Founding Edition

A publication from Open Range

OPEN BOOK



On the Cover:
To capture the breadth of what's happening across Nebraska, we looked to the state itself. From above, familiar boundaries give way to a patchwork of cities, farms, fields, and roads, each distinct but connected. To bring that perspective to life, we turned to Omaha-based illustrator Matt Carlson, whose eye for pattern and place captures something we hope this book does too, giving you a reason to look a little closer at what's happening here.

OPEN BOOK

Open Book is published by Open Range, a nonprofit organization connecting and supporting entrepreneurs across Greater Omaha and Lincoln.

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FOREWORD

Open Range's inaugural publication captures an important moment for entrepreneurship in Nebraska.



Our state has long been known for its work ethic, entrepreneurial spirit, and ability to solve real problems. Today, those qualities are driving companies across agriculture, healthcare, software, manufacturing, energy, and other industries to innovate. The stories in these pages show that ambitious, world-class companies continue to be built right here.

They also show that no company is built alone. Behind every founder is a network of investors, mentors, educators, partners, and early customers who believed in an idea, shared their expertise, or opened a door. Those relationships are as much a part of Nebraska's startup story as the companies themselves.

As Board Chair of Open Range, I am grateful to the entrepreneurs who took the risk to build companies, often without knowing exactly where the journey would lead. I am grateful to everyone who helped them along the way, and to the Open Range team for bringing their stories to light for us to learn from.

This publication celebrates how far Nebraska has come while reminding us how much possibility lies ahead. I hope these stories leave you proud of what is being built here and inspired to play a role in what comes next.

Paul G Smith
Board Chair
Open Range

EDITOR'S LETTER



A few months into working on this publication, I told someone it would include 40 features about startups and the people building them across Nebraska.

"Nebraska has 40 startups?" they asked.

They were genuinely surprised. I laughed, but the sentiment stayed with me because it captured exactly why Open Range wanted to share these stories. Nebraska has never had a shortage of hard workers or bold ideas, but it has sometimes lacked a willingness to stop, look around, and recognize the full weight of what has been accomplished here. Midwestern humility is real, sometimes to our own detriment. People see a problem, find a solution, make it better, and move on to the next problem. This book is our chance to do some of that telling on their behalf.

My career began at Flywheel before I even understood what a technology company was, much less what it meant to build one in Nebraska. I just knew that something exciting was happening on 14th and Harney in downtown Omaha and I wanted to be a part of it. I was surrounded by people building something that felt creative, ambitious, and entirely its own. Flywheel gave me my first window into Nebraska's startup community. As that momentum grew, so did my career, taking me to startups based on both coasts and teams spread across the world.

But I have yet to encounter a community that works harder than this one. These interviews reinforced what I've seen firsthand: Nebraska's founders are ambitious yet practical. They're resilient without losing their optimism. They're determined without losing their kindness.

These pages tell how a father and son built a robot to keep farmers out of dangerous grain bins, how a mother returned to school and founded a company when she couldn't find the services her daughter needed, and how one founder kept building while going through cancer treatment. Across these features, deeply personal problems and difficult circumstances became companies, then grew with the help of early customers, mentors, investors, and employees.

Taken together, these stories reveal a startup community far more established, interconnected, and influential than many people, including many Nebraskans, realize.

Being invited to put this publication together has been one of the greatest honors of my career. It also brought our writing team full circle. Laurel Oetken, Morgan Smith, Jazmyn Schuette, and I first worked together at Flywheel, where we learned to tell product and company stories through the people building them. Years later, the band got back together to report, write, and shape a publication about the community where our own careers began.

I'm grateful to Laurel for trusting us with a project of this scale and for believing these stories deserved to be told with this much depth. This publication took far more than the four of us, of course, and the credits at the front and back of the book recognize the dozens of people who helped bring it to life.

The pages that follow were never intended to be a complete history of entrepreneurship in Nebraska. There are companies, builders, and communities we could not include, along with new ventures taking shape even as this issue goes to print.

For years, Nebraska's builders have kept their heads down and done the work. Consider this our invitation to look up, take in what's being built around us, and be a little less humble about what this state's entrepreneurs can accomplish.

Kacie Hughes
Editor-in-Chief

Creating the





The people, programs, and pivotal moments that helped Nebraska's startup community find its early footing.

Photography provided by Jeff Slobotski from the Silicon Prairie News archive

Silicon Prairie

Before Nebraska's startup community had a name, Jeff Slobotski was trying to find it.

SLOBOTSKI WAS living in Omaha and working for a New York technology company. His job took him to cities like Austin, Boston, New York, and San Francisco, where startups had already become a visible part of each city's identity. Back in Nebraska, he could see signs of that same energy. They were just harder to find.

Some of the people behind that energy were already connecting online. Slobotski helped bring them into the same room by organizing informal Tweetups, gatherings of early Twitter users at bars and coffee shops where people wore name tags with their Twitter handles. BarCamp, already taking place in cities around the world, gave Omaha's loose network another reason to gather. The premise was simple: if collaborative technology events could happen elsewhere, Omaha could host them too.

"We were super DIY, but these early events started to give people a shared identity," Slobotski said.

That identity mattered. Nebraska's business community was largely associated with established industries like finance, insurance, agriculture, transportation, and construction. Grassroots events like Tweetups and BarCamp showed developers, designers, artists, and entrepreneurs that they weren't the only ones carving out a different kind of career here.

This wasn't the beginning of entrepreneurship or innovation in Nebraska. Companies, universities, and investors had been building businesses and experimenting with new ideas for decades. William Fisher had already built ACI Worldwide into a global payments software company, proving Nebraska technology could reach far beyond the state. Hayneedle and Proxibid were growing in Omaha, while three **University of Nebraska–Lincoln** students were getting **Hudl** off the ground.[1]

Nebraska had experimented with public startup investment before. In 1986, lawmakers created the Nebraska Research and Development Authority, setting aside $4 million in seed financing for new technologies and emerging industries.[2]

More than a decade later, lawmakers tried again. Following the passage of the Nebraska Venture Capital Forum Act in 2001, **Invest Nebraska** was formed as a nonprofit in 2002 and received $500,000 over three years to strengthen connections among entrepreneurs, investors, universities, and economic development leaders.[3]

In its early years, Invest Nebraska provided technical assistance, helped companies become investment-ready, and supported business plans and pitch competitions. **Nebraska Angels** followed in 2006, giving individual investors a structure for evaluating and investing in early-stage companies together.[4]

Even with more activity, building a high-growth company in Nebraska could still be a lonely proposition. Few people nearby had scaled a startup before, and experienced startup attorneys, product leaders, regulatory specialists, and sales executives were hard to find.

A pattern was emerging, though. Nebraska produced disciplined founders who watched expenses, listened to customers, and understood the importance of revenue. Those instincts could be an advantage, but they didn't always align with a startup model built around rapid experimentation, outside capital, and a willingness to accept failure as part of the process.

Slobotski remembers early-stage capital being especially hard to find. Omaha was home to Berkshire Hathaway and significant private wealth, but that success hadn't translated into



HOW THE INFRASTRUCTURE GREW

2001 Nebraska Capital Venture Forum Act passed

2002 Invest Nebraska formed

2006 Nebraska Angels formed

2008 Silicon Prairie News launched

2009 Inaugural Big Omaha event

2011 Business Innovation Act created

2013 NMotion Accelerator launched in Lincoln

2015 Nebraska Innovation Campus opened

2022 Millwork Commons opened

2024 Silicon Prairie Rising Report published

2025 Open Range publicly launched







"Silicon Prairie News was the rallying cry that people could get behind."

Jeff Slobotski
Director of Business & Ecosystem Development
PGSA

a deep pool of startup capital. Founders frequently depended on savings or support from friends, family, and the few local investors willing to take an unfamiliar risk.

Failure carried a social burden, too. In a place shaped by Midwestern values like humility, responsibility, and keeping your word, closing a company could feel like letting people down. There weren't yet enough examples of founders who had failed, learned from it, and gone on to build again.

The ambition was already here. The community still needed more shared knowledge, stronger role models, and people who understood what building a startup required.

In July 2008, Slobotski teamed up with Omaha software entrepreneur Dusty Davidson, then co-founder of Brightmix and Tripleseat and later a co-founder of **Flywheel**.

Together, they launched **Silicon Prairie News** (SPN) [1] to cover the founders, investors, designers, developers, and creatives building companies in Nebraska and across the region. The publication gave the emerging community a megaphone that reached the coasts and beyond, while helping people see activity across Omaha, Lincoln, and neighboring cities as part of something larger.

In 2009, SPN launched **Big Omaha**, bringing nationally recognized founders, investors, and creators to Nebraska. It wasn't a conventional business conference or a step-by-step guide to starting a company. Speakers talked honestly about ambition, uncertainty, failure, and the messy work of building something real, and each May, hundreds of people traveled to Omaha from across the country to hear it.

"SPN was the rallying cry that people could get behind," Slobotski said.

More infrastructure and recurring points of connection followed. In 2011, the Nebraska Legislature passed the **Business Innovation Act**, creating grant and investment programs administered by the **Nebraska Department of Economic Development** with support from Invest Nebraska. **NMotion** launched in Lincoln in 2013, while **1 Million Cups**, Startup Week, and the Silicon Prairie Awards gave founders, investors, mentors, students, and community leaders more regular opportunities to gather.[5]

As those connections multiplied, Omaha and Lincoln increasingly saw themselves as parts of the same startup community rather than competitors vying for attention and resources. SPN connected that growing activity through a shared story and identity, while Big Omaha gave the community a place to gather around it. Over time, both became central to how the region understood itself.

That era began to shift when AIM acquired SPN in 2015. Big Omaha continued through 2018, when its last conference became part of the Maha Music Festival.[6]

Those transitions revealed how much of the community's momentum had formed around SPN and Big Omaha, and how difficult it was to sustain once both changed. A community can gather quickly around a trusted publication, event, or group of founders, but a durable ecosystem needs multiple leaders, institutions, and gathering places capable of carrying the work forward.

Growing Nebraska-based companies gave the community examples it could point to. Hudl quickly expanded far beyond its original three-person team. **Buildertrend** went from an Omaha basement startup to serving construction companies worldwide. Flywheel built a nationally recognized company before WP Engine acquired it in 2019.[7] Other founders raised capital, hired teams, sold companies, and started again.

Employees learned what rapid growth looked like from inside a startup. Investors became more familiar with early-stage deals. Founders who had struggled through their first funding round could guide someone else through it.

The network was finding its way into physical space, too. **Nebraska Innovation Campus** opened in Lincoln in 2015, attempting to bring university researchers, talent, and private-sector companies into closer proximity. By the early 2020s, **Millwork Commons** was coming together in Omaha, giving founders, investors, and other builders a place to work, gather, and cross paths outside scheduled events.[8]

For Slobotski, Millwork Commons was a continuation of the work he began with SPN. He later joined **Paul G Smith Associates** (PGSA) in a business and ecosystem development

1 Silicon Prairie News
A nonprofit media organization that covers stories related to technology, innovation, and startups primarily in Nebraska.

role, helping to shape the direction of Millwork Commons and the surrounding community.

"Millwork Commons is what we were doing with SPN online, now in physical form, offline," Slobotski said.

The community Slobotski once had to search for had become much easier to find. By 2024, Nebraska had more programs, events, funding sources, university initiatives, coworking spaces, and support organizations than ever before. But as those resources multiplied, finding the right starting point and knowing what should come next became a challenge of its own.

Knowing the right people often helped founders navigate that complexity. Nebraska's early startup networks were predominantly white, male, and rooted in technology and established business circles. Their close-knit nature helped information and introductions travel quickly, while also making personal connections the clearest way in.

The community has since grown and diversified, but relationships still provide an advantage when it comes to learning about opportunities, meeting decision-makers, and knowing where to turn. For founders without those connections, the path through a growing network of resources remained much less clear.

That increasingly complex landscape became one focus of an endeavor led by a group of local civic leaders. Building on work already underway through Omaha's participation in the MIT Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program, the effort offered a third-party assessment of the region's startup environment conducted by Fourth Economy, Urban Impact Advisors, and Mass Economics, in partnership with local staff from PGSA.

Drawing on nearly two years of interviews with local stakeholders, research, and visits to peer cities, the resulting Silicon Prairie Rising report was published in September 2024.[9]

Focused primarily on Greater Omaha and Lincoln, the study documented a substantial support network, but uneven outcomes. Omaha alone had more than 40 identified business support organizations, while Lincoln had one of the region's densest support networks. Yet Nebraska overall ranked 34th nationally in its rate of new entrepreneurs and would need to attract an additional $600 million in venture capital each year to match the top 20 states.

SILICON PRAIRIE RISING REPORT

What the 2024 assessment found

40+

Business support organizations operate within Omaha's innovation ecosystem

The **Silicon Prairie Rising report** found substantial support across Greater Omaha and Lincoln, but those resources were often scattered and difficult for founders to navigate.

WHAT FOUNDERS STILL NEED

- A clearer path through available resources
- More support between prototype and commercialization
- Stronger connections to talent, capital, and corporate partners

Nebraska has built the pieces. The next step is making them work together.

Source: Silicon Prairie Rising: Positioning Nebraska as America's Central Innovation Hub, September 2024. The 40+ figure applies specifically to Omaha.

