

One in a *Ver* Million

Dream of Red Earth Coop getting close to reality

By David Lias
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The dream of a number of Vermillion citizens to open a cooperative food store came a step closer to reality last week, thanks to a membership boost provided by musicians Jami Lynn and Dylan James.

The duo performed a free concert Thursday night, Jan. 24, in the Red Earth Cooperative's downtown Vermillion storefront, located at 108 E. Main Street, before a capacity audience.

Red Earth Cooperative has been developed with the goal of becoming a member-owned, one-stop grocery. It has been formed to be a source of local, healthy food in southeast South Dakota.

Its members work mainly on a volunteer basis, and have developed a business plan. Red Earth will consist of retail store offering a "one-stop shop" grocery experience with attention to local foods and sustainability.

The members and the cooperative's board of directors are working on

the grass-roots level to build membership. To be successful, those involved with Red Earth have determined they need 250 members. The members help the co-op financially by paying a \$40 annual fee. They also will provide volunteer labor when needed to help sustain the business.

Thanks in part to last week's concert, the cooperative's board of directors signed up new members and made progress toward reaching that 250-member goal.

"I feel this (the cooperative) is a unique way to use your purchasing power," said Ryan Munes, who serves as the board's secretary. "By being part of a co-op, you're able to use your purchasing power to make decisions on items that you buy."

It doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to realize why Munes has become involved with the Red Earth Cooperative.

"I studied wildlife ecology, and I've returned to school - I'm

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While Norbert Pinkelman isn't technically a Vermillion resident - he, in fact farms and resides just across the river in Nebraska, he hopes he and his farming operation will have a growing influence - no pun intended - on the Vermillion community.

Norbert is a member of the board of directors of the Red Earth Cooperative, a dream of many citizens in the Vermillion area that's about to become a reality. The co-op received a membership boost thanks to a Jan. 24 performance by musicians Jami Lynn and Dylan James.

The duo performed a free concert in the Red Earth Cooperative's downtown Vermillion storefront, located at 108 E. Main Street, before a capacity audience.

"Part of the reason I got involved with it (the cooperative) is there is no reason why we can't grow our own food locally," said Norbert, who farms on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River not far from where the Clay County Park is located on the South Dakota side of the river.

"We can't grow everything that we need, but we can produce a lot of it," he said. "Why shouldn't we grow good food locally instead of exporting the good food to other areas?"

Norbert plans to be a producer for the cooperative. He raises livestock on his farm, and also is involved in honey production. Audience members at the Jan. 24 concert dined on popcorn raised by Norbert's father.

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Meet Norbert Pinkelman



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Being involved with Red Earth continues to be an adventure, Norbert said.

"None of us on the

board have been involved with a co-op, or been on a co-op board, so the learning curve is kind of tremendous," he said, laughing. "We are learning as we are going here. Sometimes, people may think we aren't doing things right ... we don't know. We're doing the best that we can, we're feeling our way through it, and we're hoping we're doing things right. Time will tell."

Norbert is confident that the cooperative will be successful. "There is no reason that this cannot work," he said. "People have to understand what a co-op means. It means that the members have to participate and support it. Along with that commitment is the fact that you get to have a say in it. As a co-op, we still have to be concerned with profit or loss, but at the same time, our members remain an important factor."

"Can it work? Definitely," Norbert said. "But it's up to the people to make it work."

The cooperative needs to attract fewer than 100 members to reach its goal

of 250. "The reason we want 250 members is so we know we have a customer base," he said, "plus, it raises capital for the business, too. We are all on a shoestring budget. The board members are all contributing their time and talents and money, too. It's a great idea."

Contemporary agribusiness, he said, involves shipping locally-raised crops and livestock out of the area for processing at plants owned by large, multi-national corporations.

"Every load of corn or livestock that gets hauled out of the area means you're hauling economy out of the area," Norbert said. "If we can produce it here, and purchase it here, and consume it here, we're generating economic activity. And we don't need the state to help us - the people can do that themselves, and it's real economy."

The doors of the cooperative's Main Street business have yet to open. The space, except for a couple coolers and some other equipment, is mostly empty. But the walls boast a fresh coat of paint; the ceiling and lighting also appears to have received substantial attention.

It is a place that seems to be very, very close to have an "open" sign appear on its front door soon.

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