

Nebraska Foundation, Mrs. Harlan chose Courtney to be the recipient of their Harlan Fellowship.

The Harlans have taken an active interest in supporting agricultural and law programs at this University. Their contributions include the Harlan Vice Chancellorship in the Institute of Agriculture & Natural Resources, the Neal Harlan Professorship of Agribusiness, the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources Scholarship Program and the Judge Harry A. Spencer Professorship of Law which honors Lee’s father, a former Nebraska Supreme Court Justice.

**Dr. James T. & Connie Horner Fellowship**

**Rachel Ibach** of Lincoln continues in her second year as the first Dr. James T. and Connie Horner Fellow for Nebraska LEAD Class 42 through the University of Nebraska Foundation. Dr. James T. Horner was born dirt-poor on a small family cotton farm near Hornersville, Missouri, on July 14, 1928, and passed away on July 12, 2022, in Naples, Florida. Dr. Horner excelled academically, militarily and in leadership roles. His undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees were earned at the University of Missouri, and he launched his military career through ROTC (United States Army).

In the early 1980s, Dr. Horner took on the responsibility of organizing the Nebraska LEAD Program and served as the “Founding Director.” Dr. Horner’s organizational skills and leadership served him well and, under his direction, the program got off the ground and has become one of the top programs of its kind in the country today. After some 35 years on the faculty, Jim took early retirement in 1994. During the 2019 LEAD Banquet, he shared, “when people ask me what I am most proud of in my career, I say, ‘LEAD.’”

**Kreuscher LEAD Fellowship**

**Traci Menke** LEAD 42 of Seward continues in her second year as the first Kreuscher LEAD Fellow. John and Kristi (Kammerer) Kreuscher of Gothenburg established the Kreuscher LEAD Fellowship Fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation to honor their parents who promoted agriculture and leadership. Allen Kreuscher was a founding member of the Nebraska Corn Growers Association and worked to establish the Nebraska Corn Board and Nebraska Ethanol Board. Allen helped establish the DeWitt Grange and Christ Community Church in Beatrice. Marvin Kammerer was a lifelong farmer, a Harlan County Supervisor and a Republican City School Board member. He also served as a 4-H leader for many years.

John is a Nebraska LEAD Class 4 Alumnus and has been involved in agricultural lending for 46 years. Kristi served as the Perkins County Court Clerk Magistrate and then served as a Senior Business Analyst on the JUSTICE Computer Project with the Nebraska Court System.

**Lancaster County Farm Bureau LEAD Fellowship**

**John Sullivan** LEAD 43 of Superior has been selected as the first Lancaster County Farm Bureau LEAD Fellow. Through this endowment fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation, the Lancaster County Farm Bureau is supporting local Farm Bureau members who are passionate about serving the agricultural industry. This endowment from the Lancaster County Farm Bureau will also hopefully serve as an inspiration and a challenge to other county Farm Bureaus across the state to fund their own Nebraska LEAD Fellowships to promote the development of well-reasoned leaders for agriculture.

**Larry V. & Linda J. Pearson LEAD Fellowship**

**Blake Hokamp** of Randolph continues in his second year as the first Larry V. and Linda J. Pearson Fellow for Nebraska LEAD Class 42. The Pearson’s established their fellowship at the University of Nebraska Foundation in order to support the Nebraska LEAD Program and an agricultural producer from northeast Nebraska. Larry grew up on a farm near Wausa, Nebraska, while Linda grew up in Redfield, South Dakota. Larry worked for more than 35 years in the

energy industry and retired in 2009 after more than 20 years with Tenaska, Inc., in Omaha. Prior to his retirement, he was President and CEO of Operations where he was responsible for all aspects of Tenaska’s 13,000-megawatt power plant portfolio and the operation of Tenaska’s pipeline systems. Linda has served on the board of the Omaha Hearing School and on numerous projects supporting their childrens’ schools. Larry served two terms on the board of directors of the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council from 2010 to 2016 and currently serves on the board of Nebraska Methodist Health System/Nebraska Methodist Hospital in Omaha. His prior civic and charitable activities include a long history of volunteering with the Boy Scouts and service on several boards, including the Omaha Chamber of Commerce and the Nebraska Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Larry and Linda have also been active in their church, St. Luke United Methodist Church in Omaha.

