

Jordan the Ninja's Inspiration
with features on Dundee—Benson—Aksarben

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Letter from the Editor

The Experience Issue

As the new Managing Editor of North Omaha First, I've decided to call this the "Experience Issue," because it contains articles about various ways you can experience North Omaha, Dundee, and Benson.

The cover story features Jordan the Ninja, a remarkable young man who was inspired as a youth by classic musicals starring singers/dancers Fred Astaire, Donald O'Connor, and his all-time favorite, Gene Kelly (think Singing in the Rain). The singing and dancing talents that Jordan honed through the years is shared at venues around our city (and beyond) and he has become a well-known social media influencer.

Edge of the Universe is an experience almost impossible to describe, but we do our best. In other words, it's meant to be experienced – often. This coffee/cocktail place in Benson features a new theme designed by local artists every few months. They partner the artist's theme with showcased work of a local non-profit.

TakeRoot Farm Stop in Dundee makes shopping for fresh-from-the-farm food, well, fun. And Salchipapas Monster restaurant at Seventy-Five North takes you to Columbia with authentic foods that delight the tastebuds.

Seventy Five North has an incredible mission to provide multi-layered housing in the heart of North Omaha, complete with restaurants and a community building.

Speaking of community, the new Central Library at 72nd and Dodge Streets is an impressive building on the outside, to be sure. Take one step inside and you will be amazed at the beauty and expansive access to more resources and services than you can imagine.

How lucky we are to have the library and all these experiences just waiting for us in our local neighborhoods.

Enjoy the read, and as always, I'd love to hear from you.

Wendy Wiseman
Managing Editor
North Omaha First

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About the Cover

Jordan the Ninja grew up enamored with Gene Kelly, the artful dancer/entertainer. In more ways than one, he follows in his footsteps. See page 4.

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Scan to learn more about
Jordan the Ninja

INSPIRED BY DANNY KAYE

The Omaha Entertainer Creating a Spotlight All His Own

How does a 31-year-old Omaha entertainer become inspired by Danny Kaye so profoundly that he sets out to build a career of singing, acting, dancing, filmmaking and making people laugh?

It's not the story you'd expect.

Most aspiring performers point to today's biggest stars as their inspiration. Jordan Smith, who prefers to go by Jordan the Ninja or Jordi, points to a man whose greatest performances lit up movie screens decades before he was born.

While many children grew up with cable television and pop culture, Jordi grew up immersed in the Golden Age of Hollywood. Danny Kaye, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby and Jack Benny weren't simply entertainers from another era. They became mentors from afar. What began as admiration became a blueprint. Jordi wasn't simply watching Danny Kaye perform. He was quietly learning what it meant to become an entertainer.

Today, that blueprint is taking shape in a career as varied as the performers who first inspired him.

The Omaha native is an actor, musician, filmmaker, social media creator and live performer whose work refuses to fit neatly into a single category. Like Danny Kaye, Jordi isn't interested in choosing one creative lane. He wants to sing, act, dance, write, perform, tell stories and make people smile. For him, they're all part of the same calling.

"I've always been a performer," he says simply.

Growing up in Florence, creativity wasn't something reserved for school or special occasions. It was woven into everyday life. Music filled the house, and learning instruments was simply expected. Today, his home studio reflects that lifelong curiosity with guitars, drums, keyboards, upright bass and more inspiring the next idea. He's always experimenting and learning, convinced there's always another instrument to play and another skill worth mastering. That commitment to craft has led Jordi in directions few artists ever explore.

He's won awards for his music, acting and dancing. He performs with two bands and as solo artist, appears on stage, creates original comedy videos, writes music and is developing an original musical. Each new project feels less like a career move and more like another opportunity to become the kind of all-around entertainer he admired as a child.

Ironically, one of his fastest-growing ventures began with a little frustration.

His popular "man-on-the-street" videos grew out of Omaha's endless road construction. Instead of complaining, Jordi turned everyday aggravation into comedy, discovering that audiences appreciated someone who could laugh along with them. His following continues to grow, but social media was never the dream. It simply became another stage.

That may be what makes Jordan the Ninja different.

Many creators build an audience first and discover their craft later.

Smith spent years developing the craft before the audience arrived.

