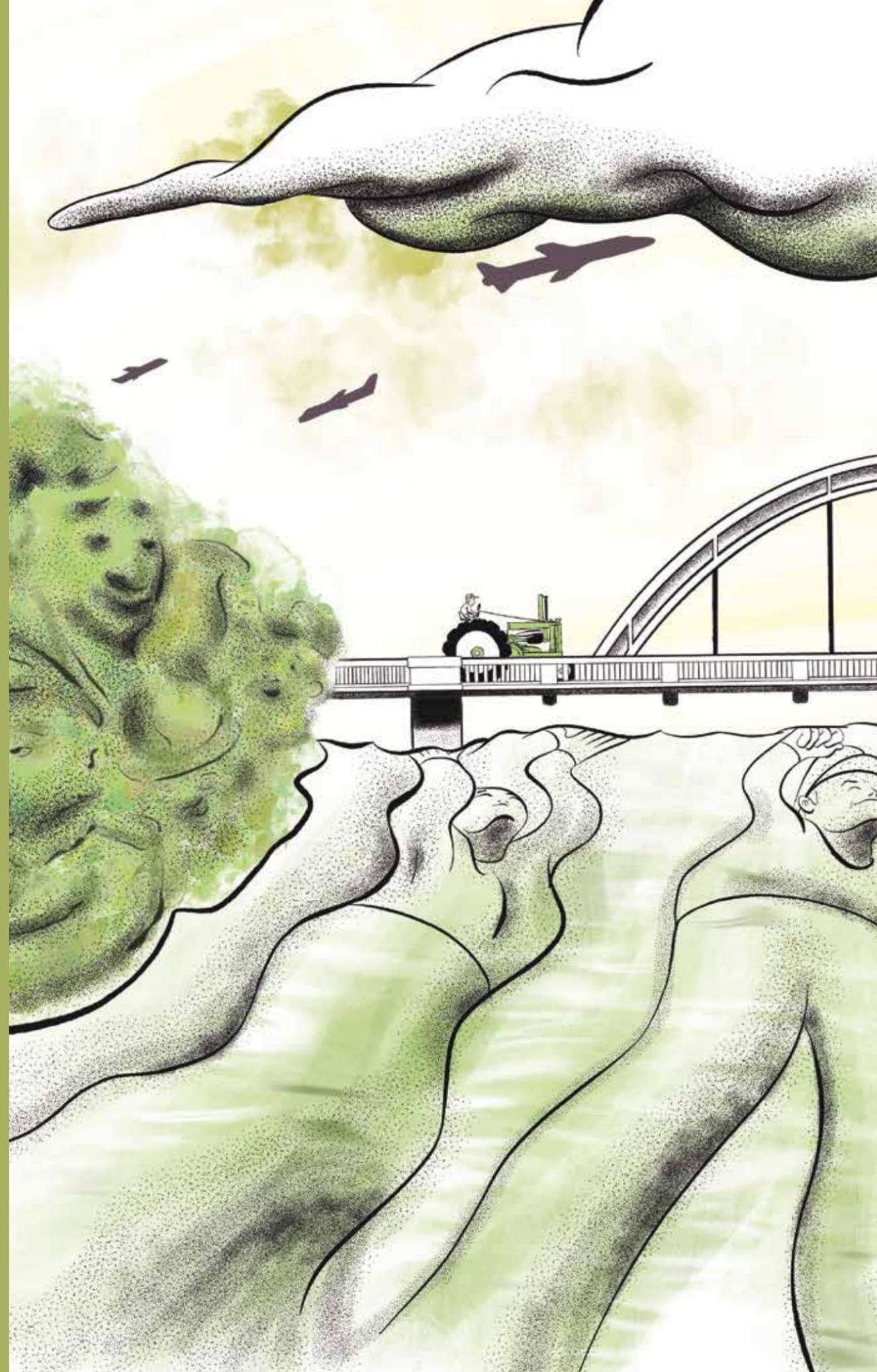


YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1987

GEOGRAPHY
North Dakota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$5 M +

LEADER
Jennifer Feist



INNOVATION STORY

No

3

VALLEY CITY-BARNES
COUNTY DEVELOPMENT
CORPORATION

COMMUNITY KNOWS BEST

STORY BY

Amy Overgaard



VALLEY CITY

**NORTH
DAKOTA**

Valley City-Barnes County Development Corporation works to enhance the lives of both current and future residents of its region — creating jobs, elevating quality of life and putting people first, all so communities can flourish.

