

# The Update

"LEAD by Example"

Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association

SPRING 2024

## President's Message



*Leslie Boswell, LEAD 28, President*

Happy Spring everyone! I am Leslie Boswell from Shickley and a member of LEAD class XXVIII. My husband, Ken, (LEAD XI), and I are retired farmers and enjoy being involved with our 11 grandchildren and traveling. I will be your president of the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Assoc. for this year and am honored to be a part of this organization. We have been blessed with great leadership by Stan, Gerald, Matt and so forth. Now you have me and I hope to deserve a position among these great leaders.

With this newsletter comes the graduation of another class of excellence. Congratulations to LEAD Class 41 on your accomplishments and good luck for all your future endeavors. We are also preparing for the retirement of our leader, Dr. Terry Hejny. We cannot express enough gratitude to Terry for his years of service to the LEAD program. We wish him and Pam a great retirement. The search for his replacement is moving forward and the field is down to three candidates. Their information is at <https://ianr.unl.edu/nebraska-lead-program-director/about-candidates> if you want to check them out.

I am really excited about our upcoming Alumni Travel Study Seminar to Savannah and Charleston the end of this month. Pat Heyen is our travel coordinator and does such a fantastic job. She has also announced our next international tour. Our next tour will be to Normandy and northern France in August of 2025. There may be an optional extension to Paris with this trip. I understand there is a lot of interest in this already, so if you want information, let Pat know soon.

After going through a restructuring of our board, we are trying to have more regional activities so it would be more convenient to join us. We would love ideas on activities and locations that might work in your areas. We feel there is a lot of value in continued networking with other members of the LEAD alumni. You can contact us if you have any ideas or would like to help set up an activity. We also have a tailgate party on the calendar so hopefully more to come.

I am looking forward to a great year with all the LEAD Fellows. If you are a member of the LEAD Alumni, thank you for supporting our organization. If you haven't joined yet, please consider being a member. We, as leaders, are most effective when we work together. This organization helps make connections that will benefit you for the rest of your life. Please join us in the LEAD Alumni Assoc.



*LEAD Alumni Officers: Austin Benes, LEAD 40, 2nd Vice President; Jesse Mohnike, LEAD 39, 1st Vice President; Leslie Boswell, LEAD 28, President; Stan Mitchell, LEAD 9, Past President.*

## Meet New Board Member - Austin Benes



Austin Benes begins his three year term on the Lead Alumni Board of Directors this spring. He is a graduate of LEAD Class 40. Austin grew up on a livestock and row crop farm in southeast Nebraska where his family ran a cow/calf and row crop operation. He attended the University of Nebraska – Lincoln studying Animal Science and Ag Education. After college he has spent most of his career advising producers around the US on best practices in row crop management and ag technology innovations through his work as a professional in the seed and ag-chem industry. In 2020, after residing for five years in Nashville, TN Austin moved back to Lincoln, NE with his wife, Adria and their basset hound, Trapper.. Austin currently works as Vice President of Sales for Kahler Automation.

As a member of LEAD 40 Austin and his cohorts traveled to Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama for their International Travel Study Seminar. “Traveling to Latin America as part of the LEAD experience provided an exceptional look at multiple subjects related to culture, trade and economic development. It was a great culmination to LEAD experience to first-hand witness the international influence which Nebraska provides to the global ag sector. “ Austin concedes that after graduation the LEAD experience is not complete. “I am very excited to be able to contribute to the leadership and direction of LEAD by serving a term on the LEAD Alumni

*Austin Benes, LEAD ?*

Board of Directors. I encourage any of our alumni base to please reach out to me or a member of the board and learn how we are continuing to grow this community of ag-professionals for the betterment of our great state.”



## Meet Joan Ruskamp – New Board Member



Steve and I have a feedlot and farm near Dodge, Nebraska. We both received associate’s degrees from the University of Nebraska at Curtis. We bought our farm from Steve’s uncle in 1981 and expanded the cattle feeding enterprise. I grew up in Grand Island and had no idea what it meant to be a farmer but I had a love for animals and a desire to be involved in agriculture.