Those findings pointed to deeper disconnects. The report described support organizations as fragmented and poorly coordinated, making it difficult for founders to know which resources to approach, when, and what should come next. It also identified gaps in public policy and investment, particularly around research, commercialization, and early-stage capital.

The report called the gap between a promising prototype and a scalable, sustainable company "pilot purgatory."[10]

Nebraska has spent much of the past 20 years building the experience founders need to cross it. Companies have found early customers, raised capital, hired teams, changed direction, scaled, sold, and started again. Much of that knowledge still lives inside private conversations and personal networks.

The pages that follow bring more of it into view through a field guide to company growth, stories of builders at different stages, profiles of accelerators and investors, and a glossary to help make sense of it all. Together, they show the customers, capital, mentors, institutions, employees, and hard-earned lessons that have helped Nebraska companies grow.

Nebraska will never be Silicon Valley, nor should it. Its strengths are proximity, close customer and community relationships, and deep knowledge of industries like agriculture, finance, healthcare, logistics, construction, and sports. The opportunity now is to make those advantages more accessible to more founders.

This publication hopes to make that path a little easier to find. ●

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A FIELD GUIDE TO OPEN BOOK

This publication can be read one story at a time, but the connections between them are part of the story, too. Over time, a flywheel takes shape as founders become mentors, early employees become entrepreneurs, customers become investors, and one company shapes the people who go on to build the next.

Understanding that cycle helps explain not only how companies get built in Nebraska, but how each one makes it a little easier for the next to begin.

How This Snapshot Came Together

Open Book: Founding Edition captures one moment in Nebraska's entrepreneurship story.

These stories grew out of conversations with founders during the spring and summer of 2026. To shape this first issue, Open Range worked with stakeholders across the community to identify startups that could reflect a range of industries, experiences, and stages of building. The final selection also reflects the founders who agreed to share their experiences and participate in our reporting.

This is not a ranking, a complete history, or an exhaustive account of every company building in Nebraska. It is one view of a much larger landscape and an invitation to notice what is working, question what isn't, and imagine what could come next.

Three Stages of Building

Open Book begins by tracing some of the programs, investments, and earlier companies that helped shape Nebraska's startup landscape. From there, it follows companies at three stages:

1

EARLY BUILDERS

Founders turning ideas into products, learning from customers, and building their earliest momentum.

2

SCALING BUILDERS

Startups gaining momentum as they expand their products, teams, customer bases, or markets.

3

BREAKOUT BUILDERS

Companies with established growth, reach, or staying power whose stories offer a longer view of building in Nebraska.

These are loose editorial groupings based on where each company was when its story was reported, not measures of importance or long-term potential. They are meant to capture this particular moment as thoughtfully as possible, knowing the landscape will continue to change long after these pages go to print.

Stories That Brought Us Here

Startups are only one part of Nebraska's entrepreneurial story. Public investment, corporate customers, established companies, major exits, and the founders and employees who go on to build what comes next all shape what is possible here.

For this issue, Open Range partnered with Silicon Prairie News to revisit and adapt several stories originally reported earlier in 2026. Together, they offer a longer view of the infrastructure and pivotal bets behind Nebraska's startup momentum, including the policies that unlocked early funding, the customers willing to take the first chance, and the homegrown companies that created jobs, developed talent, returned capital, and gave future founders a place to learn.

Names You'll See Again

Here's a peek at some of the companies, organizations, programs, and terms you'll see time and again throughout these pages. For more context as you read, turn to the full company and ecosystem index. **pg. 260**

Nebraska Business Innovation Act
A statewide economic development program that provides grants and funding to local startups.

Nebraska Prototype Grant
A matching program that helps Nebraska startups obtain financial assistance to develop new products.

Invest Nebraska
Founded in 2002, a nonprofit venture development organization that provides early-stage investment capital, strategic support, and entrepreneurial resources to startups in Nebraska.

Grit Road Partners
Founded in 2021 in Omaha, a venture capital firm that invests in seed-stage, agriculture technology startups.

MOVE Venture Capital
Founded in 2022 in Omaha, an early-stage venture capital fund investing in early-stage tech startups across Nebraska and the Midwest.

Nebraska Angels
Founded in 2006, a network of angel investors who meet to review early stage, venture-backed startups for potential investment.

NMotion, powered by gener8tor
A regional organization that runs comprehensive accelerator programs, like NMotion, to bridge the gap between early-stage traction and long-term growth.

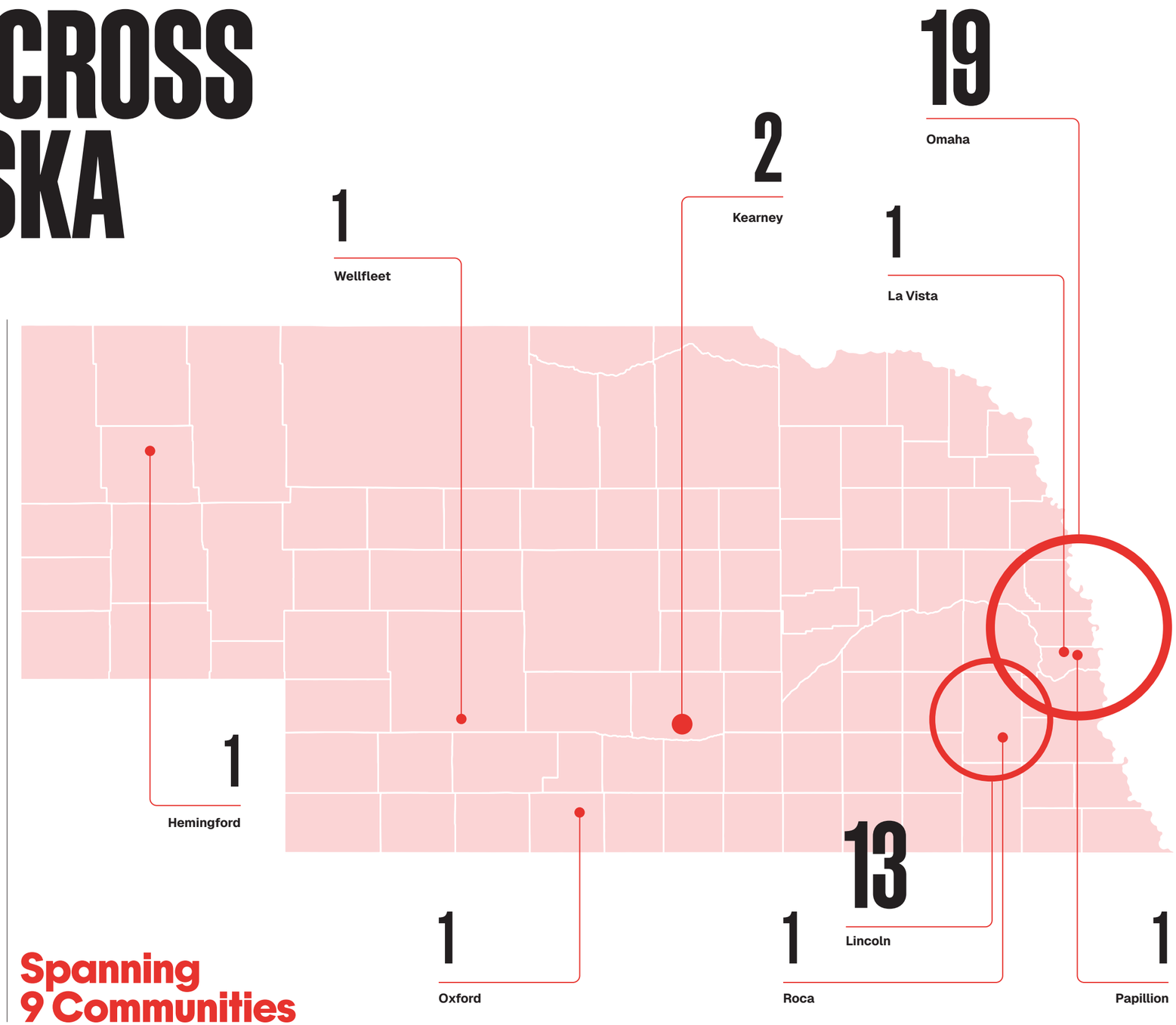
BUILT ACROSS NEBRASKA

This map represents the companies featured in *Open Book: Founding Edition*. It's a snapshot, not a complete directory of Nebraska startups.

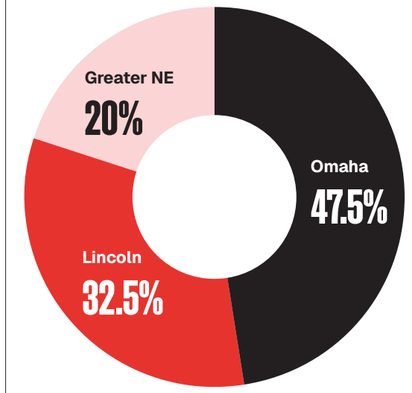
Startups Featured

40

Spanning 9 Communities



By the Numbers



37.5%

were founded by repeat entrepreneurs

- Music & creator technology
- Energy & utilities
- Government & public safety
- Education technology
- Health technology
- Financial technology
- Travel, events & hospitality
- Construction, logistics & manufacturing
- Sports & athletics
- Agriculture, food & beverage
- Enterprise & workforce software

Where New Ideas Take Their First Steps

These founders are in the earliest stages of turning an idea into a company. They're building across industries, from healthcare and education to agriculture, logistics, and consumer products. Their companies are still taking shape as they develop products, learn from customers, and turn early validation into momentum.

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Early Builders

[SET YOUR SITES]

The Site That Started It All

A life-altering accident brought Stacy and Dustin Dam back to an old idea. Their search for an open campsite became a platform now managing thousands of sites across the U.S.



SET YOUR SITES

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
3

WEBSITE
setyoursites.com

IT WAS a sunny afternoon at Lake Wanahoo. Dustin Dam was getting the campfire ready. The kids were napping. Stacy Dam went out for a bike ride.

She didn't come back.

By the time Dustin got to her, the ambulance was already there. Stacy was on the trail with a broken orbital bone, a jaw fractured in two places, and no memory of the impact, likely caused by a deer.

Three surgeries later and eight weeks with her jaw wired shut, Stacy couldn't help but wonder: What do I want out of this life? What do we want as a family?

"I tried to go back to work," Stacy said, "and I just couldn't pretend like that didn't happen to us for a reason."

Then she remembered that camping idea she and Dustin had dreamed about.

In 2021, campground technology was focused on reservation systems, built for people planning trips six months out. Dustin and Stacy were spontaneous campers, however, the kind who relied on walk-up spots.

After one especially frustrating weekend spent bouncing between campgrounds and navigating a lottery for walk-up spots, they started asking why campers couldn't check availability before leaving home.

They quickly learned they weren't the only ones who needed more flexibility. First responders and nurses planned trips around unpredictable schedules. One cancer patient camped between rounds of chemotherapy. But there was no system helping any of them find an available site.

Stacy quit her job the following year. And with that, Set Your Sites moved from idea to reality.

The platform starts with a QR code sign at each campsite. Campers scan to check in, pay, and confirm real-time availability. Managers see live occupancy across their property without driving loops around the campground.

Its defining feature is that walk-up availability and reservations live in one unified system, meaning campers who plan ahead can reserve a site and campers who show up on the spot can claim an open site and pay in real time.

"We're taking a first-principles view," Dustin said. "We're erasing the last 40 years of people trying to make it better and just making it the way it should work in 2026."

By the fall of 2024, Set Your Sites was incorporated. Stacy enrolled in a Business Model Canvas class at the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln's** College of Business. With the plan drafted, she then turned her focus to customer discovery. She enrolled in the National Science Foundation's local I-Corps program and started talking to potential customers.

Stacy cold-emailed Natural Resources Districts in Nebraska. She targeted campgrounds with strong sites that were still using cash boxes at the entrance. One wrote back. It was Lake Wanahoo, the same campground where she'd been knocked off her bike.

They drove out for the meeting, the campground manager said "yes," they got back in the car and screamed. Dustin built the first prototype in 60 days and deployed it that April.

They went from cold email to first paying customer in under four months. With one customer signed, it was time to accelerate.



"You don't have a business unless you have a customer, and you should worry about things in that order."





“We found that initial support and traction, and we hope it continues as we scale. That’s what we need more in Nebraska: opportunity to test, validate, and grow at an enterprise level.”

“You don’t have a business unless you have a customer, and you should worry about things in that order,” Dustin explained, a principle he credits to **UNL’s Center for Entrepreneurship** ❶.

In August 2024, they were accepted into the **NMotion Accelerator** and received the **Nebraska Prototype Grant**.

“It was the catalyst that exploded the company and led us to where we are now,” Stacy said. “We were really fortunate.”

Today, Set Your Sites manages more than 2,100 campsites across six states. In April 2025, they closed a $500,000 pre-seed round led by **Invest Nebraska**, with support from **Nelnet**, **MOVE Venture Capital**, and the **Nebraska Angels**. Later that year, the company was named Nebraska’s Innovation Business of the Year by the **Nebraska Business Development Center**.

Set Your Sites started as a way to simplify local walk-up camping at Nebraska campgrounds, but now Dustin and Stacy have their sights set on expanding across the nation. (And eventually, to international campgrounds.)

State parks move slowly, however, and they’re up against long-standing vendor contracts and government procurement processes. A daunting task, but they’re motivated by the challenge and the existing support from cities, fairgrounds, and Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts.