Valley City-Barnes County Development Corporation

VCBC is relentless in their pursuit of what is best for its community and has found creative ways to help the mostly rural region stay competitive with larger cities.

BREAK THROUGH

Through creative thinking and focused engagement, Valley City-Barnes County Development Corporation considers the needs of the region above all else and takes a holistic approach to improving both economic outcomes and the health and prosperity of the region.



PEOPLE COME FIRST

VCBC listens deeply to its community — business owners, workers and students alike — before taking action. Whether it's learning from organized feedback sessions or from paying close attention to its networks, VCBC builds and cultivates meaningful relationships that guide its priorities.



ECONOMIC WORK IS COMMUNITY WORK

VCBC rises to the challenge of finding creative ways to provide value to its community — embracing new ideas, making sure it addresses the needs of its neighbors and working with community to bring those ideas to life.



LISTENING



REPRESENT COMMUNITY



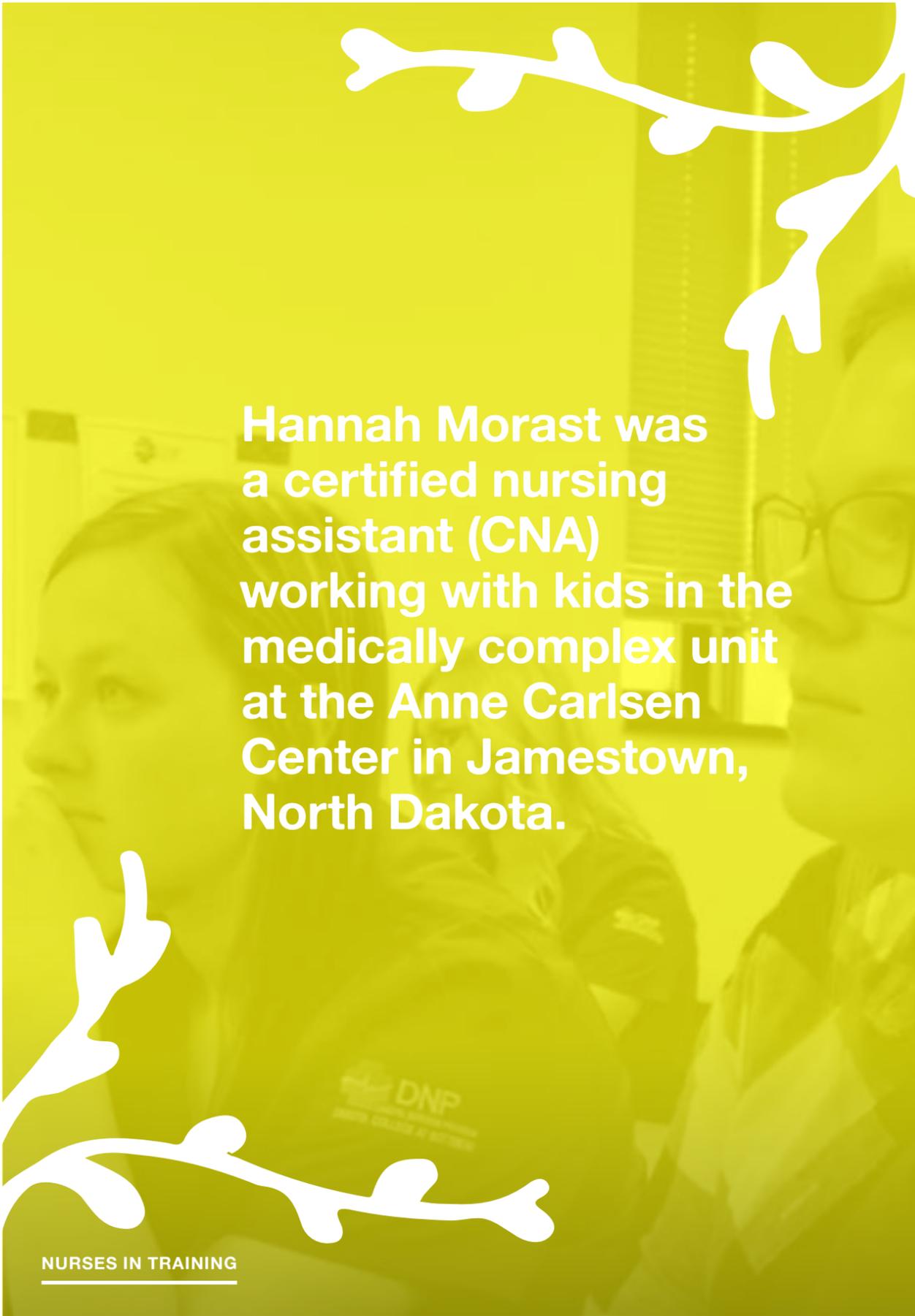
FOSTER CREATIVITY



THE VERY MISSION AND VISION OF OUR COMPANY HASN'T CHANGED.