Whether he's acting, performing music, filming a sketch or writing his musical, the motivation remains remarkably consistent. He isn't chasing algorithms or viral moments. He's pursuing the joy of entertaining people.

When asked what advice he'd offer someone hoping to follow a similar path, his answer reflects the same uncomplicated optimism that runs through his life.

"It doesn't really matter how you start," he says. "It just matters that you start."

That mindset has served him well.

He continues to create. To learn. To perform. To collaborate. His partner, Nebraska State Poet Jewel Rodgers, shares that same creative spirit, and together they encourage one another's work while pursuing their own artistic paths.

Yet, ask Jordi about the entertainer who still inspires him most, and the answer comes without hesitation.

It doesn't really matter how you start, it just matters that you start.

—Jordan Smith

"Danny Kaye, for sure."

He speaks of Kaye with genuine admiration—not simply because he was funny, but because he embodied everything Smith still hopes to become: versatile, fearless, joyful and endlessly curious. A performer who could sing, dance, act, make audiences laugh and move effortlessly from one creative discipline to another.

Ask Jordi where he sees himself in the future, and the answer comes just as quickly. "I'm going to be a star, kid." It isn't brava-do. It's belief. The kind of belief that has carried him from a little boy captivated by Danny Kaye to an accomplished entertainer whose career already spans multiple genre. He wants to get more integrated with the New York scene someday. "There's so many different things I want to achieve. I want a Grammy. I want an Emmy. I want an Oscar. I want a Tony. I want a Golden Globe," he said with confidence. "I know it's going to happen. It's only a matter of time."

He's added writing a musical to the list of all he does today. It's a comedy called Superhero Musical about a character who goes to New York because he wants to join the big superhero teams and help them save the world. "I started it by writing the songs for the villains. I know how the story goes and I'll get there."

Yes, Jordan the Ninja will get there, singing and dancing all the way. 🎤

Services Offered Free to the Public

- The Podcast Studio
- 3D Printers
- Meeting Rooms
- Zoom Rooms



Scan to learn more about the
Omaha Public Libraries

MORE THAN BOOKS:

Inside Omaha's New Central Library

The new main branch of the Omaha Public Library at 72nd and Dodge isn't trying to replace neighborhood libraries. It's betting that a bigger front door brings more people to all of them.

And that unmistakable buzz you hear about this design-forward building? In the words of the library's marketing director Courtni Kopietz, "it's our place to come together."

This new vibe is purposeful.

To reimagine its flagship branch, the OPL project team spent nearly six years collecting input through community listening sessions and a public survey. The message that came back wasn't a wish list of things to cut from the old library, Kopietz says, but a question of "if you could have more, what would that more look like?" The answers, somewhat surprisingly, centered less on books and more on gathering space: more meeting rooms, an outdoor area, and — high on the list — a café, something none of the system's other branches had ever offered.

The result, which opened this year, is a four-story, 102,000 square foot statement at the city's busiest intersection. It absorbed the former Do Space, the city's standalone digital-innovation nonprofit, folding its technology and community-access philosophy directly into the library's DNA. That merger is why so much of the new main library — the podcast studio, the 3D printers, the meeting rooms, even the bookable single-person Zoom rooms — are available to anyone who walks in, no library card required.

The library also offers access to city directories, obituary files, and Midwest research materials, a long-arm quilting machine, 3D printers, Cricut machines, sewing and embroidery machines, and the Memory Lab to digitize home movies and VHS tapes.

"It's one way that we're hoping to open things up to the whole community," Kopietz explains. The rule of thumb: if it leaves the building, you need a card; if you're just using the space, you don't.

Asked what feature simply could not have existed in the old downtown library,

The Central Library's Impact is Far-Reaching

-A DoSpace is also at the Milton R. Abrahams branch, on 90th in Northwest Omaha with the same tech as the Central Library.

-The Charles B. Washington branch on Ames has recently been renovated to improve the patron experience based on the overall facility study that was part of the Central Library's planning.

-The new Central Library is accessible by many bus lines, including the ORBT and is open 68 hours a week, (more than any other branch), to serve patrons who need more flexibility in hours.

-There are partnership rooms at the Central Library where nonprofits host 'office hours' for patrons, including the Volunteer Lawyer project.