“We found that initial support and traction, and we hope it continues as we scale,” Stacy said. “That’s what we need more in Nebraska: opportunity to test, validate, and grow at an enterprise level.”

Now when the Dam family goes on a spontaneous weekend camping trip, there’s no question whether they’ll get a site. They check availability before they leave home. They scan their own QR code when they get there. They pay digitally instead of with cash.

And there’s no more standing around in campground lotteries. Getting a site is now simple. The way it should be. ●

❶ **Center for Entrepreneurship**
A program through UNL that provides entrepreneurship education, coaching, competitions, and events for future founders.

[DRIIVE]

The Scheduling Dilemma No One Solved

Online booking made the office more efficient, but sent technicians driving all over town. After watching the problem unfold inside his family's business, Quinn Small joined forces with Nick Small and Corey Collins to build a better way.



DRIIVE

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
3

WEBSITE
getdriive.com

THE FIRST breakthrough wasn't building the product, it was realizing the existing tools were making the problem worse.

When Quinn Small stepped back into his family's window coverings and installation business during COVID-19, demand was climbing quickly, and so were the costs. Like many operators trying to keep up, he turned to software.

Online booking promised a simpler system: customers could schedule appointments directly, cutting down on phone calls and administrative work. But once the system went live, a new problem surfaced. The office became more efficient. The field did not.

Appointments were being scheduled without accounting for how technicians moved through the day. Routes became inefficient. Crews who once completed five jobs a day were now completing two. The burden hadn't disappeared, it simply shifted from the scheduling desk to the technician's windshield.

"There should be a solution to this," Small said. "It's the kind of logistical problem that technology is great at solving."

He experimented with scheduling tools but found most were designed for virtual meetings or businesses where customers come to a fixed location. That model works for hair salons or gyms, but breaks down for tradespeople traveling between homes and job sites.

To make it work, Small built his own workaround. Using Airtable, Calendly, and Zapier, he divided Lincoln and Omaha into service regions and created a web of booking links to group appointments geographically. The system worked, but barely.

"I realized that if I ever quit, leave, or get hit by a bus, this whole thing's going to fall apart," he said.

It was clear the solution needed to become a product.

That idea evolved into Driive, a booking and scheduling platform for home service businesses such as power washing, window services, HVAC, plumbing, landscaping, and similar trades. The platform qualifies leads, enables homeowners to book directly with service providers, and factors drive time into appointment scheduling to optimize job routes.

The company began taking shape in 2023 with a proof-of-concept that helped Small move from an internal workaround to an early product. Contractors and development partners helped bring the first version to market.

As more customers began using the platform, it became clear the idea needed more than a prototype. Building a scalable product would require a team.

In October 2025, Nick Small, Quinn's brother, and Corey Collins joined full time, helping Quinn transform the early prototype into a scalable product. The team rebuilt core systems and incorporated AI into the development process, allowing them to ship features faster while staying lean.

The founding team brings experience from both sides of the problem. Quinn and Nick grew up around small businesses, where entrepreneurship was simply how work operated in their household. Collins came in with a different background, building and exiting software companies across several startups. Together, the three combine experience in engineering, product development, growth, and field service operations.

Just as important, the founders believe the best products come from solving problems you've experienced yourself.

"We're not recognizing a need we don't inherently understand. We literally built this because we needed it for a real business," said Nick.



"There should be a solution to this. It's the kind of logistical problem that technology is great at solving."

Quinn Small
Founder & CEO

Customer response has provided some of the clearest signals of progress.

One early customer used Driive at a home show to capture and schedule leads. The implementation wasn't perfect. Bugs surfaced and workflows needed improvement. But instead of walking away, the customer leaned in, offered feedback, and committed to continue using the platform.

Moments like that confirm the team's belief that the problem extends well beyond one company. In another early conversation with a business owner in Austin, Texas, the customer described the same scheduling challenges Quinn had experienced in Nebraska down to the same workaround strategies.

It was proof to the founders that the pain point was both real and widespread.

For Quinn, Nick, and Collins, building in Nebraska was never a fallback plan, it was a strategic choice. Nebraska is home for Quinn, but he had also seen companies prove that meaningful startups can be built here. Early support from Nebraska's startup ecosystem helped turn that belief into action.

There's also a deeper advantage.

Much of the software being built for industries like field services and construction comes from founders who have never worked inside those sectors. The Driive team believes their proximity to the market gives them a different lens.

"We are the blue collar that we're building for," said Nick. "We are the boots, not the suits."

That perspective has resonated with both customers and investors. In June 2026, Driive announced a nearly $800,000 pre-seed round led by **Invest Nebraska** [1] with participation from **MOVE Venture Capital**, **Nebraska Angels**, **Nelnet**, and CompanyCam's founder Luke Hansen.

The team talks about a future where service companies no longer spend hours coordinating appointments, adjusting routes, and chasing leads.

"Our vision is to create a world where scheduling runs itself. We believe that's possible," Nick said.

It's an ambitious idea. But for them, it starts with the same principle that sparked the company in the first place: if scheduling is one of the biggest operational challenges in home services, software should be able to solve it. ●

[1] **Invest Nebraska**
Founded in 2001, a nonprofit venture development organization that provides early-stage investment capital, strategic support, and entrepreneurial resources to startups in Nebraska.

[SHEMATE]

Making Women in Sports Seen

After speaking with more than 100 women athletes, Teresa Friesen saw how much they had to offer the next generation beyond competition. SheMate connects that experience with high school girls finding their own path through sports.



SHEMATE

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2022

INDUSTRY
Sports Tech

EMPLOYEES
2

WEBSITE
shemate.club

TERESA FRIESEN didn't grow up playing competitive sports. She didn't have a long athletic career to draw from. What she did have was a question she couldn't shake.

What would it have meant to see women like her on screen?

"We were a sports-loving family," she said. "We had games on all the time. But we never watched women's sports. It wasn't an option."

That absence stuck with her. Not because of the games themselves, but because of what they represented.

"When you see women athletes, you see all the different ways women can be," Friesen said. "When that's not captured, we end up with really limited views."

Years later, that question became SheMate.

The idea took shape in fall 2021, during a reverse pitch hosted by Nebraska Athletics. The program's leaders were looking for solutions to a growing gap in opportunities for female athletes in the early days of NIL, the NCAA's name, image, and likeness policy that for the first time allowed college athletes to be paid.

Friesen began digging in, interviewing more than 100 women across college, professional, Olympic, and Paralympic sports. One early connection proved particularly useful: **Opendorse** ❶ gave her a direct line to athletes across the country.

"They reinforced what we were hearing," she said. "This wasn't one school. It was everywhere." The conversations revealed clear patterns.

"They wanted something meaningful," Friesen said. "Not just promoting a product. They wanted experience they could carry into what comes next. And they wished they had someone just a few steps ahead of them when they were younger."

❶ **Opendorse**
Former Nebraska football players Adi Kunalic and Blake Lawrence built Opendorse to connect athletes and brands, then helped shape the infrastructure behind NIL.
pg. 224

"The magic of seeing Simone do what she does through her eyes. That was it. That's why we need women in sports on TV."



Today, the company partners with schools and clubs to run virtual group mentoring sessions, connecting high school girls with women athletes who have recently navigated the same path. Each session is structured and facilitated, designed to take pressure off the athletes and create space for honest conversation.

"We ask them to show up as their full, authentic selves," she said.

That intentionality comes from her background in social work, where she spent more than a decade working with adolescents and studying how people process challenges and build confidence. When COVID-19 hit and everything went remote, a single question kept surfacing: how can we increase access to wellness through technology? SheMate, in a way she didn't expect, became her answer.

That same mindset shapes how Friesen builds, following the evidence, staying close to people, and adjusting as she goes.

Inside the company, Chief Operating Officer Kristin Stone provides the counterbalance.

"I'm like, idea, idea, idea," Friesen said. "And she's like, okay, wait. Let's think about what makes sense for us. I really value that."

The first version of SheMate was a Zoom session, no cost, no product, just a conversation to see if the idea had any pull. It did, and she kept building.

What followed wasn't linear. Friesen was building the company while raising her daughter, often balancing growth with what her life could realistically hold.

"I couldn't just not sleep," she said. "I had to make choices."

Those choices shaped the pace, but also the purpose. The moment that clarified everything came when her daughter was four, watching the Olympics for the first time.

Simone Biles appeared on the screen. Her jaw dropped.

"The magic of seeing Simone do what she does through her eyes," Friesen said. "That was it. That's why we need women in sports on TV."

SheMate is still early, but Friesen has now gone full time on the company, building toward a future where more girls grow up seeing women athletes as visible, possible, and worth watching. ●

The Infrastructure of Innovation



Fifteen years after its passage, the Business Innovation Act has become one of the most influential forces in Nebraska's startup ecosystem.

Adapted by Open Range from original reporting
by Lev Gringauz for Silicon Prairie News

Twenty years ago, Nebraska's startup ecosystem was still taking shape.

THE STATE ranked near the bottom nationally for venture capital investment and trailed much of the country in new business and job creation. The **Nebraska Angels** had only recently launched in 2006, and many founders believed that if they wanted to raise money or scale a company, they would eventually have to leave the state.

"A lot of people that were involved in startups at that time felt really undervalued by the broader business community," said Jason Ball, CEO of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and Partnership for Economic Development (LPED).

Nearly two decades ago, Ball worked closely with startups as the Director of Business Development at LPED.

"There was a feeling that maybe startups weren't celebrated, that policymakers weren't focusing on creating a policy-based environment that supported more startup creation," he said.

That began to shift with the passage of the Nebraska Business Innovation Act (BIA) in 2011.

The state legislation created a series of programs focused specifically on early-stage startups and entrepreneurship support. Since then, BIA-backed companies have generated nearly $16 in revenue for every $1 of state investment, according to the 2024 BIA Impact Analysis from the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln's** Bureau of Business research. Those businesses have also created almost 5,000 jobs, while making over a billion dollars in annual economic impact that generates $27 million in state and local tax revenue.

All of that came from roughly $60 million in state funding awarded to companies from 2011 through 2024. More than half went toward the **Nebraska Prototype Grant** program, one of the BIA's flagship initiatives.

For many founders, those grants became an early lifeline, helping transform ideas into products they could test in the market and eventually raise venture capital around.

In 2016, a $50,000 prototype grant supported a new company trying to make life easier for contractors managing construction projects and field work. Less than a decade later, CompanyCam would become Nebraska's first unicorn, reaching a $2 billion valuation in 2025.

For Ball, stories like CompanyCam reflect an ecosystem that looks fundamentally different than it did 15 years ago, and for the better.

"It highlights how things that start out as a policy conversation on the floor of the Legislature can really lead to becoming catalysts for really, really big things down the road," he said.

BUILDING INVEST NEBRASKA

A key player in today's startup ecosystem is **Invest Nebraska**, the state's nonprofit partner for venture capital and entrepreneurship support. Some BIA funding is directed to the nonprofit, which regularly co-invests (its money requires a funding match) alongside firms like **MOVE Venture Capital**, **NMotion powered by gener8tor**, and **Grit Road Partners** to boost the impact of homegrown funding across the state.

Dan Hoffman
CEO
Invest Nebraska



"It seems like yesterday that the BIA was passed, and I don't think any of us could have predicted the success of the program."

That collaboration has helped drive Nebraska startups from raising just $22 million in 2012 to a record $530 million in venture funding last year.

But that success was not a given, being built on old policy failures and a few lucky breaks. The organization had a precursor in the late 1980s that was given $4 million in state funds to invest in startups. Only five companies received support, with mixed results.

"It only existed for about three years. That happens with legislators; they think about things in really short periods of time, when it takes many, many years for these programs to be successful," said Dan Hoffman, CEO of Invest Nebraska.

Invest Nebraska was created by Nebraska legislation in 2002 as another attempt to build startup infrastructure in the state. But it was given an even shorter leash with just $500,000 over three years to connect startups with potential investors before being expected to sustain itself independently.

It survived, with little to show for it, until being selected in 2008 to run a new state program focused on helping startups become investment-ready. Hoffman joined Invest Nebraska, just as momentum around startups and entrepreneurship in Nebraska was beginning to accelerate.

Leaders were taking a broader look at the state's long-term economic competitiveness. A 2010 report from Battelle, an economic development consulting firm hired by the Nebraska Departments of Economic Development and Labor, pointed to many of the same challenges startup leaders had already identified: weak venture capital access, limited entrepreneurship infrastructure, and the need for stronger innovation support statewide.

Invest Nebraska was also working alongside the Legislature's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Task Force, which reached many of the same conclusions. Several of those ideas would eventually shape the BIA, including the creation of a state-backed venture capital fund that could invest in startups through Invest Nebraska.



"How do we strengthen it? How do we become the best state in the country in terms of wanting to be a startup founder, locating and starting your company here?"

Heath Mello
CEO
Greater Omaha Chamber

"I think people understood that instead of creating a new organization, maybe we just leverage the one that already exists," Hoffman said.

For Hoffman, that became the turning point.

"Invest Nebraska received more resources to actually get in and assist companies with those fundraises," he said. "It seems like yesterday that the BIA was passed, and I don't think any of us could have predicted the success of the program."

SUSTAINED LEGISLATIVE EFFORT

In 2010, Heath Mello was a 30-year-old state senator serving his first term on Nebraska's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Task Force.

At its first meeting, legislators were clear about the stakes.

