



Union County, Iowa

# Union County Unites Diverse Sectors



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be recognized." Ross was nominated for the award by a customer—an elementary school teacher who realized that she wouldn't be able to build assets in her students without Ross, with whom she could confidently leave her own children each day, knowing they were in a nurturing environment.

Affirming everyday acts of asset building—and mobilizing diverse sectors of the community to do so—is transforming Union County in southern Iowa, which last year was recognized as a Jostens Our Town Rising Star and this year receives a

Tammy Ross of Afton, Iowa, knew something was up the day her husband volunteered to keep watch over the children in the home daycare she'd run for 15 years so that she could dash down to KSIB radio station in nearby Creston. She'd gotten a call to come by the station but didn't know why. Once there, Ross was flattered to receive an Excellence in Education award on the air.

"It was kind of humbling," Ross says. "You do your day-to-day work the best you can. You don't expect to

Jostens Our Town Award and Grant.

The Excellence in Education award is one example of how Youth Plus, the local HC • HY initiative, has rallied support on behalf of local young people from such various quarters as the media and business. For example, in addition to KSIB radio, the local paper, the *Creston News Advertiser*, gets in the act, publishing a photo of award winners. Tammy Ross also saw her name in lights on the flashing electronic sign at the Iowa State Savings Bank, the locally owned institution that sponsors the award and sweetens the pot by putting up \$2,500 for an annual prize for which the monthly Excellence in Education recipients are eligible.

## Business connections

"We've worked hard on recruiting people from different sectors of the community," says Youth Plus project manager Suzanne Johnston. "We nurture those relationships and try to tie them to the big picture of building assets in youth. It's a mistake to get people on board and not capture what they have to offer." Whereas businesses may not seem the most obvious place to begin building assets, Johnston notes, "They have the greatest potential of reaching the majority of adults."

Take Rhonda Miller, production manager at Bunn-O-Matic, the coffeemaker assembly plant. When she first started attending Youth Plus meetings, she didn't have a clue how her company could contribute. But it wasn't long before the plant became such a flurry of asset-building activity—everything from making work rules more family-friendly to letting youth groups



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## Quick-take

### ON UNION COUNTY, IOWA

- Location:** Southern Iowa, 79 miles south of Des Moines
- Population:** 12,309 people, of whom 2,867 are 17 years and younger
- Initiative launch:** 1997
- Annual budget:** Approximately \$42,000
- Staff:** 1 part-time adult, 1 part-time youth
- Plans for award:** Build assets in schools and workplaces through training and support
- Contact:** Suzanne Johnston, Union County Youth Plus at 641-782-8426 or sujohn@iastate.edu

## BY TODD MELBY

conduct car wash fundraisers in the parking lot—that Bunn-O-Matic was presented the Jostens Our Town Corporate Award in 2000.

So, when Youth Plus approached Iowa State Savings Bank, they didn't take the usual approach. "Many organizations make the mistake of viewing banks as strictly financial contributors. If we had gone in and said, 'We want \$5,000,' we wouldn't have gotten Excellence in Education," says Johnston.

Instead, Youth Plus invited the Karl and Jan Knock, the bank's owners, to come up with their own ideas of how to make Union County a better place for young people. The award to recognize outstanding childcare workers, school employees, school volunteers, and students was the Knocks' brainchild.

"There's nothing more important for a community long term than developing young people," Karl Knock says. "If you grow up and leave your hometown and it was terrible, if it ground you down and bored you, you'll never come back. But if the town nurtured you, you might just come back."

To help foster such a nurturing environment, the bank recognizes and uses its position as the first contact many groups in a rural community make when attempting to establish a new venture. So when an arts project, a Habitat for Humanity home, and a school-based weather station approached the bank, the Knocks made sure to hook the projects up with Youth Plus as well.

### Teen center action

Creating engaging opportunities for young people is critical to keeping small towns vibrant. With 7,597 people, Creston is the county's largest city. Its downtown boasts several locally owned businesses, including the Strand Theater, Family Shoe Store, and Drey Sporting Goods. On a weekend night, it used to be that the choices for teens consisted of going to the movies or gathering in the vacant parking lots behind stores to drink.

That's no longer the case. Since the HC • HY initiative started here in 1997, three teen centers have popped up in Creston and the smaller cities of Afton and Lorimor. What would life be without them?

"It would be a lot duller, that's for sure," says Josh Brown, 17, who lives with his grandparents on a farm in the northeast part of the county, not far from those smaller towns. And Brown should know. Before moving to Union County to live with his grandparents, Josh had, as he said, "seen stuff happen"—including shootings, car wrecks, and a friend lost to drugs.

Grandma's tough love—including the requirement



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that Josh be home each night for dinner—helped Josh turn his life around. So has Youth Plus. Josh not only serves on the board of directors for the teen centers, but he's also helped organize rock concerts, counseled peers, and been a leader in creating wholesome fun.

From his post on the Youth Plus float at this summer's Union County Fair parade, Josh alternated between dousing viewers with water from a squirt gun and handing out popsicles to young children. To add to the spectacle, he convinced the driver of a station wagon that was supposed to pull the group's float to push it instead by driving the car backwards.

### Everybody on board

"Youth Plus isn't just meetings, meetings, and meetings," Brown says. "We want to get the whole community involved." And the HC • HY initiative has successfully tapped into many local resources.

Consider Sgt. Pat Henry of the Creston Police Department. He doesn't like a reactive model of policing in which he "just goes out and writes kids a ticket for drinking beer." Working that way, Henry says, was "endless and frustrating. It didn't seem like I was helping much." His response was to organize softball games between teens and area police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians as a way for youth and adults to get to know each other.

Or take pastor Chuck Spindler of Creston Baptist Church. Inspired by Youth Plus, Spindler formed a weekly youth gathering with a spiritual flavor at the local YMCA. Now other ministers have also joined in to create programming. Perhaps equally important, membership in the area's interfaith ministerial association has grown from 4 to 12 in recent years. "We've seen barriers break down," Spindler says.

Then there's Creston High School principal Todd Wolverton, who is known for sending teens thank-you notes when they work overtime on school projects.

Union County isn't resting on its laurels, but seeking even more ways to nurture intergenerational relationships. "Asset building is not a quick fix, it's a long-term effort," Johnston concludes. ▶

Todd Melby is a Minneapolis writer.

**EVERYONE ON BOARD:** Whether riding on the Youth Plus float, serving seniors, or reading to preschoolers, young people in Union County are involved in their community.



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Karl Knock, owner,  
Iowa State Savings Bank