

## Episode 4: Focus on Alumni with Kayla Savage

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to *Get Online* from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. *Get Online* has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

Today we are switching things up by interviewing a graduate of our online Community Development Master's Program. This is the first in a series of episodes in which we bring you the stories and life achievements of Great Plains IDEA alumni. These short profiles on individuals give listeners a glance into what it's like to follow your dream, face down a challenge, and accomplish something when doubt almost stopped you.

Today's guest is Kayla Savage and she is joining us from St. George, Kansas, which is a rural community about 45 minutes west of the state capitol, Topeka. Kayla works for the Kansas Department of Commerce as the Community Development Division Director.

Hi Kayla, thanks for joining us today.

Kayla Savage:

Hi Kathryn, thanks for having me.

Kathryn Harth:

In your social media, you have used the hashtag "#ruralbychoice" and for those of us who live in states that have large rural areas, whether that's the Great Plains or upstate New York, we sometimes hear about urbanization in which young people are leaving rural areas and they're moving to urban areas. But that's not you, so why do you choose to be rural?

Kayla Savage:

For me, it started because I was born and raised in Kansas. The people and the lifestyle are why I choose to be rural. I believe that it goes back to appreciating the people and relationships and the opportunities, even that you have to be involved in your community and in the choices that the community makes as a whole as well. But the way that my family started out was because we wanted to be around people who just really appreciated the land and space. I also appreciate, you know, the Kansas sunsets.

Kathryn Harth:

I also love the Kansas sunsets. For listeners, I live in Kansas as well and I lived in Colorado for a time and the mountains are gorgeous, but when the sun goes behind the mountains nothing happens, it just goes high in the mountains. It doesn't make a beautiful sky and give you all of the colors that we have in Kansas. Let's talk for another second or two about Kansas to our listeners.

Kayla and I lived in the same small town and we got our bachelor's degrees from the same university, but not at the same time, so we didn't know each other when we lived there. There

were always people who cared about the town, but the way that it looks today compared to 20 years ago when I was at Emporia State University, it's much more vibrant and it's award-winning. You were there after me and that means that you lived in the award-winning Emporia, Kansas and they won in 2005, they won the Great American Main Street Award, so talk to us a little bit about how you ended up working for the Emporia Main Street and what your role was there.

Kayla Savage:

Full disclosure, my goal, when I went to college was to graduate as quickly as possible because my theory was that if I graduated as quickly as possible, then I would hopefully be working longer. So kind of a backward-thinking to probably most college students at that time in their life, but there was this great intervention that happened when I was at Emporia State, an office that was focused on transfer students, so I was a transfer student, I spent a year at Cloud County Community College in Concordia, Kansas. Great experience coming from, you know, a school that had 44 people in my high school graduating class. So when we talk about being rural, that's rural, that's a great example for you, you know, coupled with the fact that I wanted to get through school pretty quickly and the fact that I was a little bit out of my comfort zone. I was just going to stick to what I knew.

She kind of intervened and said, "My plan is not to intervene with your academic world, it's really to make sure that you are thriving as a person." She said, you know, "I want you to explore, I want you to explore some other opportunities here," and she said, "there's this great organization here called Emporia Main Street, they had just won that award that you mentioned, the Great American Main Street Award. So they had great momentum, amazing volunteers, an amazing, really dedicated director that wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty, rolled her sleeves up, cleaned flower beds downtown, worked events sun up 'til sundown, and really engaged the community and that was something that I could definitely get on board with.

Kathryn Harth:

For our listeners who aren't familiar with Emporia, Kansas the population is about 25,000 which puts them at the 17th largest in the state. The Great American Main Street Award we keep mentioning recognizes communities that use the main street approach to revitalize traditional downtowns and neighborhood business districts.

Kayla Savage:

You know, the Main Street program in itself resonates really well with anybody who's from a small community, but also larger communities who want to make lasting change and impact. It's not a prescribed "this is what you have to do in your community," it's really through that approach that you identify your unique community assets and how you can build on those.