"We want to ensure our economic development policies in Nebraska are as evolved and as competitive as possible so that we can have a bright and productive future for our state," said State Senator Danielle Conrad, chair of the task force.

Mello said the push for stronger startup support became a rare bipartisan effort that spanned both the Legislature and the executive branch. Despite some skepticism, the BIA ultimately passed unanimously.

"You typically don't see both branches of government work on the same issue independently of each other, and come to the middle saying, 'This is where we need to go,'" he said. "That was one of the most unique efforts in my legislative career."

Today, Mello serves as the CEO of the **Greater Omaha Chamber**, where he sees the BIA's impact play out across Omaha's business community. With rising concern over Nebraska's brain drain and jobs stagnation, he believes the program is more important than ever.

The BIA's impact extends beyond startups themselves, helping create the kinds of opportunities and long-term economic momentum that make it easier for people to build careers and companies in Nebraska.

But the past year also revealed how fragile that progress can be.

In early 2025, Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen proposed significant cuts to the program before pausing it entirely that October without a clear public explanation. The decision sparked two months of advocacy from founders, business leaders, and policymakers across the state.

The BIA was ultimately reinstated in December, with Governor Pillen now backing a plan to increase annual funding to $15 million by using state unemployment insurance tax funds. The Legislature approved that plan during the 2026 session.

For Mello, the reversal reflected how much political and business support the BIA has built over the last 15 years. Looking ahead, he sees an opportunity not just to preserve the program, but to expand its ambition.

"How do we strengthen it? How do we become the best state in the country in terms of wanting to be a startup founder, locating and starting your company here?" he said.

For that momentum to continue, Mello believes the BIA will need to remain broadly bipartisan, with support extending beyond Omaha and Lincoln to communities across the state.

The impact of the Business Innovation Act can clearly be seen across the state's startup ecosystem, even in these pages. Nearly all of the founders and startups featured throughout this publication are, in some way, products of the ecosystem those early investments helped build.

The challenge now is sustaining that momentum long enough to see what the next 20 years might produce. ●

[MAJOR TALENT]

From One Veteran to Thousands

Tim den Hoed started by helping a few veterans translate their military experience into civilian careers. Then someone challenged him to build something that could reach thousands.



MAJOR TALENT

HEADQUARTERS
Papillion, NE

FOUNDED
2022

INDUSTRY
SaaS; Staffing

EMPLOYEES
11

WEBSITE
majortalent.com

THE MILITARY prepares people for nearly everything except what comes next. Translating years of service into civilian terms is a problem the institution leaves unsolved.

"When we get out of the service, we always identify with what we did while we were in," Tim den Hoed, founder and CEO of Major Talent, said. "That doesn't necessarily mean that's what we have to do when we get out."

In transition programs, he saw the same pattern repeatedly: highly trained individuals unsure how to articulate their value beyond the roles they held in the military.

"The vast majority of people that are in the service are doing a job that they didn't necessarily want to do," he said.

Den Hoed had spent 20 years in the military, from the United States Marine Corps to recruiting for the Air Force. He built a reputation for questioning systems and rethinking how things could work better. As a recruiter, that approach led to results, making him the top recruiter in his region and one of the top three in the nation.

But after retiring in 2018, his focus shifted. He began helping veterans navigate their transition to civilian careers.

"I had just committed myself to saying, 'I'm going to help a couple of veterans a month,'" den Hoed said.

That changed after a conversation with advisor Alexi Wellman, an Omaha CEO and angel investor, who challenged him to think beyond one-on-one support.

"Instead of doing this one veteran at a time, why don't we build a tech company around you? We can take care of thousands at a time," she said.

That conversation became the foundation for Major Talent.

Major Talent is a platform designed to help veterans prepare for civilian careers and connect with opportunities across industries. It provides a structured, self-paced system that helps users identify their skills, reframe their experience, and navigate the job search process.

One of the most valuable parts of the platform is helping veterans identify and express their military skills in business-friendly terms, so employers can clearly understand the value they bring. This is an area that many veterans struggle with after leaving the military, as their experience is often deeply specialized but not easily translated into civilian roles.

"We provide the most professional potential for our veterans," den Hoed said.

The first version focused on translating military experience into civilian language, but it wasn't enough. So the platform expanded from résumé support and interview preparation into something more continuous.

"Let's give you all the resources that you need and create a continuity pipeline for you rather than a transactional piece," he said.

The product evolved alongside the problem. Early traction came through relationships and word of mouth. As the system grew, so did its complexity.

Another advisor didn't understand how Major Talent could scale, so den Hoed walked him through the entire revenue stream. After getting validation from him, den Hoed realized he was onto something special.

The **Nebraska Prototype Grant** [1] became a turning point for Major Talent. Without a technical background, den Hoed approached development pragmatically, questioning why they would start from scratch when similar tools already existed.

He went searching for an existing solution, digging through GitHub until he found a base system that could work. With no technical background, he leaned on a neighbor who was a software engineer to help him download and understand it. The approach was resourceful, driven by curiosity and a willingness to challenge assumptions rather than technical expertise.

"If it wasn't for the Nebraska Prototype Grant, I don't know that I would be here," den Hoed said.



"When we get out of the service we always identify with what we did while we were in. That doesn't necessarily mean that's what we have to do when we get out."

[1] **Nebraska Prototype Grant**
A matching program that helps Nebraska startups obtain financial assistance to develop new products.

At a recent event, veterans and leaders crowded the booth where den Hoed showcased Major Talent as more than just a platform. He walked through how it supports veterans at every stage of transition, from résumé development that translates military experience into language employers understand, to personalized interview coaching and direct job placement support. It's a model built not just to connect, but to prepare.

"You are the military's LinkedIn," attendees told him.

For den Hoed, those reactions carry more weight than any metric.

"I know the value of what we have here, but when we get to share our platform with people, that's literally the most fulfilling thing," he said.

That momentum is beginning to extend beyond individual interactions. Conversations are happening at the national level, where members of Congress are working to include language in a federal appropriations bill that would position platforms like Major Talent to be adopted as a standardized program throughout the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Interest is also emerging internationally from allied countries like Canada, Australia, and Germany, with soldiers reaching out with similar needs. They tell den Hoed that they fight together, but they don't have the same resources. Major Talent has the resources. The gap isn't confined to one military system. It's shared across the world.

The platform continues to evolve because the problem hasn't changed. Veterans still leave the service with skills that don't easily translate, and employers still struggle to see beyond job titles.

For den Hoed, the work now is building something that can connect those two sides at scale.●

[NAVISAVI TRAVEL]

Turning Travel Videos into Vacations

Sally Bunnell was on her way to shut NaviSavi down when the call came from Techstars. What happened next transformed a travel app into a global platform connecting inspiration, content, and booking.



NAVISAVI TRAVEL

HEADQUARTERS
Oxford, NE

FOUNDED
2019

INDUSTRY
Travel Tech

EMPLOYEES
20

WEBSITE
navisaviapp.com

SALLY BUNNELL was in Stockholm to shut her company down.

She had done everything to keep the lights on: funding it from her personal savings, letting people go until it was just her and her videographer. Yet it wasn't enough. Even her parents told her it was time to stop.

On her way to meet up with David Pears, her chief technology officer and co-founder, her phone rang.

The Tulsa **Techstars** Accelerator Class of 2023 had accepted her.

Instead of shutting the company down, Bunnell and Pears made a new plan to go all in on NaviSavi Travel.

"Techstars gave us the first six-figure capital we'd ever had," she said. **MOVE Venture Capital** came in right behind it. NaviSavi was still alive, and Bunnell was just getting started.

The idea for NaviSavi had been forming for years without her realizing it. Working as head of video content at a record label in New York, Bunnell traveled constantly. She was always having unique experiences in new locations, and her friends kept asking the same question: "How do I do what you just did?"

She started building travel guides. Recommendations, itineraries, and packaged video content, all before TikTok or Instagram Reels existed.

Her guides were great, but she noticed a gap: travel inspiration and travel booking didn't live in the same place. You see a video that inspires your next trip, but then you have to leave the app to research if it's actually real, affordable, and bookable.

At the same time, travel brands were struggling to find authentic user generated content. They didn't want polished, sponsored footage; they wanted real videos from real people.

NaviSavi bridges that gap.

Travelers watch authentic videos and book those exact experiences directly from the platform. Patent-pending AI technology tags the videos, creating an extensive library for travel brands, airlines, and discovery channels to license and distribute. Creators earn rewards for the videos that convert.

The platform turns travel inspiration into instant transactions, at scale.

"It's no longer just a consumer-facing travel app," Bunnell said. "We are a global content ecosystem of ingestion, distribution, and monetization."

Techstars pushed Bunnell and Pears to stop thinking like a B2C app and start thinking like a B2B business. When the accelerator brought them to Tulsa, Oklahoma, it was the first time they had ever worked in the same room together. They were finally able to go all in, and spend time thinking deeply about their strategy.

"Techstars afforded us the opportunity to start learning more about the business," Bunnell said. "It was the support system I needed."

Once she moved back to Omaha, Bunnell spent about three years learning about the state's startup ecosystem before applying for her first **Nebraska Prototype Grant**. Her mindset was, "Alright, I'm here. Let me meet everybody and see how we can help each other."

She attended weekly meetups like **1 Million Cups**. She started finding mentors and customers like Kyle Tut from **Pinata** ❶. As NaviSavi started gaining traction, **MOVE Venture Capital**, **Invest Nebraska**, **Nebraska Angels**, and the **Department of Economic Development** all came through.

"I always say you meet people for a reason, a season, or a lifetime," Bunnell said. "My team has pretty much all come in through that mentality."

NaviSavi has served travelers around the world. Their videos have been licensed by airlines, travel brands, and connected TV channels. They've partnered with brands like Meta and Booking.com. Now, they're partnering with major financial institutions to build the future of travel transactions through agentic media and commerce.

The vision: you never open a browser and you don't need to toggle between different apps. You say what you want, a real video surfaces, and you say "book it." The entire transaction completes through voice. And NaviSavi's video content lives right in the middle of all of it.

It's an audacious goal, but Bunnell's embracing the challenge.

"You just have to believe in yourself, and you have to be crazy enough to know that there's that vision. That you are still on the right track," she said.

Now when Bunnell's friends ask her for travel advice, she can use her own platform to share ideas and help her friends book, all from one place.

While the final destination isn't set, there's no doubt that NaviSavi is on the right track. ●

> "You just have to believe in yourself, and you have to be crazy enough to know that there's that vision. That you are still on the right track."

❶ **Pinata**
His company kept stalling at about 50 daily users. But then the market caught up. It was all a matter of time.
pg. 200



[MAXWELL]

Serious About Joy at Work

Companies invest heavily in their people, but much of that value goes unseen. Adriana Cisneros Basulto built Maxwell to make benefits feel visible, personal, and worth celebrating.



MAXWELL

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2020

INDUSTRY
HR Tech

EMPLOYEES
10

WEBSITE
maxwell.app

ADRIANA CISNEROS BASULTO has always been building something. As a kid, it was shaved ice stands and candy experiments with her cousins, her grandmother serving as their first investor, fronting the capital and getting paid back when the sales came in.

Later, it showed up inside corporations, building products, departments, and infrastructure that didn't exist before she arrived.

The idea that became Maxwell formed slowly, from both sides of the workplace.

On the product side, she learned to identify needs and build toward them. On the HR side, she saw something harder to ignore. Companies were investing heavily in their people, carefully designing compensation, benefits, and recognition programs. But most employees only understood their paycheck. The rest of that investment was fragmented, underutilized, or invisible.

"Employees don't have a good understanding of the amount of investment beyond their pay," she said. "They see their pay and that's what they think they get. They don't think about the rest of it."

But even when benefits existed, they often didn't feel personal. Employees were left asking a quiet, lingering question: what about me?

That disconnect stayed with her.

The first version was simple by design. Maxwell offered lifestyle spending accounts that gave employees choice instead of forcing employers to predict every need. Over time, the platform evolved into something broader, connecting HR systems, benefits, rewards, and communication in one place. Cisneros Basulto often compares it to an iPhone: a clean, unified experience that works on its own while connecting seamlessly to everything around it.

But underneath that simplicity is something more deliberate. Maxwell is built not just on software, but on behavioral science. The way a reward is framed matters. The visibility of a benefit matters. Even the timing of a notification can change how an employee perceives value.

Rather than sending a generic message, Maxwell reminds people that their employer chose to invest in them, nudging them toward moments of genuine joy.

That idea, being serious about joy, has become a company value. For Cisneros Basulto, it is not a branding exercise. It reflects something she has come to believe more deeply with time.

"What a privilege to be able to work on building something," she said. "Not everyone has that opportunity."

That perspective shapes how she handles the harder moments: the missed deals, the quiet doubt, the recurring question of whether more could be done.

"The good things will pass, so you should really enjoy them," she said. "And the bad things, even the worst moments, will also pass."

Maxwell has been built the same way Cisneros Basulto approaches everything else. Start somewhere, learn quickly, and trust that even the hardest parts are temporary. ●

"The good things will pass, so you should really enjoy them. The bad things, even the worst moments, will also pass."



[VISIONSYNC]

From Tech Transfer to Startup

Taylor Korensky knew how to build software. Licensing university-developed technology to launch VisionSync would teach him something different: how to build a venture-backed company.



VISIONSYNC

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
1

WEBSITE
visionsync.com

TAYLOR KORENSKY'S first company taught him how to build software, but the second one is teaching him to build a startup.