Kopietz doesn't hesitate: the Automated Storage and Retrieval System, or ASRS — a robotic warehouse capable of holding up to 600,000 items behind the scenes, and the only one ever installed in a public library in the U.S. Its mechanical arms were lowered into place by crane before the surrounding walls were even built. The payoff is a collection that can grow without being boxed in by shelf space, letting staff hang onto titles out of print or fallen out of favor, only to become suddenly in demand again. That flexibility has mattered more than expected since one of the industry's major book distributors, Baker & Taylor, abruptly shut down last fall, forcing libraries nationwide to scramble for new suppliers.

The building has also changed how Omahans relate to their library system, at least by the numbers. In its first three months, the new main library alone issued more than 8,700 new library cards — nearly 3,000 a month, compared with roughly 1,600 a month system-wide, across all twelve branches, before it opened. By midsummer, the branch was closing in on 10,000 new cardholders on its own, already half of what the entire system signed up in all of 2025.

Not everything is new, though. Tucked near the Do Space area on the building's second floor hangs the Kingman mural, a piece staff were determined to carry over from the old main library even before they knew whether it would fit the new design. And upstairs is the third-floor genealogy department that Kopietz calls "the quietest floor in the building" that houses the city directories, obituary files, and Midwest research materials, along with a monthly "Share and Solve" group for genealogy hobbyists.

For all the new gadgetry, from the long-arm quilting machine that's been booked solid since day one to the 'memory lab' to digitize home movies and VHS tapes, Kopietz insists the mission hasn't drifted from the neighborhood branches that came before it. Regulars at Swanson and Benson and Sorenson still stop there first out of habit, she says, even as they make the trip to Central for the novelty — or the genealogy floor, or the 3-D laser cutter, or even free flower seeds — before heading home. 🌱

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The teacher selected will win a \$500 gift card and be featured in the next North Omaha First Magazine issue.

SALCHIPAPAS MONSTER

Latin American Street Food Spicing Up the Dining Room



If you think saying “sal-chi-pap-as” is fun, just wait until your tastebuds experience the party in every dish at Salchipapas Monster on 30th Street in the Dining Room. In their simplest form, salchipapas are french fries covered with sliced sausage and condiments, but none of the salchipapas at Monster are simple. The Super Monster adds sweet plantains, corn, chicken, beef, pork belly, bacon, guacamole and cheese. Jalapenos can be added, because, why not?

There are nine salchipapas to choose from, but that’s just one part of the menu. The burger section features eight fully loaded choices like the Monster (see above); Mixta, that piles on chicken, ham and cheese; the Hawaiian with ham, cheese and pineapple; and the Texana with BBQ shredded beef and onion. If hot dogs are more your style, there’s the Monster Dog smothered with carne asada, chicken, sausage, grilled onion and cheese; the Crazy Dog with beef, chicken and cheese; and Picada with plantains, beef, chicken, sausage, chorizo, cheese and grilled onion.

While the entrees are plentiful and filling, it’s best to leave room for extras like empanadas and patacones (fried green plantains) stuffed with beef and guacamole. There’s always a soup special on Sunday that’s served with rice and avocado, and every day your little ones will like the nuggets and corn dogs on their special menu, too.

Salchipapas Monster is owned by Beth Gonzalez Hoya who grew up in Columbia and came to Chicago to build a better life. There, she worked in housekeeping while she cultivated her dream of owning her own restaurant in America. In Chicago she met a friend who told her about the opportunities in Omaha, Nebraska, so she courageously ventured here. She and another friend literally built a shack in Ralston to serve their food out of and with their success, expanded on Beth’s dream. She started looking for a bigger place and was delighted to find space in the Dining Room at 2112 North 30th Street where she shares a large, finished kitchen with Big Mama’s notable restaurant. Talk about a “one-two” punch of good food! Each restaurant has their own recipes and staff.

“We make our food with the freshest ingredients and add love and passion,” she said. In this “perfect space” in North Omaha, Beth is pursuing her dream of sharing original and family recipes in her own restaurant. Her desire to share good food runs deep. As noted on her website, her grandfather, a navy chef, taught her that cooking is a way to express love, tradition and culture. “This is our home. This is our culture,” Beth added. “It’s been so great to find a place that makes us feel at home.”

Her future vision includes a food truck, additional locations, and to expand their catering business. The quiet confidence she exudes is evidence that she will get there.