Downtown historically has been our gathering place, our place for commerce, the place where we go to celebrate community, and it continues to be today for most communities and Emporia is one of those examples of a vibrant downtown because the community has invested in it. Since then, they've won several awards.

My time at Emporia Main Street, I started out as an intern and my focus was summer promotion events trying to get people downtown together, having those conversations around community things that are important, that are going on in the community, but really utilizing downtown as that gathering place

Kathryn Harth:

Kayla wrapped up the summer internship and returned to school that fall and just a few weeks into the semester she got a call from the Emporia Main Street director offering her a job as the assistant director. Let's hear from Kayla about her reaction to that question.

Kayla Savage:

I said, "okay, I think this is in line with what I'm going to school for." As I tell people now, I drank the Kool-Aid of the Main Street program that summer and it was definitely something that I knew was a huge opportunity and I didn't want to pass it up. I already had a really great basis of a working relationship with her, had a great understanding of the program, who the volunteers were and that winter she had the opportunity to actually be an assistant lead at the State Main Street Program. And as I was going into my last semester at Emporia State, I was encouraged to actually apply for her position as executive director and in February of my last semester of college for my Bachelor's degree, they offered me the job.

Kathryn Harth:

I love it. I love it.

Kayla Savage:

So it's a little bit of a whirlwind, they saw something in me, they took a chance on me, and I spent the next two years, actually almost two and a half years, working as the Executive Director of Emporia Main Street. There I did have successes just in the two and a half years that I was there, we had a huge first-time development and fill construction project that was a three-story building, first-floor retail service businesses and then two stories of living quarters, which was fantastic because the goal is to get people living downtown, working downtown, doing their business downtown.

I also did work on a project called Community Initiated Development so anybody who's in the community development world has probably heard of that process, the goal is to have certain businesses located in certain districts within the central business district, very intentional, and again, I just go back to that community engagement piece, the Main Street Organization really focuses on that, an organization like that gives those people a vehicle to make change in their community.

Organizations that exist like Emporia Main Street Program, even your smaller communities, Kansas has a great program called Pride and it's for really small communities that aren't large enough for a Main Street Program, that still have wonderful, engaged citizens that have the capacity to care about, think about, engage in, and make a change in their communities. Those are other opportunities as well.

Kathryn Harth:

So you've talked a lot about community and how passionate you are, so lots of people are passionate about lots of things, but that doesn't mean we all run out and get a master's degree in the thing that we're passionate about. So, tell us a little bit about what was going on in your life when you decided it was time to go back to school to pursue a master's degree. I think it's it sounds pretty obvious, probably, to the listeners why you chose community development, but maybe not, maybe there was an "aha" moment for you. So talk to us a little bit about how you got into the Great Plains IDEA Community Development Program.

Kayla Savage:

You know what I like about the Community Development Program was just the explanation of it really aligned with my background and my values. The online option made it much more appealing for me as a full-time working professional with a family because then I could really control my own schedule.

I also had the opportunity to make the program what I needed it to be, for my interest. The classes that I chose were really focused around the nonprofit management, but there was also the flexibility for electives and also the flexibility to look at other programs that could fit into my academic and professional goals.

You know, I was pursuing my master's degree after 10 years of being out of the academic world. In my experience, even before I was an actual student, just when I was pursuing the option and looking into what the program provided and offered, all of my experiences were incredibly authentic human experiences. I had this idea in my mind that I had to use very academic-like jargon, worry about how I said things, and make sure that I sounded very official and the reality is that the folks at GPIDEA, the folks in community development and all of the instructors, all of the professors, they're all humans themselves. They are very authentic people, their goal is not to make you feel like you are lesser than because you have not completed the number of years of school, and also a huge selling point for me choosing that program was the fact that with the Community Development Program specifically, I was going to be learning from the people at the top of their field, not necessarily from the same university, but they're at the top of their field in their specific research area or their specific academic area in community development and it was a huge benefit to me throughout the program because there was such a diversity in perspectives and styles of teaching. But also, in the basis of community development, you know, there's such a broad definition on what community development is and what it can be, from a community perspective, from a state perspective, from even a worldwide perspective.