Korensky founded Appsky, a creative agency that specializes in software product development, shortly after graduating from the **University of Nebraska at Omaha** in 2016. The work gave him a front-row seat to how software companies are built. It also showed him the difference between building software and building a venture-backed company.

Through Appsky, Korensky helped founders launch products and navigate early technical decisions. But running a services firm follows a very different path than building a startup. Agencies grow through clients and steady work. Startups operate on speed, scale, and the possibility of an exit.

VisionSync became Korensky's opportunity to step into that world himself.

The idea grew out of relationships that he had built while running his former company. Through that work, he connected with teams at the **University of Nebraska Medical Center** and **UNeMed** ❶, the university's technology transfer office. Among them were Dr. Rodney Markin, Michael Dixon, Stephen Hug, Tyler Scherr, and others exploring how to commercialize a piece of software originally developed inside the university.

"Tech transfer is a very nontraditional way of going for entrepreneurship," Korensky said.

Instead of a founder inventing something from scratch, universities license research, intellectual property, or software to entrepreneurs who build companies around it. The process connects academic discovery with commercial execution, but it often requires founders who are comfortable navigating both worlds.

Korensky had been curious about tech transfer before. VisionSync's software itself is what convinced him to take the leap in 2023.

The platform addressed a problem many organizations quietly struggle with. Strategic plans are carefully developed and approved, but tracking execution often happens through scattered spreadsheets, slide decks, and status updates. VisionSync replaces that patchwork with a single system that tracks initiatives, ownership, and outcomes across an organization.

"VisionSync helps provide the information before the board meeting," Korensky said, "rather than discussing it during."

The technical complexity of the platform had slowed earlier attempts to commercialize it. For Korensky, that challenge felt familiar. After years building custom systems through Appsky, it was exactly the kind of problem he felt prepared to take on.

Leaving a stable services company to build a startup brought a different pace and a different kind of pressure. Agencies grow through clients and predictable revenue. Startups operate on shorter timelines and higher expectations.

"A startup is a company that wants to exit or has an opportunity to exit," he said. "There's an intensity to that."

The shift forced Korensky to rethink how quickly decisions needed to happen. Growth could not unfold gradually the way it might in a consulting firm. Every step forward needed to move the company closer to scale.

Joining the inaugural **Techstars** Founder Catalyst pre-accelerator program in the fall of 2025 helped Korensky understand the financial mechanics behind startup growth. Metrics that once sounded abstract began shaping how he evaluated the business and how he communicated its potential to investors. The experience sharpened his understanding of the economics behind VisionSync and the path the company would need to follow.

❶ UNeMed
The technology transfer and commercialization office for UNMC and UNO, located in Omaha's EDGE District.

That path now leads to fundraising.

Compared to a decade ago, the venture environment has grown more cautious. Expectations are higher, and investors are more selective about the kinds of companies they back.

For founders building in Nebraska, Korensky believes that challenge can feel compounded.

"When you combine further risk aversion in startup investing with the already risk-averse community in Nebraska, you've got a double effect," he said. "It makes it harder for those sectors to grow organically."

But Korensky remains committed to building VisionSync in Nebraska. His family is here, and the relationships that helped launch the company stretch across the state. Still, he sees more founders beginning to look beyond the region for capital as they scale.

VisionSync is now approaching a milestone Korensky views as an important step forward. The company hopes to reach $500,000 in annual recurring revenue, a level that could make fundraising conversations easier and open the door to larger opportunities for the platform.

For a founder who began his career helping others build software, VisionSync represents a different kind of challenge. Nearly a decade after launching his first company, Korensky is now applying those lessons to something designed not just to be built, but to scale. ●

"When you combine further risk aversion in startup investing with the already risk-averse community in Nebraska, you've got a double-effect."



[MISSION ACCOMPLISHED]

Supporting Her Daughter's Needs

When her daughter's speech therapy ended despite clear progress, Jenilee Woltman went back to school to become a speech-language pathologist herself. Mission Accomplished grew from her determination to give neurodivergent children more consistent, accessible support.



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

HEADQUARTERS
Hemingford, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
Health Tech

EMPLOYEES
6

WEBSITE
missionaccomplished.app

THE DRIVE from Hemingford to the nearest speech-language pathologist (SLP) took an hour and twenty minutes. Jenilee Woltman made it twice a week after spending more than a year trying to convince a pediatrician that her daughter needed help. Two months after therapy finally began, it was cut.

"We were making progress," she said. "And then all of a sudden that just stops."

Her daughter, who is neurodivergent, could count to 50 and identify shapes most adults had long forgotten. Yet simple open-ended questions or multi-step routines could bring everything to a halt. Intelligence was never the concern, what was missing was consistent support at the exact moment it was needed.

She didn't go looking for another appointment. She went back to school to become an SLP herself.

"I did not actually seek this out," Woltman said. "It came about by a multitude of frustrations."

If consistent support didn't exist, she would learn how to provide it. Along the way, her husband, Lee, kept the family's ranch running and stepped in wherever he was needed at home while Woltman returned to graduate school and later launched her own practice.

What she first worked through as a parent, she soon recognized in the clinic. Across classrooms in western Nebraska, she encountered students who understood exactly what they were supposed to do but couldn't begin. The worksheet made sense. The instructions were clear. Later, they could explain the assignment back perfectly. But in the moment, they froze.

"These kids are highly intelligent," she said. "They just think differently and need a little different support."

During her first year running the therapy practice in the Panhandle, the pattern repeated daily: a worksheet on a desk, instructions given, a student stuck at the starting line. Adults assumed the issue was attention or motivation, but Woltman saw students move forward the moment expectations were reduced to a single step. Write your name. Pick up one item. Throw away one thing.

Breaking tasks down worked, but the challenge was consistency as the strategy only worked when someone was there to guide it. By October 2024, the question had shifted: what if support could appear at the exact moment a child needed it, whether an adult was standing there or not?

Mission Accomplished grew from there.

The app helps neurodivergent children build executive functioning and self-regulation skills by breaking daily challenges into personalized, manageable steps. Instead of confronting a full task at once, a child sees only a few actions at a time, each connected to what comes next. Progress builds without overwhelming the moment.

The goal isn't simply completing tasks, it is giving learners a reliable way to begin.

Woltman didn't start in technology. Her undergraduate degree from the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** is in animal science. In a past life, she had conducted research on animal-assisted therapy with nursing home residents experiencing dementia and noticed that when pressure decreased, communication surfaced. Years later, she recognized the same dynamic in children. Reduce cognitive load and ability appears.

Throughout 2025 she built the company between appointments, learning product development and fundraising at night while continuing to run her clinic and supervise graduate students. Her longtime friend Melissa Schoenemann joined as chief operating officer after first helping inside the practice. They divided responsibilities and learned together, guided less by startup experience than by proximity to the problem they were solving.

As the company evolved, so did the team. In early 2026, Ali Redden joined the company, taking ownership of the platform's technology and helping Mission Accomplished continue to grow alongside the families it serves.

From Hemingford, she connected with mentors, operators, and investors across the state. Through the **Nebraska Business Development Center** [1], Chadron State College, and **Techstars**, she built a network that stretched from Omaha to Scottsbluff.

"It doesn't even matter that we're seven hours away from Omaha," she said. "We have not felt that way. We just feel so welcomed in the whole startup community."

The geography hasn't changed. The access has.

"I had no pauses about building anything in Nebraska," Woltman said. "I would not think about building anywhere else."

Today, the work has grown beyond a single practitioner. Mission Accomplished operates with a small team working alongside families, educators, and clinicians to refine how the platform fits into everyday routines at home and at school. The company is still early, supported through grant funding as it prepares for its first round of outside investment.

Woltman sees that stage not as a pivot away from the mission, but as an extension of it. The more environments the tool can live in, the less children depend on one person being present at exactly the right time.

"When kids have success, when kids feel like they are in control and that they did this independently, that is huge," she said. "I'm doing exactly for these kids what I wish my daughter had when she was much younger."

Mission Accomplished began with a long drive and a frustration that refused to settle. From the same place where she once struggled to find consistent help, she is now building it herself. ●

[1] **Nebraska Business Development Center**
A statewide program with credentialed consultants who provide one-on-one business services to local business leaders.



[GRAPPLE]

Finding a Place to Grow

Jack Sellwood arrived in Omaha without deep roots or a network waiting for him. Through Flywheel, the city's startup community, and years of persistence, he found both a place to belong and a place to build Grapple.



GRAPPLE

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2025

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
3

WEBSITE
askgrapple.com

JACK SELLWOOD didn't grow up in Omaha, but somewhere along the way, it started to feel like the right place to build.

Sellwood had always been drawn to the act of creating things. Long before Grapple existed, he found himself chasing ideas simply because the process of turning something abstract into something real felt satisfying. Building products, testing ideas, and seeing how people responded created a feedback loop that kept pulling him back.

That instinct eventually led him into startups. And over time, it also led him to Omaha.

When Sellwood first arrived, the city felt unfamiliar. He didn't have deep roots in the region or a network waiting for him. What he did have was a job at **Flywheel** [1].

It was also his first traditional job after years of running his own business. As Sellwood shared, Flywheel was the only time he had ever "blindly applied" for a role after spending most of his early career building things on his own.

Working inside one of Omaha's earliest breakout startup companies gave him a front-row seat to how startups actually get built. The experience also introduced him to something he hadn't seen before: a startup community that felt unusually collaborative.

"Omaha is a liminal space," he said. "It's a blank canvas where people have the room to connect and build things together."

Through the Flywheel network and the broader startup ecosystem around it, Sellwood began meeting founders, investors, and operators across the city. Introductions turned into coffee conversations. Advice flowed more freely than he had expected.

Over time, those connections became more than professional introductions. Weekly gatherings with friends, conversations with other builders, and the informal networks around Flywheel slowly turned Omaha from a temporary stop into something closer to home.

That same openness also shaped how Sellwood began to think about building his own startup. His time at Flywheel exposed him to a culture of builders who shared what they were learning, made introductions across the ecosystem, and helped one another navigate the unpredictable process of building companies. In that environment, Sellwood began developing the idea that would eventually become Grapple.

Founded in 2025, Grapple is a do-it-yourself data analytics platform powered by what the company describes as an AI data engineer. The software helps business teams analyze their data without relying on traditional data engineering pipelines, which often become bottlenecks inside growing companies.

In many organizations, sales, marketing, and finance teams all depend on the same small group of engineers to build dashboards or extract insights from company data. Requests stack up. Questions sit in queues. Decisions slow down while teams wait for technical resources.

Grapple is designed to remove that friction, allowing business teams to connect their own data sources and generate insights without waiting on engineering support.

Like most startups, however, the path from idea to company was slower and more uncertain than Sellwood initially expected.

"The hardest thing people don't tell you about startups is that you have to sustain the motivation for much longer than you think," Sellwood said.

For extended stretches, Grapple existed mostly as an evolving concept. Sellwood continued refining the idea while trying to determine whether the problem he saw could become a real business.

That persistence was tested most visibly during fundraising.

1 Flywheel
How an Omaha startup lived up to its name by setting the next generation of founders and leaders in motion. **pg. 208**

While venture capital in the Midwest has grown significantly over the past decade, much of that capital still concentrates around companies that already have measurable traction.

"There's a lot of funding in the Midwest for companies with traction," Sellwood said. "But going from zero to that first revenue is really hard."

For much of Grapple's early life, Sellwood operated with very little margin for error. At times he found himself managing the company with only a few months of runway ahead as he worked to move the product forward.

"We really needed to fundraise, and pushing the people in my network to invest ultimately saved the company," he said.

That early support helped Grapple raise an initial $250,000 pre-seed round as the company began building the first version of the platform.

Sellwood credits many of those early connections to relationships he built in Omaha. Conversations with investors at **Invest Nebraska** and **MOVE Venture Capital** helped him better understand how capital moves through the region. At the same time, the network he built through Flywheel offered hard-earned insight from people navigating the same path.

In April 2026, Grapple announced an additional $750,000 in pre-seed funding, bringing its total funding to $1 million. The company also joined the California-based LAUNCH Accelerator while continuing to expand the platform and grow its customer base.

But the community that first welcomed him into Omaha's startup scene is still very much part of his process. The same founders, investors, and builders continue to share ideas, advice, and encouragement along the way.

For Sellwood, that environment has made one thing clear: somewhere along the way, Omaha became more than just the place he was building a company. It became part of how he was able to build it. ●

"The hardest thing people don't tell you about startups is that you have to sustain the motivation for much longer than you think."



By the Numbers: Accelerators

The Combine

How long has your program been operating, and what originally inspired its creation?

The Combine launched in 2019 with a straightforward premise: Nebraska is one of the most productive agricultural states in the country, but it lacked a dedicated home for AgTech entrepreneurs. The founding vision was to create that infrastructure; mentorship, coworking space on Nebraska Innovation Campus, and a network of farmers willing to engage directly with startups. Seven years in, that farmer network has become one of our most distinctive assets.

VENTURE CAPITAL RAISED

$27M+

ATTENDEES AT AGTECH CONNECT CONFERENCE

300+

COMPANIES SUPPORTED

50+

GRANTS

$20M+

NMotion

What role do programs like yours play in strengthening Nebraska's startup ecosystem?

