

Keith Olsen, Fundraiser

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Cruisin.' That's something one does on a ship, or maybe that's what we used to do in our cars on Main Street on Saturday night. Today we'll meet a man who organizes cruises – not on ocean-going vessels or old-time cars, but with tractors as a way to raise money for a worthy purpose. It's just one of the many creative ways which this community leader has found to raise funds for worthy causes. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Keith Olsen is a farmer and community leader in Brown County, Kansas. He farms near the community of Horton, population 1,935 people. That's rural, but there's more.

Keith grew up at Horton. He was going to be a teacher but after college, he had the opportunity to come back to the farm. He has always been involved in helping develop activities for kids.

For example, Keith noticed that there was no carnival or festival at the Brown County Fair. One night Keith attended a program put on by his local John Deere dealer and saw a video of a pedal tractor pull. He thought that might be a fun activity for kids at the fair, so he went to work. He built a sled for the tractors to pull, organized a contest and enlisted kids to participate. It went so well that others became interested, and eventually Keith was doing pedal tractor pulls at events in four states. In fact, he and his wife Denise were married on the one weekend in the summer which Keith had open from tractor pulls.

Keith has other interests as well. He was active on Kansas Farm Bureau Young Farmer and Rancher committee, now serves as a county commissioner, and in winter months works as a basketball referee. One day he was officiating at the middle school in the rural community of Everest, population 311 people. That's rural, but there's more. Someone commented about the school's gym floor, which was covered with old linoleum tiles and not very suitable for basketball. Keith decided to take this on as a project and brainstormed various ideas to raise money.

He organized various sports camps and tailgate events with K-State coaches, with the proceeds going for a new hardwood gym floor at Everest Middle School. In two and a half years, he raised more than 70 thousand dollars. When the time came to dedicate the floor, Keith kept his characteristic sense of humor. "Don't put my name on it," Keith said. "I don't want to be dribbled on." Today a plaque honoring Keith's contributions hangs outside the Everest gym.

Keith still does a multi-state boys football camp with former NFL star Paul Coffman and others, plus a basketball camp for boys and girls. Among the beneficiaries are Highland Community College.

Keith and Denise have two daughters, Greta and Ingrid. When Ingrid was one year old, she was diagnosed with Angelman Syndrome, a neuro-genetic disorder which requires lifetime care. Suddenly Keith's fund-raising efforts became even more personal.

One fund-raising idea which he had tried was a tractor cruise. That's an event where farmers and other tractor enthusiasts bring their antique tractors together for a cross-country caravan. Keith has now organized the northeast Kansas tractor cruise into

an annual event. Each tractor driver pays a fee, with proceeds going to the Angelman Syndrome Foundation.

In fall 2011, more than 40 antique tractors took part in a 30 mile tractor cruise across Brown County. They went from Everest to the rural community of Lancaster, population 292 people. Now, that's rural.

In 2009, Keith was one of eight Kansans honored by the Topeka Capital-Journal for his accomplishments in philanthropy. His work also earned him recognition as a Harvest Hero by John Deere and the High Plains Journal. Meanwhile, he is working on plans for the next annual tractor cruise in fall 2012.

Cruisin.' It's not just done on ships or on Main Street during Saturday night. Tractor cruises are one of the creative ideas used by Keith Olsen to make a difference by raising funds for worthy causes for his home and community. He's not just cruisin,' he is cruisin' for a cause.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.