It's about making life better for people.

Jennifer Feist
VCBC



Hannah Morast was a certified nursing assistant (CNA) working with kids in the medically complex unit at the Anne Carlsen Center in Jamestown, North Dakota.

NURSES IN TRAINING

She was enjoying the work, but she knew she wanted to do more — that she had more to offer her patients than her role allowed. Hannah saw potential in herself and felt that if she was going to pursue a health care career long term, she wanted to become a nurse. But that's where things got complicated.

Her husband is a farmer and rancher, so location was important: she had to find a school that didn't require moving or traveling to attend. The couple also had two young boys at home, and she wanted to be present for them. Plus, her job was giving their family health insurance, so she knew she would have to keep working while pursuing a nursing degree. Not only that, but both she and her husband had student loans from their undergraduate degrees.

"So then it turned into 'What's available to me? What's affordable? Do we want to add more student loans?'" she recalls.

"BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I knew I wanted to do a little bit more."

Hannah found the nursing program at Valley City State University (VCSU) and thought it could be a good fit — local, affordable, flexible.

Valley City hasn't always had a nursing program. In fact, it's only been around since 2008. Prior to that, the closest registered nurse (RN) programs were in Fargo, and the closest licensed practical nurse (LPN) program was in Wahpeton. And those programs weren't bringing enough nurses into Valley City.

In those pre-2008 days, Valley City's health care providers were hurting; the ratio of nurses to patients and residents in health care facilities was too low, so patients weren't getting the level of individual care and attention they needed. The community needed more nurses to better serve them.

THE TEAM AT THE VALLEY CITY-BARNES COUNTY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (VCBC) HEARD ABOUT THIS NEED

and took it upon themselves to create some change.

“We told ourselves, ‘We need to help do something to generate nurses,’” says Jennifer Feist, VCBC’s director of development.

The team got to work bringing nurses into the community by piloting a nursing program at VCSU in collaboration with the Dakota College at Bottineau. They pulled together partnerships and funding. They applied for grants and publicized the program. They worked alongside the local health care industry to make sure they were meeting needs. “And I think we’ve seen some really good results,” says Jennifer.

Many of the programs’ graduates go on to work in hospitals, clinics and care facilities in Valley City and the surrounding communities — Hannah being one of them.

Hannah graduated from VCSU’s nursing program in 2017 and has been working locally as an RN ever since. She enjoys the work and the impact she makes. “I was fostered in a great environment as a nurse, in our

little community,” she says. Because Valley City is a smaller community, she was able to benefit from a lot of mentorship when she was a new nurse, and she now gets to offer one-on-one care to her patients in a way that wouldn’t be possible in a larger hospital system.

And her ambitions haven’t stopped there. “I have future goals for my nursing career,” says Hannah. After experiencing the impact her instructors at VCSU had on her, she says, “I’d like to get my master’s and go into nurse education — use my leadership management skills. That’s the goal.”

But without Valley City-Barnes County Development Corporation’s push to establish the nursing program at VCSU, Hannah may never have grown her health care career beyond being a CNA — and she certainly wouldn’t have realized her ambition to go into education. “I think my life would feel incomplete if I hadn’t gone on for nursing,” she says.



How can organizations develop a culture of listening?

A culture of listening evolves through built-in structures and organic participation. Be deliberate in your efforts to structure discussions through identification of key questions and outcomes. It is also important that leaders understand differing backgrounds and experiences of community members and the tremendous value their backgrounds can bring to community growth. Setting aside preconceived ideas, individual agendas and biases is essential to ensuring that all parties are truly listened to. Leaders must ensure they are doing this while also guiding community conversations that minimize dominant voices overpowering the conversation and undermining a listening atmosphere.