**Frank & Shirley Sibert LEAD Fellowship**

**Neleigh Gehl** LEAD 43 of Ericson was selected to be the Frank and Shirley Sibert Fellow. Through their Frank and Shirley Sibert LEAD Program Excellence Fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation, Mr. Sibert chose Neleigh to be the 2024-2026 recipient of their Sibert Fellowship. Frank and Shirley Sibert graduated from Red Cloud High School. In addition, both graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln: Frank with a degree in animal science and Shirley with a degree in music and elementary education.

Through their married life, which was over 65 years, they volunteered countless hours and provided significant funding in support of the Nebraska LEAD Program, the University of Nebraska and Nebraska agriculture. Shirley passed away in July of 2018. Neleigh is the 14th Sibert Fellow.

**Jerry & Naomi Warner Fellowship**

**Amy Warner** LEAD 43 of Edison has been selected as the second Jerry and Naomi Warner Fellow. Through their Jerry A. and Naomi I. Warner LEAD Program Excellence Fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation, the Warners chose Amy to be the 2024-2026 recipient of their Fellowship.

Jerry and Naomi received their undergraduate degrees from UNL: Jerry in agricultural education and Naomi in family and consumer science education. Naomi also earned both a master’s and Ph.D. from UNL in adult education. Although neither Jerry nor Naomi had the opportunity to be a LEAD Fellow, they are strong supporters of what the Nebraska LEAD Program offers and the developmental impact it has on those who participate. Since retiring - Jerry from Farmers National and Naomi from education, the couple has traveled extensively and enjoy winters in Arizona.

**Kathy Wittler, DVM LEAD Fellowship**

**Logan Reed** of Holdrege continues in his second year as the first Kathy Wittler, DVM LEAD Fellow for Nebraska LEAD Class 42. Dr. Wittler established her fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation in order to give back to the program that gave her so much while also providing this amazing opportunity to others. Dr. Wittler is a LEAD 6 alumna who grew up on a farm by Cozad. Upon graduating from LEAD, Kathy went back to college to retake all the science courses that she had originally taken in the 1970s as those courses were all outdated 20 years later. Kathy then went to Kansas State University where she earned her veterinary medicine degree (DVM) in 2002 at the age of 50. She then practiced in the Omaha, Lincoln and Council Bluffs areas for 17 years until retirement. As Dr. Wittler shared, “I would never have considered doing something as outrageous as going back to college and vet school without the support of my family and my LEAD experience.”



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Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council

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**Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council (NALC) Notice of Annual Meeting**  
**Friday, March 21, 2025**

**WHO:** Current NALC Members  
**WHAT:** Election of Board of Directors  
**WHEN:** Friday, March 21, 2025, 4:30-5:00 p.m.  
**WHERE:** Nebraska East Campus Union

All current members of the NALC are invited to attend the annual meeting of the NALC. In addition to other applicable requirements for membership, current members are those who have contributed at least \$ 100 to NALC for the Nebraska LEAD Program. Membership contributions must be received in the Nebraska LEAD Program office between July 1, 2024, and March 1, 2025.

**Nebraska Farm Bureau Scholarship Awardees**

Since 2003, the Nebraska Farm Bureau Services, Inc., has offered \$ 1,000 scholarships to Nebraska LEAD Program Fellows meeting certain criteria:

Please join us in congratulating the following LEAD Fellows for being selected this year’s Nebraska Farm Bureau Scholarship recipients: LEAD 42: **Michelle Bose** of Arcadia, **April Deising** of Hemingford, **Adam Oldenmeyer** of Ayr, and **Jake Werner** of Lincoln. LEAD 43: **Jake Judge** of Norfolk and **Courtney Nelson** of Norfolk.

Scholarship applicants must be a current member of their local Farm Bureau and have “Professional Producer” status. Upon their completion of the LEAD Program, the scholarship recipients must agree to serve in county Farm Bureau leadership in one of the following capacities: officer, director, committee member or committee chair, or on a state Farm Bureau committee.