We have five adult children, four are married and one is in religious life. Our children and eleven grandchildren live around the country with two of our daughters living in Nebraska. So far, we do not have any immediate family coming back to our farm.

Throughout the years I have been involved in serving others in a variety of ways. When my LEAD 28 class graduated from the program, I did not realize how the LEAD experience would prepare me for new roles in agriculture. Shortly after completing the LEAD program, I started looking for ways to share the beef production story. The CommonGround program became one avenue for me to share our story of beef production from the feedlot segment. On the Beef Checkoff side, I served on the

Cattlemen’s Beef Board in a variety of leadership roles including the officer positions.

No matter where I serve I have always received so much more than I have given through the friendships, training and personal growth. I look forward to serving on the Nebraska LEAD Alum Board and getting to know more LEAD alum and their families.

# Outstanding LEAD Alumni 2024 - Anne Meis



*Anne Meis, LEAD 33 and Matt Dolch, LEAD 33.*

This is an excerpt from Anne’s nomination letter.

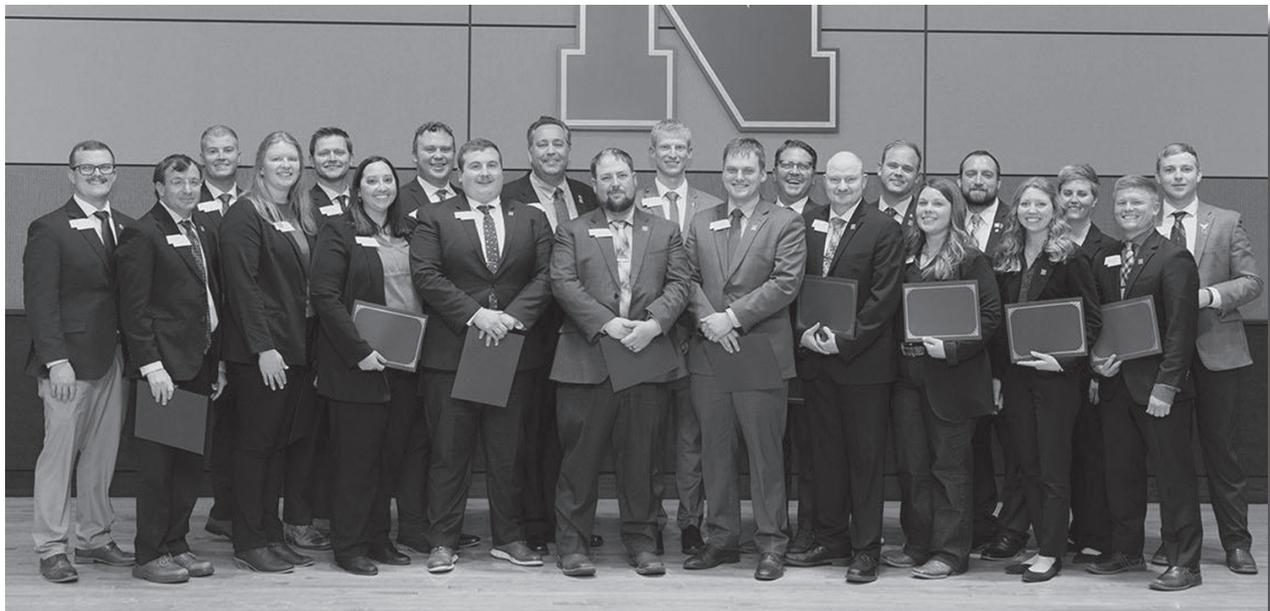
When defining examples of successful leaders in Nebraska and in the agricultural industry. Anne Mies is top-of-mind. Anne is a graduate of Nebraska LEAD Class 33 and has employed her leadership skills to the fullest for the Meis Farms operation near Elgin, Nebraska. There she plays an active role in the family farming operation that raises corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and feeder cattle.