We serve as an anchor in the startup ecosystem because of our regular cadence of cohorts. Each time we invest in six companies, we activate the community by connecting founders to at least 70 mentors, key customer prospects, and at least 40 investors. In the past five years alone, 312 mentors have stepped forward to help. All this activity helps to shine a light on the Nebraska startup community in a way that inspires potential founders to take the leap themselves while encouraging community champions to help amplify the founders.

COMPANIES INVOLVED

118

NUMBER OF COHORTS

21

ALUMNI EXITS

8

RETURNS FOR FOUNDERS & INVESTORS

$60M

Techstars

How would you describe the founders or companies your program supports?

The Techstars Founder Catalyst program supports tech-enabled, early-stage startups looking for a comprehensive curriculum to kick start and build their business. It's a pre-accelerator program for founders who want to make the next big step in solidifying their pitch, developing a financial model that's built to scale, and moving from prototype to public launch.

STARTUPS PARTICIPATED

15

APPLICANTS OVER 2 COHORTS

70+

FUNDING RAISED POST-PROGRAM

$2.15M

[FUTURHERD SOLUTIONS]

A Stronger Start for Piglets

Keeping newly weaned piglets healthy requires constant attention in an industry already short on time and labor. Aaron Holliday and Brooke Parrish are building a robotic solution to give farmers an extra set of hands in the barn.



FUTURHERD SOLUTIONS

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
AgTech

EMPLOYEES
2

WEBSITE
futurherdsolutions.com

THE MOMENT it clicked wasn't in a boardroom. It was in the barn, running on four hours of sleep.

Aaron Holliday was moving through pens of piglets, trying to keep them alive through their most fragile stage.

"I was in charge of about 12,000 animals across six different sites," Holliday said. "You don't leave the farm until midnight and then you're back there at five in the morning."

The first days after weaning are critical. If piglets don't eat, drink, and move enough, they don't make it. The solution is simple in theory: keep them active, eating, and drinking, during that early window.

In practice, it depends entirely on people, and there aren't enough hours or hands to do it consistently.

Swine production hasn't lacked attention. It has lacked time. Farms are spread across locations, constrained by biosecurity protocols, and facing labor shortages. Even when teams do everything right, they can't be everywhere at once.

"Piglets really suffer and we see higher mortality than what should be happening right now in the nursery phase of swine production," Holliday said.

The industry has adapted by working harder. But harder hasn't meant better. It has meant longer days, higher costs, and results that still fall short.

That gap, between what needs to happen and what's possible, became the foundation for FuturHerd Solutions.

FuturHerd Solutions is an AgTech company focused on precision livestock technology. Its flagship system, the Nursery Nanny, supports piglets during the post-weaning phase by improving movement, feed and water intake, and survivability.

"If I had somebody else that could really mimic this motion for us, we might have a lot better success," Holliday said.

That "somebody" became a piece of equipment.

Holliday met co-founder Brooke Parrish in graduate school at the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln**, where they were both studying animal health and precision management. While balancing coursework and research, they began building the company in the hours before work, after class, and on weekends.

What makes the system effective isn't just automation, it's consistency. Producers can program how often it runs, every 45 minutes or every few hours, without re-entering the barn. The goal is to keep pigs active, reduce mortality, and ease labor demands.

Even with strict biosecurity protocols, showering on-site, changing clothes, and limiting exposure, disease still finds its way into barns. Much of that risk comes down to human traffic. Every entry and exit increases the chance of contamination.

By reducing the amount of unnecessary traffic in the barn while keeping piglets active, FuturHerd aims to lower that risk, leading to less antibiotic use, fewer health challenges, and more consistent outcomes for producers.

Early on, the idea didn't feel like a company, but that changed with early validation. FuturHerd Solutions was named a winner of the **Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition** [1] in January 2026, signaling belief in both the idea and the team.

"People came up to us afterward and said it was a great idea," Parrish said. "That was when I felt like a founder."

Early traction came through pitch competitions, university programs, and connections across Nebraska's startup ecosystem. Progress was incremental.

"The first year was such a struggle because it seemed so out of reach," Holliday said.

The **Nebraska Prototype Grant** allowed the team to move from concept to development and begin building a working robot.

> "People came up to us afterward and said it was a great idea. That was when I felt like a founder."
>
> **Brooke Parrish**
> Co-Founder



"Moving into the next phase of autonomy meant we can give producers a real demo and show that we're not only getting pigs up to eat and drink, but that it's truly set it and forget it," Holliday said.

Even then, progress was iterative. Early testing relied on off-the-shelf components, and automation lagged behind the vision. Moving forward required external partners, funding, and time carved out between full-time work and graduate school.

FuturHerd is being built in Nebraska not in spite of its location, but because of it. The founders are close to their customers, embedded in the industry, and supported by local programs, mentors, and funding opportunities. The company has raised $236,000 to date.

In agriculture, credibility is earned through experience. "What do you know about swine production?" is a real barrier for outsiders. Building from within removes that friction.

Still, adoption is not guaranteed. Technology in agriculture moves slowly, shaped by cost, trust, and infrastructure.

"Nobody wants to commit to anything until their neighbor does," Holliday said.

Even when the value is clear, producers often default to what they know. Many barns also lack reliable internet access, and the return on investing in connectivity isn't always obvious. For FuturHerd, addressing both skepticism and connectivity is key to lowering the barrier to adoption.

The next steps are straightforward. The company needs early revenue, producer buy-in, and a system that proves itself in real barns, not controlled environments. Beyond that, the path requires significant capital to continue building in a hardware-heavy category.

For now, the focus is simple: get into the barn, run the system, and keep more pigs alive. ●

[1] **Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition**
An annual statewide competition for undergraduate and graduate students to submit startup ideas for cash prizes.

[DOCOLOGY]

Turning Intake into Action

Three founders once tried to sneak into a medical conference with discarded name tags just to talk to doctors. A year later, the same association named docology one of the 10 most innovative companies in urology.



DOCOLOGY

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2025

INDUSTRY
Health Tech

EMPLOYEES
10

WEBSITE
docologyhealth.ai

IN 2025, co-founders Andrew Rogers, Dr. Sida Niu, MD, and Tyler Hamik tried to sneak into the American Urological Association annual conference using discarded name tags. They weren't there to attend. They were there to find doctors, ask questions, and find out if the issue they were seeing existed elsewhere.

The problem they were chasing started earlier.

After becoming a partner in his urology practice, Niu found himself losing nights and weekends to chart prep. Referral packets, lab reports, and radiology records arrived through a largely manual process. Before seeing his first patient, hours had already been spent locating files, extracting details, and preparing for patient visits.

The issue wasn't isolated. As the team spoke with other physicians, the same frustration surfaced: too much time spent preparing for care and too much staff effort tied up in document intake. Most tools focused on downstream workflows like scribes or billing. The bottleneck at the front end remained.

"The more we listened and talked to users, the more we understood the pain points they were facing every day," said Rogers.

What they uncovered went beyond chart summaries. Clinics didn't just need documents processed faster, they needed them structured and routed. The same information had to serve clinicians, billing teams, and staff.

Those gaps became the foundation for docology, an intelligent workflow automation layer that sits between existing fax infrastructure and electronic medical records. The platform captures and organizes inbound documents, generates clinical summaries and timelines, then routes everything directly into the patient chart. Most importantly, it does all of it without changing a clinic's existing workflow.

The problem may seem small, but in healthcare, inefficiencies compound quickly. Time spent searching through records affects physician capacity, staff workload, and the patient experience. For independent practices, better workflow is not a convenience, it's leverage.

Not all of docology's inflection points have come from product decisions. Some have come from people.

During a recent clinic onboarding, a newer team member led the process for the first time. Watching it unfold, Rogers realized she was better at it than the founding team members were.

"Hiring is our biggest superpower and our biggest weakness if we make the wrong choice," said Hamik. "Finding the right people in the right seats keeps us up at night, because human capital is our most expensive cost and our biggest multiplier when done right."

Rogers, a builder focused on systems and scale, works alongside Hamik, who leads customer relationships and go-to-market, and Niu, whose clinical background grounds the product in real-world use. The company is built around that mix, and where they chose to build has shaped it as well.

Nebraska has also influenced how the company has grown. None of the founders are from the state, but all chose to stay for the cost of living, access to decision-makers, and the strength of the startup community. In a smaller ecosystem, connections carry weight.

That access has translated into early support from accelerators, local investors, and informal connections that opened doors at critical moments. Early fundraising helped docology continue building while expanding its footprint across the healthcare industry. But building in Nebraska also required range.



> "One of the biggest reasons people fail is a lack of grit and the willingness to keep going without taking no for an answer."

Progress hasn't come from a single breakthrough, but from a series of persistent moves. A cold call Hamik made during a family vacation turned into a clinic visit, then a pilot, then access to one of the largest service organizations in urology.

A year after trying to sneak into the American Urological Association conference, docology was accepted into the association's Innovation Nexus program and named one of the 10 most innovative companies in urology for 2026.

"One of the biggest reasons people fail is a lack of grit and the willingness to keep going without taking no for an answer," said Hamik.

Today, docology is beginning to focus on specialty private practice physicians. Its software works with the documents clinics already receive (faxes, email, paper, or portal uploads) and turns that unstructured intake into usable information inside the electronic medical record. The company is working across urology, oncology, and OB-GYN, with plans to expand into additional specialties.

However, docology is still early. The company is hiring carefully, raising selectively, and growing without losing the culture that has carried it this far. The next phase is about proving that one of healthcare's most manual workflows can be made more efficient without forcing clinics to rebuild how they operate.

For a company built on intake, the ambition is straightforward: remove enough friction so care can move faster. ●

The Founding Team

Left to right:
Andrew Rogers, CEO
Dr. Sida Niu, MD, Chief Medical Officer
Tyler Hamik, President & CRO







[CUP OF COA]

Rewriting the Rules of Hot Cocoa

Most cafés treated hot cocoa as an afterthought. Jasmin McGinnis saw an opening for a luxury cocoa brand that could taste better and make better business sense for the cafés serving it.



CUP OF COA

HEADQUARTERS
Kearney, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
Specialty Beverage; CPG

EMPLOYEES
4

WEBSITE
cupofcoa.com

MOST CAFÉ MENUS treat hot cocoa like an afterthought. It sits quietly beside espresso drinks: familiar, nostalgic, and rarely questioned.

Jasmin McGinnis questioned it.

Most people know her as a coffee shop owner. She operates three cafés, Barista's Daily Grind, in Kearney, Nebraska, though she didn't start the business. She began as an employee and later bought them, a transition that sharpened her focus on costs, efficiency, and product quality.

Ownership also changed how she looked at the menu. Across cafés, hot cocoa was often treated as a children's drink or a seasonal novelty. If someone was paying five dollars, McGinnis believed it should be better than something they could make at home.

However, baristas across the country were doctoring drinks with sauces, syrups, and milk just to make the flavor work. For owners, that meant added ingredients, slower service, and shrinking margins.

"I don't like seeing cafés spin their wheels," said McGinnis. "If a drink isn't profitable, it doesn't matter how good it is."

Determined to find a better solution, McGinnis began testing cocoa products, evaluating them for flavor, aroma, mouthfeel, and ease of preparation. None met the standard she had in mind, so she developed her own.

What started as a way to control costs soon evolved into something bigger: Cup of Coa (pronounced Kō), a luxury cocoa company redefining how cocoa is experienced in cafés and at home. Its milk-based cocoa powders are designed to be mixed fresh for every cup, delivering flavor, consistency, and speed without sauces or pumps.





> "*What's the luxury hot chocolate brand in America?*' I said there isn't one. And he said, '*Exactly.*'"

❶ **Grow Nebraska**
A nonprofit organization that provides education, marketing, and assistance to businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists in Nebraska.

The first version started in the kitchen. Once she perfected the recipe, McGinnis and her café team produced their first large batch themselves. They packaged it in food-service buckets and began serving it in their shops. Within five months, that batch generated $16,000 in cocoa sales, and the drink became a signature item.

For several years, Cup of Coa expanded alongside McGinnis' cafés through industry trade shows and a wholesale website. She reinvested profits from customers to fund each show, an expensive but necessary way to meet new café partners.

But the specialty coffee industry moves at its own pace. Many leads take years to convert, as café owners attend festivals while still planning new shops or expansions. The result was steady, gradual growth and a slowly expanding customer base.

"When we launched a retail website, I got so excited when I looked at my map and saw how many people were on my website," McGinnis said. "People were hearing about us organically."

That momentum pushed McGinnis to explore the broader startup ecosystem. She entered a Hy-Vee startup pitch competition, where founders presented everything from medical technologies to complex hardware innovations. Compared to those ideas, her product felt simple, but the experience exposed her to a new network of resources.

It also revealed how many parts of Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem she had already worked with. In the room, she recognized organizations like **Grow Nebraska** ❶ and the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** food science team, who had helped her early on with product development and labeling, while also meeting new partners and advisors.

One of those connections led her to **NMotion powered by gener8tor**. At first, she wasn't interested in venture capital. She had built the business deliberately and didn't want to give up control. What changed her mind wasn't the funding, it was the structure of the program.

In the fall of 2024, McGinnis joined the 12-week accelerator, which connected founders with mentors, investors, and startup networks while helping refine strategy and growth plans. The program also included a $100,000 investment in Cup of Coa, giving the company capital and a stronger support network.

"I remember asking them, 'I didn't invent cocoa, so why would you invest in me?'" McGinnis said. "And Scott Henderson, Managing Principal at NMotion, said, 'What's the luxury hot chocolate brand in America?' I said there isn't one. And he said, 'Exactly.'"

