

This Tiny Town Defied My Beliefs

A Positive Attitude Makes Big Things Happen in Palmer

“In Palmer, this spirit goes beyond school and housing and playground. It permeates the for-profit sector, too.”

BY LIZ HENDRICKS



Liz Hendricks

“We have to save our school or else our town will die!”

How often have we heard that adage in rural America? Yet traveling northern Kansas’ Flint Hills eco-region, conducting one-on-one interviews, I happened across a tiny town that appeared to defy that presumed truism. To my first citizen query, “so when did your school close?” came the innocently honest reply, “I don’t know.”

For the next hour, Palmer in Washington County—population 111—disturbed my assumptions and energized my hopes as I toured its streets and roamed its countryside, guided by a well-informed, spontaneously-willing resident.

First discovery: new homes. In the countryside and in the town itself. People had chosen to move back to this community, invest in property and build their home, their future. Most also chose to use local labor and the town’s own lumber yard for materials. “We don’t even shop around,” one new homeowner announced.

Second discovery: child care. Up until recently had TWO in-home services (one is currently on maternity leave)—for a town of 111—WOW! Minus a school, how could they have a demand for two child care providers?

Third discovery: a well-groomed ball diamond and playground equipment, which by some standards would be adequate, but not for Palmer’s moms. They had created a fund for new playground equipment and were close to reaching their \$30,000 goal.

Discoveries continued throughout my tour, but the last one stopped me in my tracks:

a “challenged house.” That’s correct. One. Of some 50 homes; only one was slightly less than well-kept. In unison, the rest sang “Pride of Palmer,” each seemingly vying for the prettiest-place-in-town award on a daily basis. Even the closed school building was a well-maintained, obviously well-cared-for community building.

In Palmer, this spirit goes beyond school and housing and playground. It permeates the for-profit sector, too. Several years ago, area citizens helped form a rural water district that has now enabled local dairies to populate the countryside. It revealed itself in comments like, “business owners aren’t greedy here.” And, “the local bank plays an important role in the community.” And, “people just volunteer, it’s how their parents and grandparents were raised, and it is your sense of duty to the community.” And, “citizens believe in supporting their local businesses and in turn the businesses support the community.”

How does this happen in a community the size of Palmer? Or in one the size of your community? Is it one or two civic-minded neighbors who believe in doing things for the betterment of the community more than for private gain? Is it a focused, self-propelled community group that sees a need and then does it? What, over time, gives rise to a community culture in which people and organizations and businesses see a need and step forward?

Palmer USA made me a believer. If they can do it, my town and yours can, too. **KCL**

LIZ HENDRICKS is president of Public Square Communities, Inc. and a resident of Howard in Elk County.