A culture of listening is also created through intentional relationship-building. This takes time and requires a culture of caring about what others are doing and being present for them as you would want them to be present for you. Go to each other’s events, show up when a community conversation is held by another group and help promote each other’s initiatives. This builds trust and understanding and sets the stage for listening at all levels.

Jennifer Feist
VCBC

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 1



**PEOPLE
COME FIRST**

BEING INVOLVED IN OR
INTEGRATED INTO A VARIETY OF
ORGANIZATIONS AND SECTORS
helps us listen

Alicia Hoffarth
VCBC



Since 1986, VCBC has helped make life better for residents of Valley City and the surrounding communities. Its primary focus is job creation, bringing money into the state and community that they didn't have before.

But the work the organization does — and the impact it has — reaches far beyond that. It's the belief of the VCBC team that in order to create and keep jobs in their community, there have to be quality-of-life touchpoints as well. They've worked to elevate the standard of living and enhance the quality of life for present and future residents — because when community members can flourish, so can businesses.

It would be easy to categorize Valley City, located just 60 miles west of Fargo and 40 miles east of Jamestown, as just another one of the small towns between these two larger cities — a bedroom or farming community. But the VCBC team isn't satisfied with that kind of attitude. They believe their community has something unique to offer.

“Because of where we are geographically in Valley City — between Fargo and Jamestown, with all their big box stores — you know, we can't compete to get those stores here,” Mary Lee Nielson, a VCBC board member, says. “But what we can do is offer unique shops and a great quality of life.” VCBC touts that as a selling point to new businesses exploring the community and as a way for existing employers to draw in new employees.

**BECAUSE OF THE NONPROFIT'S SIZE AND LOCATION,
Mary Lee says its people have to
think differently.**

And it's obvious they do, working on projects other economic development corporations wouldn't take on.

One big way they think differently? Prioritizing listening before taking action. They listen to the needs of business owners and employers, of parents and college students. Some of this listening and learning happens through organized feedback sessions. But a lot of it happens organically, through connections of board and staff members. By keeping an ear to the ground and building relationships within the community. By intentionally broadening their networks.

VCBC is committed to broad community representation around the boardroom table. “We look at our board members and what each person brings to the table — not only their experience but what areas they're involved in,” Jennifer says. “We try to cover as many bases as we possibly can. We have a really good balance of board members in a lot of ways.” Current board members include the mayor, the two Barnes County commissioners, small business owners and residents involved in real estate, banking, agriculture and more.

VCBC also encourages its three staff members to get involved in community initiatives that interest them. “Being involved in or integrated into a variety of organizations and sectors helps us

listen,” says Alicia Hoffarth, VCBC's resource development specialist. That could involve sitting on a board, joining an advisory committee or just volunteering and getting involved in a specific sector in some capacity. “That's part of the culture — if a staff member has an interest or tends to gravitate toward something, that allows us the opportunity to listen and understand the needs of that sector and bring them back to our larger organization. Everybody is doing a little bit of that.”

Between the board and the staff, Alicia says, VCBC has many ways of keeping a finger on the pulse of the community.

But its people also make sure they're connected on an individual level. A young woman recently called Jennifer because she was trying to wade through online unemployment applications related to the pandemic and was really struggling. After half a dozen calls, Jennifer offered to stay on the phone as the young woman completed her application, making herself available in case the caller had any other questions or problems as she went. “You have so many people who need help with something that is just not in their wheelhouse,” says Jennifer.

“IF YOU CAN BE THAT HELPING HAND, THAT REASSURING PERSON, SOMETIMES THAT’S WHAT IT TAKES.”

We’re just helping wherever we can.”

The VCBC team prioritizes all this listening and relationship-building because its members truly care about each individual. But they also believe that the people within their community know best about what the community needs. So, when they hear about a need for more professionals in a certain field, more community support for working parents or more recreation opportunities in the community, the team jumps into action. They’re able to step in and provide the momentum and resources to meet those needs by building community consensus, fostering partnerships and leveraging resources for community-led economic development.

VCBC’s fingerprints are visible on so many projects and initiatives around the area. You’ll see it in some of the more obvious places, like bringing John Deere Seeding Group into town to create more jobs in the 1990s and, more recently, helping establish the local nursing and welding programs to answer community needs for more health care workers and tradespeople. But you also see it in more unexpected places — like helping establish a community wellness center or putting together a grant program to get more child care available in the community.