That realization reframed everything. Cup of Coa wasn't simply a café product, it had the potential to define an entirely new lane: luxury hot cocoa.

In July 2025, **Invest Nebraska** became the company's first lead investor, backing the vision and helping unlock new partnerships as the business prepared for growth.

Today, the team is focused on expanding the foundation for that growth. Collaborations with industry leaders, including espresso equipment manufacturers BUNN and EVERSYS, are introducing the product to corporate coffee programs, hospitality settings, and other environments where cocoa has long been treated as a simple add-on.

But McGinnis knows the hardest part of the journey is ahead. Growth brings new pressures of expanding the team, strengthening operations, and managing demand.

In the near term, McGinnis sees industry collaborations as the fastest way forward. Over time, she envisions something bigger: a cocoa supply chain connected directly to farmers and the communities where cocoa is grown.

It's an unfinished vision, but one rooted in the same mindset that started it all: curiosity, practicality, and a belief that things can be better.

For now, Cup of Coa sits between proof and possibility; a company built on a simple question most cafés never thought to ask: what if cocoa deserved the same attention as coffee? ●

[GEARLOCKER]

The Checkout Problem

Missing gear and messy spreadsheets plagued Keenan McCurdy's wrestling room. He turned the problem into a platform now used by athletic programs nationwide.



GEARLOCKER

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
SaaS; Sports Tech

EMPLOYEES
5

WEBSITE
gearlocker.com

EVERY WRESTLING season ended the same way: gear went missing, athletes returned the wrong equipment, and coaches sorted through bins of uniforms and headgear trying to figure out what belonged to whom.

After building and selling a fitness business, Keenan McCurdy returned to the classroom, where he spent years teaching full time while coaching wrestling. That's where he first encountered the problem.

"We'd check out singlets, warmups, and headgear, and we'd run into the same issues," McCurdy said. "Stuff would go missing, equipment would get swapped between athletes, and by the end of the year it was difficult to know exactly what you had."

For years, McCurdy tried spreadsheets, tracking systems, and different organizational methods. Nothing held up. Inventory stayed inaccurate, equipment was nowhere to be found, and coaches spent valuable hours managing gear instead of coaching athletes.

As he connected with coaches around the country, he realized the problem extended far beyond wrestling.

"I started talking with coaches, and I heard the same thing: 'We would use this. This is a problem we've been dealing with forever,'" he said.

Those conversations became GearLocker, a cloud-based equipment management platform built for athletic departments, schools, and youth sports organizations. The platform helps teams digitally track equipment checkouts and inventory using tools such as QR code tracking and roster-based organization.

What began as a tool for coaches quickly evolved into a platform for entire athletic departments, adding inventory, purchasing, and budgeting tools alongside equipment check-in and checkout.

"Selling to coaches is great, but what if we could sell to entire athletic departments?" McCurdy said.

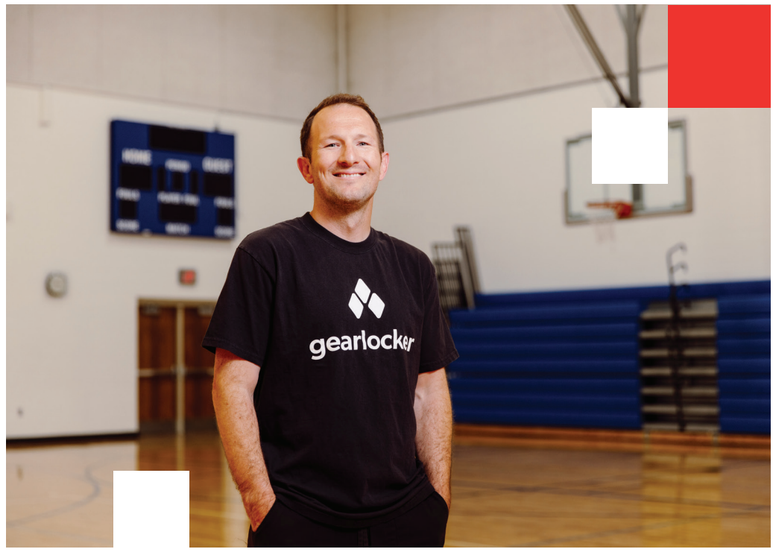
Rather than focusing only on individual coaches, GearLocker began partnering with athletic departments and school districts looking to standardize equipment management across multiple schools.

While purpose-built for athletics, some organizations have also adopted the platform to manage student devices and media equipment, highlighting a broader need for streamlined inventory management.

One of GearLocker's earliest breakthrough moments came when a district chose to deploy the platform across several schools, serving tens of thousands of students. Since then, adoption has spread to colleges, universities, and athletic organizations across the country.

Most of the company's growth is driven by word of mouth. Athletic directors and coaches regularly share the platform with peers, allowing successful implementations to spread naturally from one district to the next.

> "I started talking with coaches, and I heard the same thing: '*We would use this. This is a problem we've been dealing with forever.*'"



Skyline Point Ventures
Founded in 2021, an investment firm with a focus on private equity, commercial real estate, and venture capital.

McCurdy credits Nebraska's strong startup ecosystem with helping the company gain early momentum through mentorship, introductions, and practical advice. He points to **Skyline Point Ventures**, leaders at **Hudl** and CompanyCam, and supporters throughout Nebraska's education community as important champions along the way.

But one of the most influential advocates came from closer to home: his own athletic director at Lincoln East High School.

"Zach Limbach was incredible from the outset in supporting this vision and this idea," said McCurdy. "He really helped formulate what we needed to do to bring it to life."

For years, McCurdy split his time between the classroom and GearLocker. Days were spent teaching students and coaching wrestlers. Nights and weekends were devoted to customer calls, product development, and building the company.

As GearLocker continued to grow, balancing both became harder to sustain. After years of operating in parallel, McCurdy recently made the decision to leave teaching and focus on the company full-time.

What began as one wrestling coach trying to untangle the chaos of equipment checkout has grown into a platform helping schools better manage the equipment thousands of students rely on every day. ●

[DARO]

From Outbreak to Early Warning

By the time livestock show signs of disease, an outbreak may already be spreading. DARO uses population-level surveillance to give producers an earlier warning and more time to act.



DARO

IN A BARN with thousands of animals, disease doesn't announce itself. It spreads quietly, long before there are signs to see.

For decades, livestock producers have relied on a reactive approach, testing after symptoms appear. But in high-density operations, timing isn't a detail. It's the difference between a contained issue and a full-scale outbreak.

For Kristen Bernhard, that realization didn't start in agriculture. It started in a lab, watching how wastewater surveillance could track disease across entire communities at once. A single sample offered visibility at a massive scale.

"I saw this huge step forward in safeguarding communities by having a barometer for what's happening disease-wise," Bernhard said.

The insight was simple, but the implication wasn't. During the pandemic, researchers at the **University of Nebraska Medical Center** used wastewater surveillance to track disease spread across entire communities in real time. If that kind of population-level monitoring could work for humans, why not for livestock, where the conditions for spread are often more extreme? In the Midwest, that question wasn't theoretical.

"There's a lot of pigs under one roof, there's no social distancing, so disease would spread," Bernhard said.

Traditional livestock testing works, but it's built for confirmation, not prevention. By the time symptoms appear and samples are taken, disease has often already moved through part of the herd.

That delay carries weight. Lost productivity and treatment costs. In some cases, entire operations were disrupted. What was missing wasn't better testing. It was early awareness. A system that could look across the entire herd continuously, not one animal at a time, and signal risk before it became visible.

DARO shifts livestock disease detection from reactive testing to proactive, whole-herd surveillance. Using non-invasive molecular and genomic analysis, its technology gives producers an early view of emerging disease threats, often days before traditional methods, helping protect herd health and prevent costly outbreaks.

"We are the only tool available to producers that can capture a look of their disease prediction across their whole herd," Bernhard said.

The result: complex genomic data translated into early warnings producers can act on.

Building it didn't happen in isolation. Bernhard first connected with Josh DeMers through **The Combine**, where the two worked together before DeMers eventually left to join DARO full time. Before the product was fully formed, the team went from the lab to the farm.

"We would go into hog barns and meet the people where they were at," DeMers said.

That decision shaped the product as much as the science did. In an industry built on trust, proximity matters. It also led to an unexpected breakthrough.

The team had spent significant time trying to design a collection process that would fit seamlessly into existing workflows. When producers handed it off to interns and barn staff, the response was immediate: simple, intuitive, and even preferred over current methods. What once felt like the biggest risk quickly became a turning point.

"We have something here that's going to be extremely scalable," DeMers said.

That moment wasn't just validation. It was proof the product could scale. Today, DARO is working with five of the top 25 pork producers in the United States, partners who are not just testing the system, but paying for it.

The team is small, with four full-time employees, but deeply connected to local research institutions, with backgrounds spanning genetics, lab science, and agriculture. There's momentum not just in the product, but in how quickly the company is evolving.



Kristen Bernhard
Co-Founder & CEO

Access to swine producers is a short drive, and talent comes from nearby universities. Early support from local accelerators, grants, and investors like **Invest Nebraska** and **MOVE Venture Capital** helped move the idea into the field. By February 2025, DARO had raised $1.2 million.

In June 2026, the company added another milestone, closing a more than $2 million Seed II round led by **Grit Road Partners**.

That proximity shapes how the company operates. Decisions are tested quickly alongside producers, with immediate, unfiltered feedback.

The ambition is clear: shift the industry from reactive testing to continuous, whole-herd monitoring. But getting there requires more than technology, it means changing behavior in an industry built on routine.

In the near term, the focus is traction, growing recurring revenue, and building a foundation to scale. Longer term, the team sees continuous surveillance becoming the standard across swine production, replacing generations of reactive testing.

"I think we will become one of the fastest growing animal health companies in the Midwest," DeMers said.

If successful, DARO becomes not just a tool, but the system producers rely on to manage disease at scale. ●

"We are the only tool available to producers that can capture a look of their disease prediction across their whole herd."



HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
AgTech; BioTech

EMPLOYEES
4

WEBSITE
usedaro.com

Supply and Demand

Marina Brown started with one freight problem, but her customers revealed a bigger one. She listened, pivoted, and built Moneiva around what they needed most.



MONEIVA

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
Supply Chain; Mobility Tech

EMPLOYEES
7

WEBSITE
moneiva.com

MARINA BROWN was demoing her new supply chain automation software to a large e-commerce brand, potentially one of her biggest clients yet. The only problem? She's not a salesperson.

She didn't have a script or a formal pitch, but she did have a solution to speed up their logistics communication. She spent the entire week building a custom demo and wasn't entirely confident it would work.

"It's either going to show them exactly what they want to see or it's going to work so badly," Brown said.

It worked perfectly.

Seeing their own data in the demo naturally made the sale. Not only did Brown land a new client, but that client started sending referrals. It confirmed that she was indeed an entrepreneur, someone who's constantly looking for what could be improved next.

Supply chain communication was entirely manual at the time. Every update about freight or trucking required a phone call or an email. If things went wrong during shipment, it could take 30 extra days for a bill to reach the final party.

"It's all a matter of communication," Brown said. "If you could expedite how quickly the extra charges get communicated, there'd be fewer delays.

"We had to evolve along the way with our clients. You either listen to what your clients are going to pay you for, or you die."

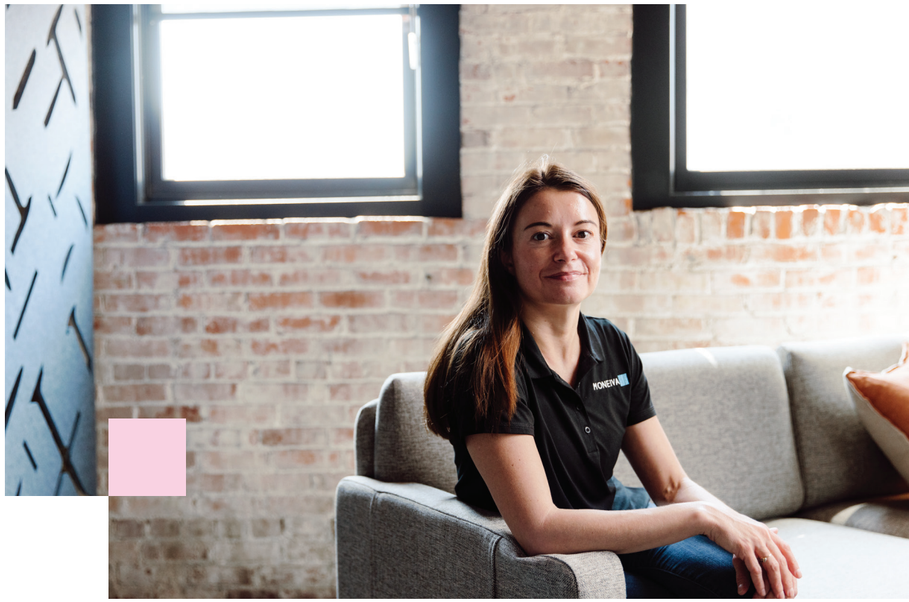
Brown worked in supply chain for six years prior to starting Moneiva and experienced the communication breakdowns firsthand. She left her job during the holiday season, and finances were looming over her.

She was wrapping Christmas presents when an idea struck her: what if she could decrease those supply chain billing delays by speeding up communication between trucking, freight, and logistics workers? Not your typical holiday vision of sugar plums, but with the quiet of the holiday, she finally had the space to think it through and start building.