Salchipapas Monster is open seven days a week. The hours and the menu are on the website and Facebook, and ordering is available via Door Dash. The website is accessible in English and Espanol. 🌐

Scan to learn more about
Salchipapas Monster



FUN FIRST: ACTIVITIES / EVENTS HAPPENING THIS FALL & WINTER

Event information is correct as of presstime. Details are subject to change. Please check the official websites as provided.

SPOOKTACULAR

Saturday, October 31st

Central Library, 7205 Dodge St

Come one, come all for the most Spooktacular Storytime of the fall! Bring your costume or come as you are, and join us for a morning filled with festive stories, trick-or-treating, a scavenger hunt, crafts, and more!

omahalibrary.org



BFF CRYSTAL BALL & ART AUCTION

Friday, November 13th

6054 Maple St

The signs have aligned for this Friday the 13th event. Mystical folks of all persuasions are invited to the Crystal Ball + Art Auction. Enter a realm of shimmering crystals, mysterious runes, sacred sigils, and visions of what the future may hold. Preview Night is Friday, November 6th.

bffomaha.org/ball



Photos Provided

SILENT BOOK SUNDAY

Sunday, December 6th

General Crook House Museum, 5730 N 30th St

Arrive anytime starting at 1:30pm, get comfortable, check out the book swap table, and enjoy the afternoon your way. Socialize as much or as little as you'd like. No assigned reading. BYOB (Bring Your Own Book)!

douglascohistory.org/event/silent-sunday-silent-book-club-3-2/2026-12-06/



OCTOBER

FALL FEST IN THE VILLAGE

Saturday, October 10th

24th & Lake Streets

bmekoum@empoweromaha.com

CHINGONA FESTIVAL

Saturday, October 10th

Stinson Park, 2285 S. 67th Street

402-496-1616

AksarbenVillage.com

AFROCON

Friday, October 10th

MCC Center for Advanced and Emerging Technology,

32nd & Sorensen Pkwy, Bldg # 24

531-622-2760

SYMPHONY CATHEDRAL BAROQUE: HANDEL'S WATER MUSIC

Saturday, October 11th

St. Cecilia Cathedral Cultural Center & Gallery,

701 N. 40th Street

NORTH OMAHA MUSIC AND ARTS (NOMA) JAZZ SESSIONS

Every Monday

2510 N. 24th Street

531.867.4280

NorthOmahaMusic.org

THE HISTORY OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS

Through January 2nd, 2027

Great Plains Black History Museum, 2221 N. 24th St.,
Omaha, NE 68110

402-932-7077

GPBlackHistoryMuseum.org

FLORENTINE PLAYERS TRUNK OR TREAT

Saturday, October 24th

Florence City Hall, 2864 State Street

402-455-6341

info@florentineplayers.com

TRUNK OR TREAT IN THE VILLAGE

Saturday, October 24th

24th and Ohio to 24th and Burdette Streets

VisitOmaha.com

NOVEMBER

BENSON BARSTOOL OPENER

Saturday, November 7th

402-932-7077

www.facebook.com/UCPofNEBarstoolOpen/

THE WEISENHEIMERS

Friday, November 13th

Benson Theatre, 6054 Maple Street

BensonTheatre.org

VETERANS DAY: CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICANS WHO SERVED

Wednesday, November 11th

Great Plains Black History Museum, 2221 N. 24th Street

402-932-7077

GPBlackHistoryMuseum.org

A WAY BACK HOME

Wednesday, November 11th - 21st

The Union for Contemporary Art

402-933-3161

<https://www.u-ca.org/theater/a-way-back-home>

FORENTINE PLAYERS - BREAKFAST WITH SANTA

Saturday, November 21st

Florence City Hall, 2864 State Street

402-455-6341

info@florentineplayers.comshelterbelt.org

LIGHTS OF AKSARBEN TREE LIGHTING

Friday, November 27th

Stinson Park, 2285 S. 67th Street

402-496-1616

AksarbenVillage.com

FOREVER YOUNG FILM SERIES

Every Saturday and Sunday

Film Streams at the Dundee Theater, 4952 Dodge Street

FilmStreams.org

DECEMBER

WINE FEST AT THE NEBRASKA HUMANE SOCIETY

Thursday, December 3rd

Nebraska Humane Society, 8929 Fort Street

nehumanesociety.org/event/wine-fest-2026

LIGHTS ON DUNDEE

Friday, December 4th

50th and Underwood Avenue

VisitDundeeOmaha.com

KWANZAA CELEBRATIONS

December 26th-January 1st

Check local calendars for events.

