Otto Weigel  
Norm Timmerman  
Norma Whisler  
Roger Wilson  
Ronda Kay Wurm  
Elda Louise (Wagoner) Youngs  
Patricia Anne Zimmerman

**In Honor Of**

Mark and Dee Friehe  
Pam Gaston  
Ronda Graff  
Don and Alice Harpst  
Chuck and Dian Trail  
Mark Wilcox  
Pam and Greg Wolford



McCook Community Foundation Fund is an affiliate of the Nebraska Community Foundation.



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