**Applications for Nebraska LEAD Class 44 are available!**  
**Seminars begin fall 2025.**  
**The application deadline is June 15, 2025.**

Contact Irene in the LEAD office now for an application at 402-472-6810 or imalzer2@unl.edu.



Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council

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Nebraska LEAD Program  
Kurtis Harms, Executive Director  
Shana Gerdes, Administrative Associate  
Irene Malzer, Administrative Associate

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Please send inquiries, change in contact information and all correspondence to:

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# The LEAD Review

## Director's Update



By Kurtis Harms, Director  
Nebraska LEAD Program

Hello, Nebraska LEAD Program supporters!

I am excited to introduce myself as the new Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program. Stepping into this role following Dr. Terry Hejny’s retirement in early-July is both an honor and a responsibility that I approach with great humility. Dr. Hejny’s leadership and dedication over the years have shaped this program into what it is today, and I am grateful for the opportunity to build on his legacy. I am eager to continue our mission of cultivating strong leaders for Nebraska’s agricultural industry.

As an alumnus of Nebraska LEAD Class 40, I know firsthand the transformative impact this program can have on its Fellows. The Nebraska LEAD Program not only deepened my understanding of the agricultural industry locally and globally, but the program also connected me with a network of colleagues and friends who continue to influence my life and career. Now, as I step into the role of Director, I am eager to provide future Fellows with the same impactful experience.

Since joining the program, I have had the pleasure of participating in the selection process for Nebraska LEAD Class 43, and I have also led several seminars for both LEAD Classes 42 and 43. It has been inspiring to witness the passion, dedication and enthusiasm these emerging leaders bring to Nebraska agriculture. I am excited to collaborate with our current classes as we journey throughout the state, across the nation and around the world. I’ve also had the privilege over these last several months to meet many Nebraska LEAD alumni and supporters of the program. It’s because of your passion and dedication that the Nebraska LEAD Program is regarded as the best of its kind in the nation.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Nebraska LEAD Program. I look forward to this new chapter and to working together to cultivate the next generation of leaders in Nebraska agriculture.

Warm regards,



## A Message From the Chair of the Board

Raymond Morse (LEAD 35)



Well, here we are starting another “typical” year of LEAD with LEAD Class 42 in their second year and LEAD Class 43 just finishing their NCTA Seminar. It is amazing to me to realize that it was eight years ago that I was just completing my Kickoff Seminar as part of LEAD Class 35. Now, here I am as Chairperson of the NALC Board writing my first message for our LEAD Review! I have read the previous messages in the LEAD Review and talked to different LEAD Alumni over the years, and the same topic comes up quite a bit. When we were thinking of or were being recruited to apply for the LEAD Program, every one of us thought the same thing, “No way do I have time to do that!” Yet, here we are with almost 1,200 graduates who decided we could take the time to go through a program that improves our ability to be a leader, become more involved in local, state and national agricultural issues and the different related organizations. I do not think there is a more important time than now for better leaders in our agricultural communities.

Dr. Hejny always asked us, “What will you do after LEAD?” For me, personally, I was able to become a board member for the company I worked for (Henningesen Foods) and become a member of the NALC Board. It wasn’t because I had nothing but time on my hands. However, I learned from the LEAD Program that there would be no better time to take on new - and definitely exciting - opportunities than the present. Now, if I can do this, **anyone** can!

In my opening statement I said we are starting another “typical” year. But is it “typical?” Yes, we have another

great group of Fellows completing their second year. Yes, we have a great group of Fellows starting their adventure for their first year. Yes, we have more new members on the NALC Board and a new executive group on the board. And last, but certainly not least, we have an impressive couple of people in Shana and Irene that keep this well-oiled machine running! All “typical” things for the new year. Except, after 17 years, Dr. Terry Hejny retired from his position as Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program.

I wanted to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Hejny, for the time and patience he had with me, and for what he has done for our Nebraska LEAD Program. I am not sure if he is aware of the positive impact he has had - not only through all the classes he directed, but all the people across the state he worked with. Thank You!