What it comes down to is looking at community needs holistically and understanding what factors impact economic growth.

“Once we have successfully worked with a company to bring them here or work with them to expand, it is critically important that we lift the rest of the community,” says Jennifer. That’s why VCBC looks beyond workforce development to family life, education, quality-of-life issues and more to see how it can positively impact the community more holistically.

“And if there are barriers to growth in the community, that’s where we dig in — regardless of the challenges.”

WE REALLY WORK TO BRING PEOPLE TO THE TABLE and solve those other community-based problems.”



THE WELDING PROGRAM

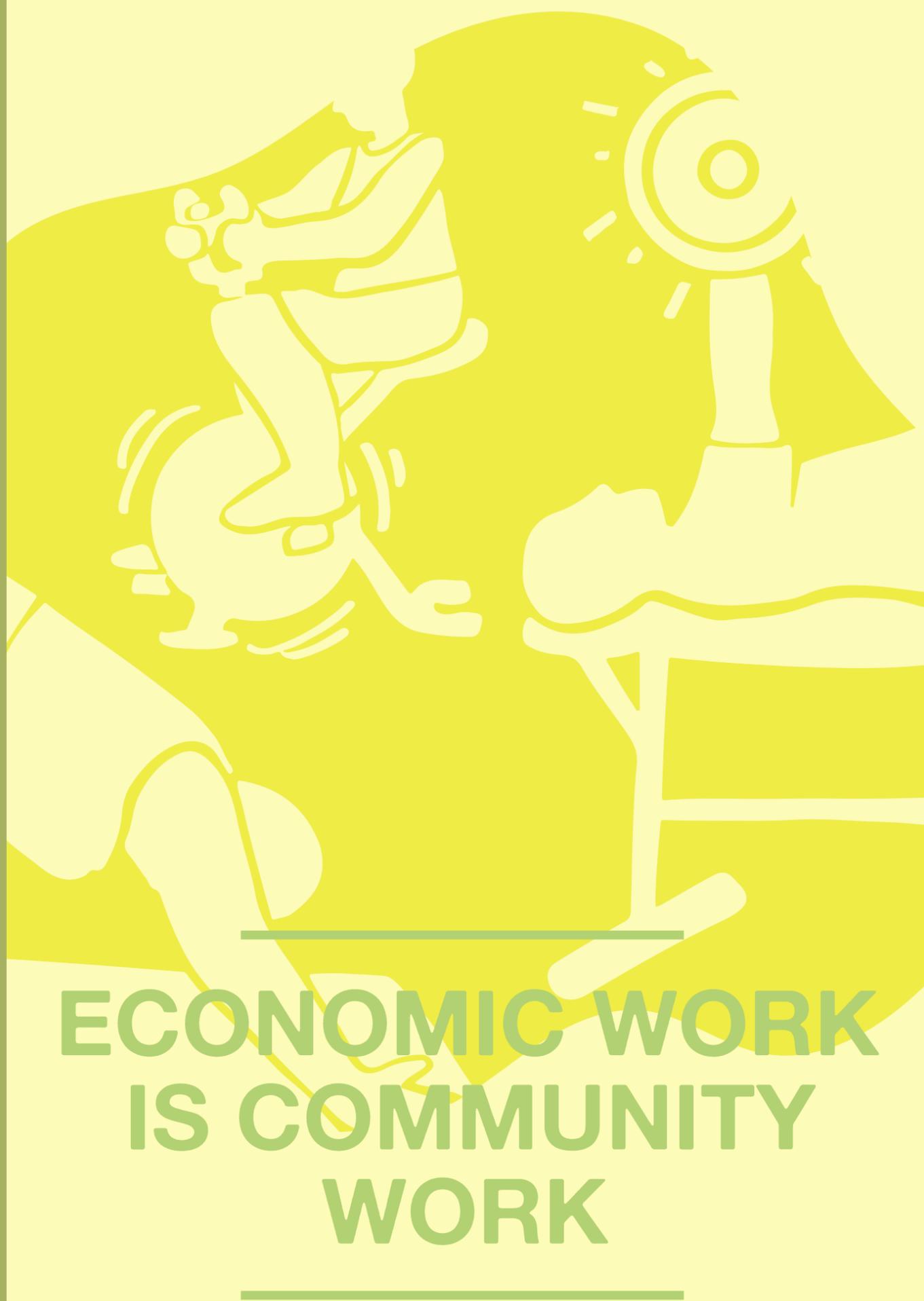


CHARACTERISTIC NO. 1

How can organizations ensure that community members — and the community as a whole — are being represented by the work they do?

