

The Trail Blazer of the Year Award is a prestigious honor bestowed annually. The award recognizes an individual who gives of his/her talents and resources to the community in such a way the entire community reaps the benefits.

Tonight's recipient was born in Redwing, Minnesota. He grew up with three brothers and a sister and he is the oldest. He graduated from Waldorf-Pemberton High in Minnesota. He attended SD School of Mines in Rapid City, SD where he met his future bride. He received a degree in Geological Engineering. Germany was his home for four years while serving the Army. He finished his army stint in Tucson. In 1978, he married his bride in Hershey, NE. In 1979, he and his family moved to Casper, Wyoming for a career in the oil field industry, which later brought him to Houston. Not wanting to raise his sons in a metropolitan area. He and his wife returned to Western Nebraska where he was a marketing director for Supreme Beef. His journey changed to the sugar industry where he served thirteen years as the CEO of Western Sugar Company. Accomplishments included construction of the molasses desugarization plant and later dealing with the aftermath of the sugar dust explosion in Scottsbluff in 1996. It happened on July 20th and by October 20th the plant was put back together to process the crop. It took two years to rebuild the factory. There were endless streams of acts of courage, strength, professionalism and determination. Traits he still displays today. In 1996, he collaborated with others to purchase a John Deere dealership in Alliance. This initial purchase has now grown into sixteen locations in the region, with over 450 employees. The 21st Century Group purchased Valley Irrigation in the Panhandle and added a Leasing Company. They are a leader in subservice drip irrigation in the region, which can deliver limited water resources to crops much more efficiently. He has donated considerable equipment, knowledge and resources to the UNL Panhandle Research & extension Center for us in irrigation research.

He has an interest and commitment to conserving and improving our natural resources. He is a member of the Department of Natural Resources Commission and member and past state chair of the Nature Conservancy. Currently he is a board member and serves on the executive committee for the Platte Institute for Economic Development. He engaged the Nature Conservancy to support the Platte River Implementation Program.

He is actively engaged in production agriculture with his son, Bryan. They demonstrate and share their data, which demonstrates the value of all available agricultural technologies, such as soil moisture probes, telematics, yield monitoring, strip tillage, and variable rate seeding and fertilization to improve production practices. Through his 16 John Deere dealership locations, his team engages in farm-size demonstration plots with field days to promote the adoption of the most current agronomic practices.

At the family's annual calf branding, a great effort is put forth to invite non-farm/ranch participants to learn and preserve the old traditions of branding while demonstrating the humane methods of treating and raising beef cattle.

He and his wife have given of their time and talents to the community in many ways. Both served as presidents of Twin Cities Development. He serves on the Foundation of South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, Trustee for Chadron State College Foundation, Trustee & past president of Scottsbluff's YMCA.

Perhaps one of his most significant endeavors was when he was appointed by the Governor Ricketts and University of Nebraska President Hank Bonds to Co-chair the Blue Print of Nebraska Commission, a statewide initiative for economic development. Blue Print Nebraska was a massive 12-month statewide visioning and planning process in 2018-19 to develop a comprehensive economic development strategy to propel Nebraska's economy into the future. It involved 18 industry councils populated with over 200 people who represent a "who's Who" in Nebraska. The resulting plan is currently being implemented through various organizations. Elements of the plan will reappear in many ways. One obvious one will be through aspect of legislation in the coming years. His co-leadership was a huge commitment personally and is point of pride for Nebraska agriculture.

Twenty years ago, he was recognized as Scottsbluff/Gering United chamber's rising Star 2002. In 2005 he was Star-Herald's Citizen of the year. In 2016, he was recognized by Nebraska State chamber in their Hall of Fame and in 2022, he received the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement. This trail blazer's caring and serving the community does not stop. He joined forces with another entity to hold major benefit activities to raise money for the affected farmers from the irrigation canal collapse. He has and will continue to give a tremendous amount to the entire community but especially to the agriculture sector of the community, state, region and country. Help me welcome the 2022 Trail Blazer – Owen Palm.