In June, Kurtis Harms was selected as the new director of our Nebraska LEAD Program. Over the past few months, I have had the pleasure of working with him and he has hit the ground running. As a member of LEAD Class 40, Kurtis understands the history of LEAD and has many innovative ideas. I am confident he will keep our program at the forefront of **all** leadership programs and continue to graduate high quality agriculture leaders. I’m excited to see Kurtis LEAD on!

For the LEAD Classes 42 and 43: I look forward to seeing your growth as you embark on and complete your Nebraska LEAD Program adventure!

## Stronger Together

Shana Gerdes



“Every age faces its challenges. . . But we are stronger than we think. We’re stronger together than alone.”

President Biden spoke these words during his address to the United Nations on September 24, 2024. I would like to think we can all agree on the truth stated here. There are always challenges (new and old) to be overcome. At times the “together” we find are words of encouragement from our peers and family; there is strength in others believing in us. Our Nebraska LEAD Program provides a leadership toolbox for our Fellows. Maybe more importantly, Fellows have an opportunity to build a network of strength through their classmates and our alumni. It is my hope that this strength then builds belief that challenges are surmountable and sometimes even the gateway to something better. I’m hopeful that together, among other things, our Fellows will find ways to remedy rural food and healthcare insecurity and create and implement new sustainable farming practices. We also need our Fellows to be bold enough to step to the front and lead from a place of integrity, strength and awareness that leaders are there to represent the best interest of their constituents and build communities that value all of us - together.

## Banquet 2025

NALC members: mark your calendars for the **Annual Recognition Banquet honoring LEAD 42** in the Nebraska East Campus Union, Great Plains Room. **March 21, 2025 \* 5:30 p.m. Social \* 6:30 p.m. Dinner**

## LEAD 13

We are holding a **30 year Reception** in your honor before the **Banquet on March 21, 2025**. Watch your mailbox for your invitation!

## The Next Chapter

Irene Malzer



September of 2024 means I have had the privilege of working with Terry and Shana and the Nebraska LEAD Program for 3 years! And while 3 years does not seem like a huge amount of time, the aggregate of learning and growing, for me, exploded. This mirrors what our Fellows tell me as they prepare to graduate from this program. As we set up the annual banquet, I am in constant communication with our Year 2 Fellows, getting things lined up for the finale with all those tiny details that do eventually add up to a fun and festive Friday evening. We celebrate all they accomplished over their 2-year journey but the highlight for most of them is the relationships they have cultivated with their fellow comrades. The ebb and flow brought on many conversations which made them think differently than when they first started. It has been a joy to watch from the sidelines the changes I see as their confidence grows after each seminar. I sure do miss communicating with them after they graduate. But then an alumnus comes in and takes over as the new LEAD director, and now I have the honor of watching a full circle moment happen right before my eyes, as Kurtis Harms started his new position in June of 2024. So, after 3 years of learning from Terry and Shana, I now have a front row seat to see where Kurtis will take our program! I look forward to the next chapter in the LEAD legacy.

The LEAD office would like to express our regret for missing in our annual report the in-kind donation of a dinner during our final seminar for LEAD 41 hosted by **Don (LEAD 1) and Donna Hutchens** at their house. Don and Donna have been the most gracious of hosts for a great number of our LEAD Fellows over the years. Thank you, Don and Donna, we most sincerely apologize for omitting your names from our list of supporters in the 2023-24 annual report.

## Meet Our New Board Members

**Tracy J. Behnken** grew up on a Nebraska dairy farm where she gained an appreciation for hard work and discovered firsthand the importance of agriculture. Choosing to stay connected and to gain a wider knowledge of agriculture, she sought a bachelor’s degree in animal science and later a master’s degree in human development and the family with an ag education minor, both from UNL. Working in Extension and 4-H youth development for more than 32 years, and as the Farmer Relations Manager for Midwest Dairy (dairy checkoff) since 2021, has allowed her to extend her knowledge and love of agriculture and food systems. Tracy is a member of LEAD 15 and has served as president of the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association. Her husband, Craig, is an alumnus of LEAD 21. Tracy’s personal life includes her husband Craig and two sons, Walker and Carter. Her family shares the love of agriculture as they are all involved in some way with her family dairy farm near Bennington.