Our focus is always on the people we serve. The diverse background and experiences of our organization ensure broad-based community sectors are represented and provide a strong basis to develop critical questions and identify challenges that must be addressed. Actively seek out representatives from sectors that may not be currently at the table or who may have a specific interest in a particular topic or issue. Seek to engage all generations, economic backgrounds and cultures when hosting community conversations or making decisions that may impact various populations. I would encourage leaders who guide and manage to harness the passion of others to secure buy-in and increase commitment.

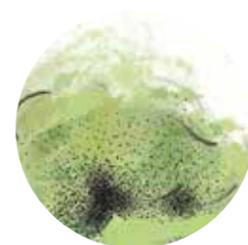
Alicia Hoffarth
VCBC



ECONOMIC WORK IS COMMUNITY WORK

AND THEN WE ALWAYS ASK OURSELVES,
**“why can’t we?
why can’t we get
this done?”**

Jennifer Feist
VCBC



Board member Paige Bjornson says that VCBC’s small but mighty team is “the most creative group of people that I’ve ever worked with in my entire career. If there’s a solution to be found, they will find it. Creativity is at the core of everything they do.”

VCBC uses that creative problem-solving mindset to innovatively drive forward the mission and impact of the organization. “I think innovation comes in how you apply new and exciting ideas,” says David Beierle, the factory manager of John Deere Seeding Group in Valley City and the president of the board of the Sheyenne Valley Community Foundation (which VCBC helped start and continues to support). He says he regularly sees VCBC come up with “innovative solutions on how we get business in the community — businesses that make sense for our location.

**AND THEY WORK WITH THEM TO
make sure they can be
successful.”**

Jennifer says the VCBC team and board approach challenges by asking, What is the value to the community? What is the value to our residents, to businesses? Is this for the good of the community? “And then we always ask ourselves, ‘Why can’t we? Why can’t we get this done?’”

This creative mindset was never more evident than during the process of bringing a wellness center to Valley City. Jennifer says that residents had talked about the idea for more than 15 years without moving beyond talk. But the community eventually realized that without the center, Valley City wouldn’t be able to grow and be competitive in the region.

So Valley City got to work. Through a state representative, VCSU Foundation staff found a state grant that offered two-to-one financial matching. VCBC and VCSU met with stakeholders and community leaders to secure community buy-in. They fundraised. And then they fundraised some more. They addressed the concerns of key local

leaders who were certain a wellness center could never be successful in their community. They discovered ways to collaborate with VCSU for a shared facility. And, all the while, they listened to the concerns and desires of their neighbors.

“They were definitely a leader or partner with us to make this go — to build a \$16 million facility in a community of our size, with about \$5 million coming from taxpayers ... and to privately raise the rest of it is really phenomenal,” says Tyler Jacobson, the director of Valley City Parks and Recreation and the owner and manager of the Gaukler Family Wellness Center.