Since graduating from the Nebraska LEAD Program, Anne has become a true advocate for the agricultural industry. Her exemplary work ethic, character and professionalism all positively contribute to her skill profile. This is visible through Anne’s service on the Nebraska Soybean Board representing District 1 and serving as Board Secretary. She is an active social media advocate for production agriculture, where she focuses on consumer education and agricultural literacy. Anne has a unique ability to

capture immediate trust with her audience, which is generated from her authentic style and real-life, hands-on experiences. I invite you to look at her Facebook profile, KRVN news features, or the local Antelope County Newspaper for immediate proof of her community and industry contributions.

Since I have known Anne, she has always placed others before herself. Her community service record includes active roles in supporting the Cedar Creek 4-H Club, the Elgin FFA Chapter, St. Boniface Catholic Church, the Elgin Centennial Committee, the Nebraska Farem Bureau. She was honored in 2016 as the Nebraska AG-ceptional Woman of the Year at the 8th Annual AG-ceptional Women in Agriculture Conference at Northeast Community College.

Anne Meis is an individual that exemplifies and embodies the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association’s spirit and mission. It is without reservation that I nominate Anne for the Outstanding LEAD Alumni Award. I believe she has and will continue to represent the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association at the highest level.



*Congratulations LEAD Class 41 — Class Members: Caleb Ayers, Chris Beerbohm, Amanda Berg, Jamie Bright, Jakob Burke, Kari Christensen, Easton Eggers, Mik Fox, Jon Lechtenberg, Abby Lineweber, Rhett Montgomery, Lance Pachta, Joe Ruskamp, Brian Schwartz, Anna Shadbolt, Amber Shane, Alissa Troyer, Steve Vaughn, Tyler Wellman, Luke Zangger.*

# A Lifetime of Agriculture: Nebraska LEAD Alumni Gather in the City of Power and Progress

Columbus, Neb. – Several Nebraska LEAD Alumni, spouses and friends from across the state came together in Columbus on February 17 for the annual alumni conference. The theme for the full-day event was “A Lifetime of Agriculture” with content focused on how the agricultural industry touches lives at every stage. A variety of speakers and tours provided attendees with engaging and educational experiences.



The day started at 9:30 a.m. with a tour of Behlen Manufacturing. Columbus is home to the world headquarters of the manufacturing company. Farm and ranch equipment, grain storage systems, strip joiners and metal buildings are produced at the 850,000 square foot facility. The LEAD group was able to learn about the history of the company, see the production facility and understand Behlen’s impact at the local, national and international levels.

Following the tour with Behlen Manufacturing, participants commuted to the Columbus Community Building for a working lunch as the Nebraska LEAD Alumni annual meeting was held.

After the annual meeting, Megahn Schafer, executive director with the Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation, presented “Laying a Foundation through Ag Education.” During her discussion, Meghan described how the Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation is working to increase agricultural literacy in K-12 students.



To understand how youth are learning about agriculture at the earliest stages of their education, the LEAD Alumni group toured the Columbus Area Children’s Museum. This brand-new museum allows youth to learn through play and is a partnership between the community and the agricultural industry. Youth exhibits are focused on modern agriculture, from animal health to crop production.

Dr. Tiffany Heng-Moss, dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, visited with the group following the children’s museum, to discuss what UNL is doing to develop the future ag workforce. Dean Heng-Moss described partnerships with high schools, community colleges and other groups to engage with young people entering agriculture.

“Ag Trends: Here and There” was the title of the next presentation from Hilary Maricle, deputy director for the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. During this discussion, Hilary provided an ag update, discussed local and national policy issues and talked about international trade.

Following a networking reception (provided by the Columbus-area LEAD alumni) and dinner, the LEAD Alumni group heard from Pillen Family Farms. What started as



*Megahn Schafer, Executive Director, NE Farm Bureau Foundation.*



*Dr Tiffany Heng-Moss, Dean, College of Ag Sciences and Natural Resources.*

a 2,500 head sow farm started by Gov. Jim Pillen in 1994 has transformed into a world-renowned commercial swine production and genetics company. In the moderate keynote discussion, Gov. Pillen and siblings Brock Pillen and Sarah Pillen – who serve as co-CEOs of Pillen Family Farms and DNA Genetics – discussed the company growth and family business succession, all while promoting rural jobs and development.