Kathryn Harth:

Investing in our communities means more now than ever. The Great Plains IDEA Community Development Program will equip you to be a change-maker in your community or organization. This diverse program is offered as a master's degree or graduate certificate and is 100% online. Community development is a project-based program that is ideal for current and aspiring professionals in areas such as cooperative-extension community and regional-planning non-profit organizations and public administration. Resident faculty from five universities work

together to provide cutting edge knowledge based on real-life experiences. The Great Plains IDEA Community Development Program is training leaders that create tangible change in our communities. Learn more about the Community Development Degree and certificate at [www.gpidea.org](http://www.gpidea.org).

Everyone can hear how passionate Kayla is about community development, she has definitely found a career that supports her values and beliefs. So I asked Kayla if there was a person or a moment that inspired her to pursue getting a master's degree.

Kayla Savage:

My mom had gone back to school to get her master's degree and the message that she had always shared with me as I was growing up was that your education and your knowledge is something that no one can take from you, you can move with it, you can stay in the same place with it. Also, my mom worked on her master's with raising a toddler at home, having a full-time job herself, and also then actually graduated when she was expecting me. It was always impressive to me because to think about the amount of work that had to have taken and the dedication, the biggest thing was she was able to tell herself, "hey, I went out to make that happen and I did it, I did it" and that is truly the biggest feeling that I had after graduating. I set my mind out to do something and I actually accomplished it.

Kathryn Harth:

Well, I think we should let listeners know that, like your mom, you were working a full-time job, you had a child while you were in the program and you were married, so you were balancing. I mean, you didn't get to watch your mom do that because you weren't in the world yet, but you heard your mom talk about it and then you made it happen too. So tell us about how you balanced, like how did you make that all happen.

Kayla Savage:

It's incredibly hard, but of course, the Community Development Program was focused on professionals and it was very clear that there was a support system there to encourage you to take one-to-two classes a semester to be able to finish the program because with work schedules and family schedules, I took a few semesters with two classes and it was very intense on top of work. While working, I had an incredibly supportive boss who was very aware that I was pursuing my degree even though it was online, so I wasn't necessarily going to physical classes. So I was really lucky in that way. You know, UFM is a great example of another community development organization.

Kathryn Harth:

For those who aren't familiar with the UFM Community Learning Center, it's based in Manhattan, Kansas. UFM provides community members who are passionate about a topic an opportunity to teach and share it with others through credit and non-credit classes. The courses are for all ages and the topics range from arts and hobbies to career and computer skills. I asked Kayla to tell us a little bit more about UFM.

Kayla Savage:

A very organic and authentic experience, amazing resource, our organization was actually founded by a group of K-State students and faculty members in 1967-68 and if you know your history, there were a lot of social movements going on at that time, a lot of unrest around Ivory Tower and concepts like that and students and faculty alike wanted to break down those barriers.

Kathryn Harth:

I think a really fun fact about UFM is that one of the people who got it going is Sue Maes. It's also the person who got Great Plains IDEA going, so yeah, really cool connection right here, that we're talking about.

Kayla Savage:

Yes while I wasn't alive then, I am certain that social unrest and people wanting to do something that mattered is something that could be carried through to this time that we're in now in the global pandemic. So, if you think about that innovation and people wanting to make lasting change, those are opportunities and instances that really we should bring back to light and say "there have been uncertain times before and look at the great things that came out of those times."

Kathryn Harth:

So you did get this master's degree and you have advanced to a totally different position that's kind of a big fancy job with the fancy title that I mentioned during the introduction, so let's tell us about how you got to the place where you're working for the state of Kansas. How'd you get from K-State master's degree, state of Kansas, and working with communities in Kansas?