CHRISTMAS IN THE VILLAGE

Saturday, December 5th

24th & Ohio to 24th & Burdette

402-502-5153

A NIGHT WITH "MR. WONDERFUL"

Saturday, December 5th

Benson Theatre, 6054 Maple Street

402-991-4333

BensonTheatre.org

AKSARBEN HOLIDAY MARKET

Saturday, December 5th thru Sunday, December 6th

Stinson Park/Aksarben Village, 2285 S. 67th Street

402-496-1616

AksarbenVillage.org

CRAFTS, COOKIES, AND COCOA WITH SANTA

Saturday and Sunday December 12th and 13th

Edge of the Universe, 6070 Maple St

See Edge of the Universe on Facebook

A FESTIVAL OF CHRISTMAS BRASS

Thursday, December 17th and Sunday, December 20th

St. Cecilia Cultural Center & Gallery, 701 N. 40th Street

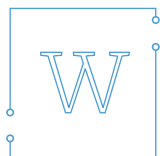
402-345-0606

OmahaSymphony.org



EDGE OF THE UNIVERSE:

Get Ready to Take a Deep Breath



Walking into Benson's Edge of the Universe Café is an experience so vastly different from walking into any other Omaha metro café that it can feel like a feast for the eyes. It's a deep breath of whimsy in a world that is so frequently devoid of it. And it's different every time.

CEO and founder Adam Van Osdel originally envisioned a café that felt more like a mini museum exhibit than a streamlined place to grab a drink. He strived to create a space that “opens hearts and opens minds,” he revealed. “The world can be different. Change is OK. And two things can exist together at the same time.”

If Van Osdel's words seem cryptic, it's because Edge of the Universe is a café that really needs to be experienced, rather than explained. Opened in 2020, it's a quirky café that managed to survive and thrive despite its beginnings during a global pandemic. Words don't do justice to the dynamic artistry and innovation displayed within the immersive space.

The café's theme changes every few months, often accompanied by a change to the menu as well. When the theme changes, the space is transformed into something different than it was before. What was once art deco becomes surrealism and then later becomes nautical. The fall theme this year is “Lovecrafting,” but the previous “Summerween” theme had Halloween elements and a bit of a spooky vibe while also celebrating the summer season.

As an artist and community advocate, Van Osdel enjoys collaborating with local artists and non-profit organizations. Edge of the Universe hosts a wide variety of happenings, including fundraisers for community organizations and events designed to raise awareness for local causes. The Café also offers a perpetual discount to all nurses, teachers, government employees, artists, care practitioners and service members.

Edge of the Universe is squarely rooted in the Benson community but has an even wider reach. Their social media pages are full of advocacy awareness, artists being hyped up and even the occasional notice about a local dog that has gone missing.

*The world can be different.
Change is OK. And two
things can exist together at
the same time.*

— Adam Van Osdel

They raise awareness for important causes right alongside urging people to come sing karaoke or enter a melon carving contest. Because, as Van Osdel said, two things can exist at the same time.

More than a quirky café and safe space for Omaha's creatives, Edge of the Universe is also a marketing machine. Local non-profits often turn to Van Osdel for advice on their marketing campaigns, and plenty of networking is done within the walls of the café.

The café's menu typically includes an assortment of coffee drinks, gourmet hot chocolate, cocktails, beers, and wine. Ice cream, desserts, and charcuterie also highlight the menu. Menu items change and evolve with the changing of the themes. Edge of the Universe offers a feast for the stomach while also offering a feast for the eyes and soul.

Every visit to Edge of the Universe is different. Even if the same theme remains, small changes happen all the time. Van Osdel said that it's common for a frequent visitor to notice something new after having visited several times during a particular theme.

It stands to reason that the changemakers of Edge of the Universe would be comfortable with an ever-changing environment. “It's different every time,” Van Osdel said. The otherworldly aspect of Edge of the Universe encourages visitors

to embrace whimsy and creative exploration while also enjoying a drink or snack from the curated menu. It's a much different experience from chain cafés that are built on a model of predictable efficiency and getting the customers out the door swiftly. At Edge of the Universe, it's nearly impossible to not want to sit down and take in the surroundings, making it less of a place to “grab a quick drink” and more of a place to experience.