*Members of Class 40.*

Nebraska LEAD Class 40 graduates Dr. Tee Bush, David Moss, Austin Benes and Kurtis Harms helped coordinate the full-day 2024 LEAD Alumni Conference. Special thanks to all the presenters as well as the following donors: Pillen Family Farms/DNA Genetics, Nebraska Corn Board, Bank of the Valley, AKRS, FCS America, CoBank and the Columbus-area LEAD alumni. Special thanks to everyone who attended and helped make the day a success!



*Austin Benes, David Moss, Kurtis Harms, Tee Bush.*



*Panel discussion: Gov Pillen with Sarah and Brock Pillen.*



*Dr Hejny Recognition: Dr. and Mrs. Hejny with Gerald Clausen.*



# Meet Joe Ruskamp - New Board Member



My name is Joe Ruskamp, and I am the LEAD Class 41 representative. I was born and raised on a family farm and feedlot in the Snyder, Nebraska area. I graduated from Dodge High School and attended the University of Technical Agriculture in Curtis, Nebraska afterwards. I started my career working with John Deere equipment about 30 years ago at a local dealership called Platte Valley Equipment. I was with them until about 2 years ago when I transitioned into my current role as Service Support with the ownership group of Platte Valley Equipment and several other dealerships. My wife and I currently live on an acreage outside of North Bend.

I have two children both involved in the agriculture industry. Eddie, our oldest, farms in the North Bend area and plans to settle down with his fiancé near us. Liz works in the soybean export industry and currently lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Her future plans are still up in the air, but she'll forever be a Husker no matter her location.

I joined the Nebraska LEAD Program to gain additional knowledge about our state and the agriculture industry. The program did so much more for me than that. I learned more about specific issues. I learned about the struggles on the NRD and their constant battle with one of our states most treasured resources. I learned about the oil industry in our state. I also learned our great in state colleges and how they are dedicated to developing

the next generation of leaders. It was very rewarding to learn how much of an effect that our great state has on the rest of the world.

For me, the chance to represent our class just seemed natural. I was blessed with a great group of individuals in our class. This felt like a great way to extend the LEAD experience and be a spokesperson for our class. I look forward to opportunity to meet as many alumni as possible.



## 2024 Dr. Allen G. Blezek Friend of LEAD Award – Donna Hutchens

*Dr. Terry Henjy gave this insight on Donna Hutchens:*

Donna (and her husband, Don) began hosting the second-year LEAD Fellows for food and fellowship at their home here in Lincoln in the fall of 1997. The Hutchens' hosted the Fellows during the IANR Ag Policy, Finance, and Policy seminar that is held in late October/early November. This was an opportunity for the LEAD Fellows to unwind after a strenuous day of presentations and not be viewed under the microscope in public setting dinner function, a chance to enjoy robust conversation and share LEAD stories and experiences.

Please note, that when I became director of LEAD in the fall of 2007, Dr. Blezek shared with me that one of my greatest challenges would be finding affordable dinner venues in Lincoln or Omaha for a group of 30 plus people (and when spouses are included, it becomes 45-50 people and an increasing amount of expense). How soon I found out!

Early in September of 2008, Don Hutchens contacted me and shared that he would be in Washington, DC with the Corn Board and they would not be able to host the LEAD Fellows this fall. He asked if there was another time that they could host the second-year Fellows and I responded that the night before the Annual Recognition Banquet in March, but that would include spouses, so we are looking at 45-50 people. He immediately said they would do it. I said wait a minute, please ask Donna, and call me back tomorrow. Well, I will never know if he asked Donna. But, beginning in March of 2009, Donna Hutchens hosted the LEAD Fellows and their spouses at her home in Lincoln the night before this very banquet.