**“WITHOUT THEM, THIS
DEFINITELY
wouldn’t be
possible.”**



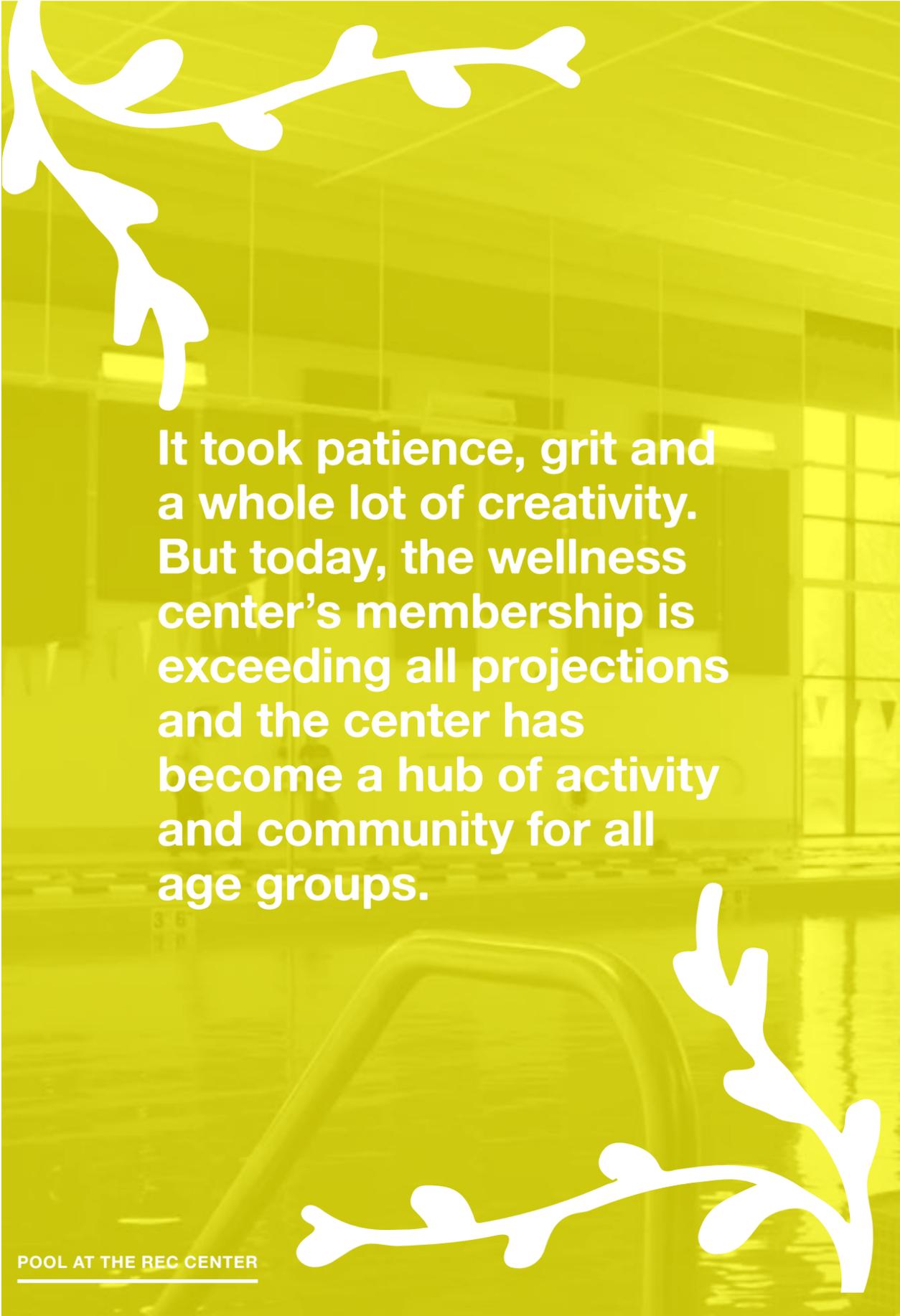
As a leader, how do you develop a culture of creativity and risk-taking among your employees?

How do you develop buy-in for this mindset with collaborators?

As a leader, it is important to encourage team members to step outside their comfort zone and take on new challenges and new roles. Developing a culture of creativity often comes in the form of many questions, such as, “How would serving as a volunteer for a specific task help you personally and professionally?” or “How would it help our organization and the community?” As a leader, it is important to support their interests and provide time and resources to help them be successful and contribute to their growth. Investing in our employees is an investment in the organization and community. We value one another.

**Jennifer Feist
VCBC**

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 3



It took patience, grit and a whole lot of creativity. But today, the wellness center's membership is exceeding all projections and the center has become a hub of activity and community for all age groups.

POOL AT THE REC CENTER

In fact, 38 percent of Valley City's residents are members of the Gaukler Family Wellness Center, which opened in late 2016. And in 2020 the Park Board added ride-share bikes and a kayak kiosk to enhance outdoor recreation in the area.

VCBC's community wide investments have diversified the economy of Valley City and increased opportunities for residents at all income levels in Barnes County. And it's far from being done. The organization has big plans to expand educational opportunities; create more platforms for community listening, learning and involvement; and build out more community recreation opportunities — among many other dreams.

But what it always comes back to is the people, "the very mission and vision of our corporation that we adopted 25 years ago," says Jennifer. "It hasn't changed. It's about making life better for people."

VCBC's philosophy is that people come first. Because of that, the decisions it makes always seek to consider the needs of Valley City's residents and the potential impact on local businesses.

VCBC IS NOT OUT TO MAKE A NAME FOR VALLEY CITY — IT SIMPLY WANTS VALLEY CITY TO BE

a really great place to live for its residents, both present and future.
