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VILLAGE VOICE

VILLAGE NORTHWEST UNLIMITED // SPRING 2025



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A Legacy of Compassion: The Beginning of Village Northwest Unlimited As Told by Robert Hoogeveen, First CEO of Village Northwest Unlimited

In the fall of 1974, I received a phone call from the high school principal in Mason City, Iowa. I was the high school principal in Sheldon. He asked if I would be willing to be part of the NCA Evaluation Team that would be coming to his school soon. He was using a program similar to what we were doing at Sheldon – a scheduling program called Variable Modular Scheduling. He also said a Dr. Polling from the University of South Dakota would be coming and he would pick me up in Sheldon, if that would be okay. I agreed to join the team and that is how I was first introduced to the concept of the Village.

When we traveled to Mason City, I noticed we had passed a sign along the highway – “Handicap Village”. I knew a good friend from Sheldon, a Social Worker for the State of Iowa, who had moved to that facility. We had time prior to our first session at Mason City, and I drove to the Village to have lunch with Lamar Esbeck. I was so fascinated by the tour he gave that we never had time for lunch. When I left, he said, “Northwest Iowa should create a Village like the one in Clear Lake.”

On the way home from our time in Mason City, Dr. Polling shared with me his family’s frustration regarding the concerns for his brother, who was a disabled adult. His frustration with the lack of opportunities for his brother impacted my thinking.

Within the next few days, I shared my experience with my neighbor, Dr. Ken Fertig. He quickly suggested we organize a group to visit Clear Lake. Our thought was the possibility of employing over a hundred folks would be a major economic development for our community. In a matter of days, we organized a group to make that visit. After a day of listening to their story, we stopped in Spencer to have dinner. Ken Fertig suggested we meet at their home on the next Sunday evening to share how we felt about what we had experienced that day.

We brought our spouses and then, perhaps, a major event took place that impacted the Village from that evening. Before we shared any thoughts, Jan Fertig, wife of Dr. Ken Fertig, made a statement. She said that she and Ken had decided that if we proceeded with the project, it would be based on doing what God would wish, and not economic development. She then read the passage of Matthew 25:40... “He who has done it to the least of these, has done it to me.” That teaching took over all our future thinking.

Attending that evening, in addition to Ken and his wife Jan, were these men and their spouses – Richard Schneider, James Short, Ron Rensink, Tom Whorley, Pastor Don Loots, and Dr. Fred Kushner, my wife, and myself. All in attendance were enthused to continue, as Jan had stated.



Those same people agreed to serve on the board and they asked Dr. Ken and myself to co-chair the idea of developing a Village in Sheldon. Later I was asked to consider taking a sabbatical leave from the school and work full-time to direct the project.

Shortly thereafter, I received a phone call from someone I did not know. He asked me to come to the Eagles Club to visit. I called Dr. Ken and the two of us stopped in to visit with Dick Wansink. He was playing cards in the back. He asked us to sit down and proceeded to ask us one question – “Would this Village be able to work with Billie McAlpine?” Billie was well-known and loved in the Sheldon community, and Dick had known him for many years. When we said yes, he asked how many acres we needed. We said 35-40. He said, “You got it” and went back to playing cards.

The Village is located where it is due to the generosity of Dick Wansink, along with some additional major gifts from Mr. Wansink, over the next many years.