**Continued on next page**

**Friend of LEAD**  
**Continued**

She has prepared all the food – snacks, main course, desserts and made available several beverage options, etc. Most importantly, she opened her home in a most welcoming way so the LEAD Fellows and their spouses, in a casual atmosphere could spend time together, reflecting on their LEAD experiences and friendships, in a “family” environment before their graduation from LEAD the next day. The Hutchens have hosted the LEAD Program at their home for 22 years, 9 times was for the Fellows only and 13 times included both the Fellows and spouses. It’s certainly obvious, the Hutchens have provided significant financial support for LEAD for many years in hosting the group at their home. However, the experience provided by Donna Hutchens to so many LEAD Fellows and spouses is simply priceless. In addition, Donna is the wife of a LEAD alum as Don is a LEAD I alum, a mother of a LEAD alum as her son, Jered is a member of LEAD 31, the mother-in-law of a LEAD alum, as her son-in-law, Matt Boos is member of LEAD 32, and an aunt of a LEAD alum, as her nephew, Nick Fowler is a member of LEAD 33.



## Tami’s Notes



*Tami Clausen, LEAD Executive Secretary.*

All I can say is it’s been a whirlwind of a few months – 2023 LEAD Alumni Annual Meeting, 2024 Annual Conference, Investment Committee meeting, Membership renewal contacts, LEAD Alumni Board Meeting, LEAD 41 Graduation Banquet, Newsletter production – but I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. If you see Nancy Eberle make sure you thank her for all the years, she kept things organized!!! This position with the LEAD Alumni has been very fulfilling. I have put so many “faces with the name” the past couple of months and everyone is so welcoming and helpful.

One conclusion that I have come to is that the future of the Nebraska LEAD Program and the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association is so vibrant. Working with the Class 40 representatives on the Annual Conference showcased for me the leadership and desire that they bring to the organization. I have been to several of the Annual Conferences and I would say the one that they organized was at the top of the list. Thank them and give back.

Gathering the LEAD Alumni Association for a full Board Meeting in Lincoln and on zoom reaffirmed that they have a true passion for the Nebraska LEAD Program and the Alumni. The full board only meets quarterly but they get so much done within a couple of hours. Thank them and give back.

I have also attended several of the graduation banquet and ceremonies since my husband’s, over 30 years ago. Attending the graduation of LEAD Class 41 was, once again, very special. The Nebraska LEAD Staff, once again, out did themselves. Thank them and give back.

But one of the most enjoyable pieces has been hearing from association members. I have asked many of you to share what you gained from your time in the LEAD program and how you have applied it. What great stories you have to share. I invite you to THANK the Nebraska LEAD program by “tooting your own horn”. Share your story, it’s not bragging! Be the catalyst that leads a new LEAD Fellow to the program. If future leaders don’t hear your story, how can they know what the LEAD program can do for them and the future of Agriculture in Nebraska and beyond. How can you share? Reach out to Mark Suhr, Social Media Coordinator and he will be happy to showcase your experience. Give me a call or shoot me an email, share your story so that I can publish it in the future.

In the end, I want to thank everyone for your assistance over the past few months. Thank them and give back. This little phrase is all that we need to further the mission and support the Nebraska LEAD program and the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association

# The Update

Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association  
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## Share Your Story

Of all the things I took away from my LEAD experience, none were greater than being inspired to get out of my comfort zone and push myself to reach my potential. To that end, I began pursuing a career as a diplomat. It took many years, but in 2021 I joined the U.S. Department of State and took the oath of office to become a new Foreign Service Officer. I recently completed a two-year tour at the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait, and later this year I'll move to Brasilia, Brazil to work at our embassy there. Although my links to agriculture have waned, representing our country and assisting U.S. citizens overseas is extremely rewarding, and I'm 100 percent convinced that I wouldn't be where I am today without having gone through the LEAD Program.

Kevin Griess  
LEAD 28

## Mission Statement

Our Mission is to encourage our members to continue as agricultural leaders by using their skills, insight, knowledge and network to LEAD by their example.

Connect with us through our website at <http://www.neleadalumni.com>, our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Leadalumni>, contact@neleadalumni or on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a164IDsg07Q>

*Please remember to submit important Nebraska LEAD Alumni news to:*

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## **NETWORK!**

Keep the spirit of the  
Nebraska LEAD  
Program ALIVE!

Update is the official newsletter of the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association. The purpose of the publication is to keep you, a vital part of the LEAD network, linked with fellow alumni!