The social and emotional benefits of spending time in a creative space can't be overstated. The World Health Organization (WHO), which started exploring the impact of arts interventions on health in 2019, finds interactions and participation with the arts to be largely beneficial to communities and individuals alike.

By those standards, a visit to Edge of the Universe Café is more than a fun experience; it's a bolster to emotional well-being and participation in a movement that benefits the local community. And there's coffee, too. ☕

Visit edgeoftheuniverseomaha.com for more information



Scan here to learn more
about Edge of the Universe



TAKEROOT FARM STOP

Ag-to-Table Concept Rooted in Dundee

For more than 26 years, the historic Dundee neighborhood was a grocery store/food desert. TakeRoot Farm Stop has changed that. While yes, shoppers can stop in and find anything from meats to locally sourced wool for knitting, it's so much more than a grocer. Opening in December of 2025, TakeRoot germinated from local Nebraskans and Iowans combining their passion for farming and for feeding those in need, and it's become a constant in the community. Gordon Miller, owner and farmer of Grandview Farm in Fremont, now also co-owner of TakeRoot, has been farming for 40 years.

He has brought his extensive knowledge and knowhow to TakeRoot, noting it's not only about the farming. It's about the harvesting. Meeting now co-owner Carla Gornall through No More Empty Pots, they've worked to create a space of sustainability, delicious and nutritious local products, and a deep appreciation for community-based agriculture. "If the community supports the farmers markets, they'll support the Farm Stop," says Gordon. The seasonal Omaha farmers markets are heavily frequented and quite robust, and TakeRoot provides many of the same products in a grocery store format.

TakeRoot is using their powers for good in more ways than one, aiming to provide educational opportunities to everyone from backyard gardeners to farmers with acres to sow. The owners know there is more we can do as a community to bring the land in Nebraska and Iowa to life through farming, and they're willing to lend their knowledge to anyone wanting to learn. They are "putting the culture back in agriculture," as Gornall notes. In a world where commercial farming and ranching is ever so prevalent, TakeRoot's owners want to bring it back to a local level to benefit their communities.

In the late summer and early autumn, shoppers can expect an array of hearty vegetables such as broccoli and cabbage, along with butternut squash, and

The farmers are willing to lend knowledge to anyone willing to learn. They are putting culture back in agriculture.

— Gordon Miller

a specialty of Miller's – sweet potatoes. He routinely produces roughly 40,000 pounds yearly, and it's on good authority that they are the best. The Stop features their weekly produce and restock of popular items in their newsletter, along with the new vendors that have joined in on their journey. In addition to the produce from Grandview Farm and Long Walk Farm in Council Bluffs, TakeRoot sources approximately 90% of their product from Nebraska and Iowa. Long Walk Farm is owned by the third co-owners Matt Johnson and Tiffany Clifton. All of the farmers stay on the lookout for producers to work with. Farmers can apply to participate via the Take Root website.

Of course, food safety is a number one priority for TakeRoot, as they pride themselves on being a place where you can rely on knowing your food is of top-notch quality. The Stop prides itself on a business model that not only improves the local community through access to food but helps the farms that produce it remain viable and strong for years to come.

Farm stops have become a staple throughout the country, bringing everyday markets to local communities and

bolstering food systems on a smaller scale. The first farm stop – Argus Farm Stop – was established in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It provided a framework for other communities to create their own. Argus has been a guiding light for TakeRoot, inspiring them to become a vital part of the Nebraska landscape.

Whether you are looking for locally sourced dog treats for your furry best friend, or quality cuts of meat for a date night in, TakeRoot provides these and more with a level of trustworthiness and desire for the betterment of the community. They also now sell Archer-type coffee and have excellent baristas on staff. Located in the heart of Dundee at 5018 Underwood Avenue, stop in for a latte while you shop the fresh produce and local fare that is deeply rooted in the Nebraska community. 🌱



Scan here to learn more about TakeRoot Farm Stop



DREAMING BIG

Bit by Bit, Seventy Five North Revitalizes Community

By 2009, two massive public housing facilities had come tumbling down in The Highlander neighborhood, a historic district adjoining downtown Omaha. To many, the resulting vacant ground was but a mild improvement over the soulless, sprawling complexes that had stood as the neighborhood's calling card for decades.