**Nathan Dorn** (LEAD 33) is owner and operator of Dorn Farms in Firth, Nebraska – a 4th generation family farm where he works with his dad, uncles and cousins. He attended Doane College where he received a social science education degree in 2007. He currently serves on the Gage County Farm Bureau Board. Nathan and his wife Tonia (married on 2-22-2022) live in Firth with their four children.

**Ron Sabatka** is the Farm Manager Coordinator for Pioneer West of the Mississippi River. In this role, he coordinates communication, agronomic information and product support between Professional Farm Managers, Pioneer seed representatives and Corteva employees. Ron joined Pioneer/Corteva in 2001 and has served customers in several roles, including technical information manager, area sales manager, commercial unit lead; digital, commercial unit manager; seed and technical marketing manager; seed-applied technologies. Before joining Corteva, he had eight years of experience in crop protection, serving with American Cyanamid and BASF.

Rooted in the heartland, Ron was raised on a family farm in central Nebraska. His academic journey led him to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he earned a Bachelor’s of Science and Master’s of Science degrees in agronomy. Ron and his wife, Denise, are proud of their two sons, one daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. When at leisure, he devotes time to his family and faith life, with extra time going to his passion for motorcycles, running, biking, hunting, fishing and traveling with Denise.

**Stephanie Schuler** is a graduate of the Nebraska LEAD Program, class 40. A Panhandle native, she now lives in Lincoln after graduating from the University of Nebraska –Lincoln. Stephanie is a Strategic Account Manager at Neogen where she supports customers in utilizing genomic data to efficiently manage resources and make meaningful decisions impacting global food security.

Throughout the year, Stephanie dedicates time to return to her family’s ranch in Bridgeport, helping with an array of seasonal projects. She also strives to stay connected with her Lincoln community through various volunteer opportunities and donates regularly through the local blood bank. Stephanie is excited to continue her contribution to the LEAD Program as a member of the NALC Board.



## 2024-2026 Fellowships Awarded

### Blezek Memorial Fellowship

**Jared Stauffer** LEAD 43 of Lincoln was selected as the second Dr. Allen G. Blezek Memorial Fellow and is in his first year of LEAD. The Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association and the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council/Nebraska LEAD Program established the Dr. Allen G. Blezek Memorial Fellowship Fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation to honor the memory of Dr. Blezek, the longtime Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program. Dr. Blezek served as the Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program for 23 years and upon his retirement in August of 2007 became director emeritus of the Nebraska LEAD Program.

### Dr. Allen G. & Kay L. Blezek LEAD Fellowship

**Wes Cammack** of DeWitt continues his second year as the Allen G. and Kay L. Blezek Fellow for Nebraska LEAD Class 42. Dr. Allen G. Blezek, was well-known by many in the agriculture education profession. He and his wife, Kay, continue to support the Nebraska LEAD Program through a very generous contribution that established the Dr. Allen G. and Kay L. Blezek Endowment Fund for Leadership Development at the Nebraska Community Foundation. Dr. Blezek grew up on a family farm near Randolph, Iowa. He earned a bachelor’s degree in agricultural education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and taught agriculture education in Iowa before returning to Nebraska to earn his master’s and Ph.D. degrees from UNL. He was a UNL professor and department head emeritus for the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication.

### M. Eighthy Fellowship

**Cale Harrington** LEAD 43 of Loup City has been selected as the M. Eighthy Fellow and is in his first year of LEAD. Through the M. Eighthy Foundation LEAD Fellow Fund at the University of Nebraska Foundation, Cale was chosen to be the 2024-2026 recipient of their Fellowship.

Before his death in 2000 at the age of 91, Mervin R. Eighthy established a foundation, which pledged steadfast support to Nebraska agriculture, youth and education.

Today, the philanthropic plan laid out by Mr. Eighthy, a Custer County ranch owner, animal scientist and president of Gooch Feed Mill, is to become longtime benefactors of the University of Nebraska and its students. This includes support for the Mervin Eighthy Agricultural Scholarship, the Eighthy Farm Management Fund and the Nebraska LEAD Program and with more gifts to be made to the University of Nebraska in the future.