Kayla Savage:

I did want to achieve a master's degree. I was hopeful that it would eventually maybe help me in career advancement, but I wasn't exactly sure where that was going to go or what that would mean, I just happened upon a job listing with the Kansas Department of Commerce and the Community Development Division and I wasn't sure if that's where exactly I wanted to be, but it was one of those strange situations where I couldn't pass up the opportunity to at least investigate. It all kind of came together and the folks who were hiring saw that and offered me the job.

It is a very fast-paced, exciting, kind of intense-at-times environment. There's a great team of public servants at the department of commerce, as I've experienced. It really provided that vehicle for mobilization so communities that have the capacity, that want to make meaningful change, they can utilize these programs and utilize really our technical resources that we have. Our goal is to you know make Kansas the best place that it can be to live, work, do business, and be engaged.

Kathryn Harth:

Tell us, you haven't been in your new job for very long, but so far--two months or so in--what's your favorite thing about this role that you have right now?

Kayla Savage:

Working with people who care and are engaged in their communities and their state. Really dedicated and motivated people both from the local communities and then also our public servants at the state level as well. We've had a grant program that came through the CARES Act that we've administered about nine million dollars to 66 different counties and cities throughout the state. The goal of that money was to put that money in the hands of the local people to make decisions on a local level to help their businesses reopen and also support meal programs, give them this mechanism to invest in their communities, invest in their businesses so that we can be on the other side of this this pandemic situation and the goal would be to come back actually stronger, more innovative, and have better businesses that come out of it because they pivoted and we provided them resources to help them feel like there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

Kathryn Harth:

In case we have listeners who don't know, the grant that Kansas received was through the CARES act, that's the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act, which was an economic stimulus bill passed in March of 2020 in response to the pandemic in the United States. I asked Kayla to share what she saw as an unexpected barrier for rural communities during this pandemic.

Kayla Savage:

One issue is broadband in the state of Kansas and that's an office within community development division that really, you know, broadband has become a forefront issue and it's definitely an issue in rural places.

Kathryn Harth:

And that's because people have to- suddenly our young students, k-12, they had to do homework from home, people have to work from home. So for people who don't live in a rural community they may not realize that you can't get internet just in where you live. Some people still have dial-up. I mean, yes absolutely.

Kayla Savage:

Yep and so when we think about health care needs and that distance education and really providing the infrastructure and the support for people just to live in the world that we live in now, it's a very pivotal need.

Kathryn Harth:

Kayla, as we get ready to wrap up here today, do you have any life advice you'd like to share with listeners?

Kayla Savage:

Wherever you're at, you know, in your life, remember that your story does have value and your experience does have value whether you have achieved greatness in your professional career or you're still going through college trying to figure out what you want to be when you grow up. You live a lot of life experiences, whether you're an older person or a younger person, those are not just moments in time that didn't mean anything or they didn't provide you some opportunity to learn from later on. You never know when you might connect with somebody who finds value in that and who could learn from or benefit from, you know, that authentic experience.

In this uncertain time that we're in also, while it can be very scary and feel like we are in totally uncharted territory (because we are), these opportunities do exist for us to think about what we want for our community in a different light, and it can breed innovation if we choose to take on that challenge and make steps toward, you know, making progressive change.

Kathryn Harth:

That's it for this week's show. Special thanks to our guest, Kayla Savage, and my colleagues Chelsea Barbercheck and Stephanie Stewart who helped produce this podcast.

You can download other Great Plains IDEA episodes on your favorite podcast app or visit our website to learn more about Great Plains IDEA. Just go to [www.gpidea.org](http://www.gpidea.org).

In our next episode we will hear from alumni Steven Goetsch, who recently graduated from the online Family and Community Services Master's Program. Steve will join us from San Antonio, Texas, where he works for the VA.

I'm your host Kathryn Harth, and until next time, *Get Online*.