For others however, the rubble and rust that gave way to barren earth was seen as the needed conflagration from which the neighborhood would rise, a phoenix of new prosperity, revitalization and hope for the all-but-forgotten neighborhood.

The visionary minds behind Seventy Five North are just such believers. The nonprofit, established in 2011, saw the now-open acres as an opportunity to change the arc of the neighborhood and its people for the better. It is a mission the group has been deftly executing ever since.

"Seventy Five North, as an organization, came together with the mission and vision of trying to breathe life back into this part of town, working with the residents to understand what their vision is for what they want to see," said Hannah Grenewich, communications and engagement manager. "We worked with the community to figure out what vibrancy they wanted to bring back to this area, and to make housing accessible here, and to create resources so that people can upwardly mobilize."

The organization is part of Purpose Built Communities, an Atlanta-based foundation with a network of similar member organizations across 14 states. Those organizations are guided along four different domains of emphasis including producing high-quality mixed income housing; supporting cradle-to-career education; providing for community health and wellness; and building economic vitality.

Put together, the four domains represent the essential yeast of sustained community vigor and provided the blueprint for how Seventy Five North could have the greatest positive impact. How such areas are addressed and what the resulting programs and structures look like, come from the individual communities themselves.

"Working in this model, these are the four things that a thriving neighborhood needs to have addressed," Grenewich said. "We seek to create interventions focused in those four areas but in a way that is resident-centered, meaning we work with residents to see what their vision is within those domains. Each organization's response is unique because it's guided by the unique context of that neighborhood and what those residents need."

The community listening sessions began shortly after the nonprofit's founding and in 2014, Seventy Five North began to implement what it had learned. That year, the group purchased 36 acres and an additional 55 lots from which the group developed 101 units of mixed income housing. Less than a decade later, the organization unveiled Nobility Point, a 60-unit senior housing facility, completed in 2021.

All told, the group is responsible for developing 310 mixed-income rental homes in the Highlander neighborhood including apartments, townhomes, rowhomes and senior housing. It has also contributed to the development of 20 new single-family homes and 134 additional replacement housing units built on the former Spencer Homes public housing site. The latter project was funded via a \$25 million Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant, administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Seventy Five North partnered with the city and the Omaha Housing Authority to carry out the redevelopment.

Other services are delivered through the Highlander Accelerator, Seventy Five North's community hub, completed in 2018. The 65,000-square-foot facility provides a home base where the organization works with individuals in matters ranging from education to dining to community programming to services for budding entrepreneurs and local small business owners. The building is also home to several community partners including Metropolitan Community College, Creighton University, Charles Drew Health Center, Nebraska Enterprise Fund and more.

The group has been equally impactful in the area of education. In 2015, Seventy Five North entered into a 10-year partnership with Howard Kennedy Elementary, then the most challenged school in the

state, with the goal of transforming it into a high performing school. In 2016, the school opened with new leadership and new curriculum stressing project-based learning and boasted an extended school day and year. Four years later, Seventy Five North leveraged a capital campaign to build the Omaha Early Learning Center at Kennedy.

"What you see today is the progress of strengthening the fabric of the Highlander neighborhood with the intentionality of making a house feel like home," said President and CEO Sharlon Rodgers. "That means creating spaces where families can thrive, where opportunity is accessible and where community is the driving force behind lasting change through long-term pathways to success. The future we work to synthesize with residents is to ensure they have the tools and environment they want and need."

"When housing is being developed, for example, and there's stable housing in the neighborhood," added Grenewich, "it provides a kind of two-way relationship with our investment at Kennedy. The mobility rate at the school is going down and behavioral referrals are going down because kids have access to stable housing. That's one example of seeing that synergy at work."

The group continued its winning streak by bringing additional housing to the neighborhood in 2023. In collaboration with Blair Freeman and several local contractors, the group created 16 newly constructed homes and renovated three existing houses along the North 30th Street Corridor. It also expanded the inventory of mixed-income rentals, adding 108 new apartment and townhome units.

Today, the Highlander district bears scant resemblance to that from whence it sprang, save for the undying faith and optimism of the people who live there and the plucky community organization that's as committed as ever to bringing it to its full potential. 🌍



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