### Gudmundsen LEAD Program Excellence Fellowship

**Emmet Storer** of North Platte continues his second year as the Gudmundsen Fellow for Nebraska LEAD Class 42. Pete and Abbie Gudmundsen ranched near Whitman, Nebraska, prior to retiring to Arizona in the early 1980s. Their strong support of the University of Nebraska can be seen in a variety of scholarships, programs and projects funded during the past 30 years. After retiring from ranching in the 1970s, the Gudmundsens donated their ranch to the NU Foundation for use by IANR. The Rafter C Ranch became the Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory and now serves as a 12,800-acre research and educational facility.

Emmet is the fourteenth Nebraska LEAD Program participant to be designated as a Gudmundsen Fellow.

### Neal E. & Leone S. Harlan Fellowship

**Courtney Nelson** LEAD 43 of Norfolk was chosen as the 2024-2026 Neal and Leone Harlan Fellow. Through their Neal E. and Leone S. Harlan LEAD Program Excellence Fund at the University of

## Destination: Romania, Hungary and Poland - January 2025

During Nebraska LEAD Class 42’s seminar at Chadron State College, it was announced that the class will visit Romania, Hungary and Poland during their International Study/Travel Seminar in January 2025. Our Fellows will explore agriculture, leadership and culture in these dynamic countries. Stay tuned - a link will be sent out for updates from the road as they experience global agriculture firsthand!

## Congratulations and Condolences

LEAD Congratulations: **Kenny (LEAD 33)** and Jennifer **Smith** on the birth of their son, Leo Joseph, on May 3, 2024. **Nate (LEAD 35)** and Natalie **Lehmann** on the birth of their son, Myles Thomas, on June 5, 2024. **Scott (LEAD 38)** and Julia **Herz Schmalen** on the birth of their son, Fritz Quinn, on July 7, 2024. **Jake (LEAD 42)** and Marissa **Werner** on the birth of the son, Nolan, on July 24, 2024. **Dalton (LEAD 42)** and Collie **Kenning** on the birth of their daughter, Margot McCall, on July 25, 2024. We also congratulate **Rhett Montgomery (LEAD 41)** and Andie Huebner who were married on June 1, 2024; **Curtis Welsh (LEAD 40)** and Gentry Shopp who were married on May 18, 2024.

The Nebraska LEAD Program mourns the loss of and wishes to express our sympathy to: the family of **Dave Dannehl (LEAD 22)** on the passing of his mother, the family of **Calvin (LEAD 33) and Desiree Wineland (LEAD 31)** on the passing of Calvin’s father, the family of **Chris Beerbohm (LEAD 41)** on the passing of his mother, the family of **Nick Fowler (LEAD 33)** on the passing of his father, the family of **Lynn Belitz (LEAD 27)** on the passing of his wife, the family of **Nancy Eberle (LEAD 12)** on the passing of her husband, Gary.

## LEADing the Way

**Mark Linville (LEAD 23)**, CEO and president of First State Bank in Randolph, was chosen by the Nebraska Banking Association as Chair-Elect. He will assume the position of NBA Chair in May 2025.

**Larry Heyen (LEAD 23)** was appointed to the Raymond Central School Board effective May 2024.

**Anne Meis (LEAD 33)** was re-elected to serve on the Nebraska Soybean Board for her 4th consecutive term.

**Dr. Terry Hejny (LEAD 20)** is now a member of the Board of Directors at Bruning Bank.

**Tony Sibert (LEAD 39)** was promoted by Bayer Crop Science to the position of Business Unit Lead for Nebraska. He will now lead all Bayer Seed Brands and Bayer Crop Protection products in Nebraska.

**Molly Trausch (LEAD 39)** started a new position as Business Coordinator in Market Growth at the National Pork Board.

**Sophia Svanda (LEAD 43)** has begun work as the Communications and Education Coordinator at the Nebraska Soybean Board.

## Fellowship Funding Opportunity

If you are interested in establishing a fellowship as a legacy to honor someone important to you, a legacy to your family’s operation, on behalf of your organization/company, or as a means of showing your appreciation and support of your Nebraska LEAD Program, please call Kurtis at the LEAD office at 402-472-6810. He will be happy to begin that conversation with you.