She applied for a federal **SBIR grant**, but after four months, 120 pages of paperwork, and six months of waiting, Brown was rejected. Still, she didn't give up.

Brown connected with the **Nebraska Startup Academy** [1], which encouraged her to apply for the **Nebraska Prototype Grant**. She got it, used the money to hire a developer, and along with her husband, Jason, built the prototype that earned her first client.

The first version of Moneiva didn't look like it does today. Brown's original idea focused on automating how extra freight charges were communicated, addressing billing delays. It didn't gain much traction, but it did land a few early customers. One of them changed everything.



Their real problem wasn't billing, it was visibility.

They had no reliable way to track freight loads in real time. The only option was to call drivers, so they had people dedicated to it all day. It was inefficient for everyone.

Brown listened and pivoted. Moneiva launched AI voice agents that integrated with client systems to handle the repetitive, back-and-forth updates. The client was thrilled.

"We had to evolve along the way with our clients," she said. "You either listen to what your clients are going to pay you for, or you die."

Today, Moneiva automates repetitive communication workflows across supply chain and mobility operations. That includes automating the implicit knowledge and decisioning processes of supply chain operators, allowing critical resources throughout the process to focus on more important matters.

Brown's primary goal is to solve complex problems for her clients, and that dedication doesn't go unnoticed; nearly every customer comes through a referral.

"At the end of the day, if not for your clients, you don't have a business," Brown said. "Our company is very big on the idea that the customer comes first."

In the early days of Moneiva, Brown was accepted into the **Techstars** Boulder accelerator program by the skin of her teeth. She was later told her application generated the most internal debate of her cohort.

Of the 12 companies in her group, Moneiva is one of four still operating.

Moneiva has seven employees now. They've raised money from **MOVE Venture Capital**, **Invest Nebraska**, and family and friends. Along the way, they've also been rejected from institutional investments, which has only lit more of a fire in Brown.

"I have lived my life in a way that when people say 'no,' then I'm going to prove them wrong," Brown said. "I plan on doing it this time as well."

The next chapter involves solving harder problems, scaling faster, and proving to those venture capital firms that passed on investing that the growth rate they doubted is absolutely possible. ●

[1] Nebraska Startup Academy
A nonprofit organization that provides mentorship, online curriculum, educational events, co-working space, and growth opportunities for early-stage entrepreneurs.

Being the First Customer



For startups, an early customer can change everything. Werner Enterprises has become that customer for founders across Nebraska.

Adapted by Open Range from original reporting by Lev Gringauz for Silicon Prairie News

In 2024 Marina Brown took a leap of faith and started Moneiva. She wanted to use AI to solve invoicing and cash flow challenges in the transportation industry.

ONE OF the first calls she made to see if **Moneiva** was on the right track was to Daragh Mahon, Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer at Werner Enterprises, where Brown had previously worked.

The invoicing solution wasn't the right fit, Mahon said.

So Brown pivoted. Instead of focusing on invoicing, Moneiva began automating supply chain communications to help operations run more smoothly. For both companies, it proved to be the right move.

"Literally within a month and a half, we went from, 'Let's do business together' to actually doing business together," Brown said.

Landing Werner as an early customer gave Moneiva immediate credibility.

"What Werner did for us is get us just about every other customer afterwards," Brown said.

Over the past few years, Werner has made a name for itself in the Nebraska startup ecosystem. The company is a hands-on corporate innovator, actively seeking out, investing in, and working with startups, including through partners like the **Nebraska Startup Academy**. To date, the company has worked with more than 15 startups.

Mahon has become one of the most visible advocates of Werner's startup efforts. Through organizations like **Tech Nebraska**, he regularly encourages business leaders to engage with startups, not just because it benefits their companies, but because it benefits the state.

"I want people to understand that there's such a thriving community here in Nebraska, and our job as CIOs, CTOs, and CEOs should be to help support that community," Mahon said. "That's what keeps talent in Nebraska."

In Brown's experience, Werner is unusual in the corporate world. She has worked with companies that begrudgingly partner with startups, but don't expend any real effort to help them succeed.

"That's not how Werner is. They really want you to be successful, because they understand the value of what your technology is going to bring to them," she said.

NO CORPORATE INNOVATION WITHOUT STARTUPS

Before joining Werner in 2020, Mahon spent much of his career in Atlanta, where he watched the startup scene grow through local incubators supported by the likes of Coca-Cola and Salesforce.

"I saw the impact that very little dollars from corporations that size could have for those entrepreneurs," Mahon said. "It stuck with me."

Mahon is convinced that the most meaningful innovation still happens at the startup level.

"The only place real innovation in tech is happening is at the startup level," he said.

So when Mahon was brought to Werner to help modernize the company's infrastructure, he saw an opportunity to work with local founders. To stay ahead of competition and solve problems, working with startups is a must.

"There was a large recognition by the executive team here that we've got to change our tech if we're going to be successful," Mahon said.

He said his startup-focused approach received support from the highest levels of the organization, including Werner's chairman, CEO, board, and executive team.

At first, Mahon connected with startups through Werner board members and local startup figures like Charlie Cuddy, the Managing Partner at **MOVE Venture Capital** and the Executive Director of the Nebraska Startup Academy.

As word spread that Werner was willing to work with startups, founders began reaching out.

To manage the influx, Werner invested in Autotech Ventures, a VC fund in California that specializes in transportation technology. Today, startups are often directed there first for vetting before Werner evaluates potential partnerships.

For Werner, the criteria are straightforward.

"It's got to fill a hole for us, or it's got to do a job for us," Mahon said.

But founders don't always need a finished product.

"In some cases, the demo was a PowerPoint because no code had been written... Sometimes, it's a leap of faith," he said.

HANDS-ON COLLABORATION

In 2021, Terry Reinert started hearing a growing concern from transportation companies: what would happen if hackers gained access to their vehicles and networks?

He had a potential solution.

Reinert co-founded **Fleet Defender** to protect government and commercial vehicles from cyberattacks. Soon after, he was introduced to Mahon.

Reinert showed all the ways he could hack into an Audi A6, the same car Mahon drove.

"We could control every aspect of the vehicle... We could listen to what the occupants were saying. We could control the steering, the brakes, the accelerator," Reinert said.

Then Fleet Defender showed how it could prevent those hacks. Mahon instantly knew he wanted to do business. Within weeks, Werner

15

Startups that Werner has worked with directly

Daragh Mahon
Executive Vice President & CIO



"I want people to understand that there's such a thriving community here in Nebraska, and our job as CIOs, CTOs, and CEOs should be to help support that community. That's what keeps talent in Nebraska."

invested in Fleet Defender and began exploring how the technology could be deployed across its fleet.

That kind of speed is essential to cash-strapped startups, and rare to see from slow-moving corporations.

"You raise a million bucks, you burn a million bucks, you have no revenue, you're dead... So you have to have these companies like Werner who are willing to be early investors and customers," Reinert said.

But Werner also pushed Fleet Defender to rethink its approach.

Physically recalling every truck from across the country to install Fleet Defender's cybersecurity tool would be an expensive logistical nightmare. Instead, Mahon encouraged the company to pursue a software-only solution.

To support that change, Werner gave Fleet Defender office space and access to its staff.

"That was probably the single longest ramp we had, where we spent maybe 18 months working with him before we had a viable product... Now it's on the entire fleet," Mahon said.

The partnership helped catapult Fleet Defender's business.

"We went from a small pilot of 100 trucks with Werner to being on over 14,000 commercial vehicles across North America," Reinert said.

For Mahon, the appeal of working with startups goes beyond solving immediate business challenges. Every partnership is an opportunity to learn, experiment, and discover ideas that might otherwise be missed.

He also believes more corporate leaders should recognize the role they can play in helping founders succeed.

"You might only find one every three years, but there's an idea that's going to change how you do business... You just got to go find it, and the only way you're going to find it is to go talk to startups," Mahon said.

For Werner, that approach has become more than a strategy for adopting new technology. It's a way to support entrepreneurs, strengthen the state's startup community, and create more opportunities for founders in Nebraska. ●

[FLEET DEFENDER]

The Hacker Mindset

Terry Reinert knows how to hack a truck, steer it off the road, and plan a cargo theft. That knowledge now powers Fleet Defender, built to stop those attacks before they succeed.



FLEET DEFENDER

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2022

INDUSTRY
Logistics

EMPLOYEES
7

WEBSITE
fleetdefender.com

TERRY REINERT knows how to hack a vehicle and steer it off the road. He also knows how to break into its data and plan a cargo theft.

So when he sat down with **Werner Enterprises'** board of directors and showed them what was possible, the room didn't need much convincing.

"One Werner executive called it an 'oh shit' moment," Reinert said.

He had just secured Fleet Defender's first commercial client.

Fleet Defender protects commercial fleets from cyberattacks and theft. It detects suspicious activity, alerts the client (and law enforcement, if necessary), and defends against attacks so trucks reach their destinations safely.

Reinert spent 13 years working in cybersecurity, including national security work that involved hacking vehicles and embedded systems. He had a job he loved, a mission he believed in, and an office on the beach in Florida. But he was ready for the next step in his career.

That opportunity brought him to Omaha to help start the Nebraska Applied Research Institute, a cyber research institute affiliated with **University of Nebraska at Omaha's** Peter Kiewit Institute. He figured he'd give it a year.

Then he met Courtney, Fleet Defender's Chief Operating Officer and Terry's wife. When they first met, they realized how well they worked together, balancing their strengths and weaknesses. They got married, then built their first business together in 2018.

Red Berry Innovations is a cyber warfare consultancy. It started as the two of them in their basement, working on a modest Army contract. That work pulled them deeper into vehicle cybersecurity, revealing a huge gap in defense.

There was no antivirus for cars. Nothing to flag that a hack had occurred, let alone prevent it. The Reinerts knew exactly how to break into trucks, which made them uniquely suited to defend them.

Six months later, they tripled that contract. In 2022, they incorporated Fleet Defender. Less than two months later, one of the largest trucking companies in the country signed on as their first commercial customer.

"It's crazy to go from zero to enterprise overnight," Reinert said. "But Werner was an amazing first partner."

That partnership reshaped the technology. Fleet Defender had been building hardware that had to be physically installed on every truck. Werner pushed them toward a software-only approach.

One morning, Reinert logged into the Fleet Defender dashboard expecting to see the same few hundred trucks his team had been tracking in a pilot group.

7,000 trucks appeared on the dashboard. Overnight, Werner had deployed their software to thousands of trucks.

"That meant we built a scalable product that could literally scale without us," he said. "That was so cool."

As Fleet Defender grew, so did cyber-enabled cargo theft. The pattern usually starts with attackers targeting a truck's operational technology to figure out where it's headed, who's driving, and where it can be intercepted.

One Fleet Defender customer showed the early signs of exactly that kind of attack. The company flagged it, alerted authorities, and police arrived before a second pallet was off the truck.

"Watching the technology work and actually protect fleets from attacks, stopping cargo theft from occurring, that feels really good," Reinert said. "I can sleep well at night knowing I'm making a difference."

Fleet Defender is a team of seven people, plus AI agents to help them scale. Talent hasn't always been easy to find due to the limited number of cybersecurity, defense, and artificial intelligence companies in the Midwest, but the supportive community makes up for it.

"Omaha is a hidden gem," Reinert shared. "Everybody's always willing to help. If you need a mentor or advice, somebody knows someone, and they'd be happy to make that introduction for you."

These days, Reinert spends as much time thinking about Fleet Defender's technology as he does about the company's direction.

"I think there comes a time in every founder's journey that you wake up one day and realize there are families that are relying on you and the decisions you make," he said. "You don't want to do anything to impact that in a negative way."

That weight is part of why Fleet Defender is expanding, but carefully. They're in talks to move into railroad and law enforcement vehicles, with dreams of supporting other modalities across air, sea, land, and space.

No matter what Fleet Defender protects next, Reinert plans to keep the hacker mindset. It's how the company iterates quickly: break things, fail fast, recover, and build it back stronger than before.

The difference now is the target. He spent 13 years hacking to attack. Today, he hacks to defend. ●



"It's crazy to go from zero to enterprise overnight. But Werner was an amazing first partner."

Terry Reinert
Co-Founder & CEO



Courtney Reinert
Co-Founder & COO

[LANDOPTION]

Advocating for More Wild Things

With Landoption, serial entrepreneur Eric Dinger helps farmers navigate programs that strengthen their operations and make more room for wild places.



LANDOPTION

HEADQUARTERS
Roca, NE

FOUNDED
2024

INDUSTRY
AgTech

EMPLOYEES
4

WEBSITE
landoption.com

ERIC DINGER was twelve years old and guiding pheasant hunts in Redfield, South Dakota, and the hunters kept complaining about cleaning birds. So he offered to do it for two dollars and 50 cents a bird.

"I thought I had caught the world by the tail," he said. "I thought for sure there had to be rules against a kid making money like I made."

Dinger has been looking for the next version of that ever since.

In college, he burned mixed CDs because he was the only one on his dorm floor with a CD burner. During his junior year, he called his dad to say he was dropping his pre-med path for business. He started his first real company shortly after and hasn't had a traditional job since.

His explanation for all of it is simple: "Wiring issue," Dinger said. "I got a green wire connected to a red one."

That wiring has carried through every company he has built. It's also shaped what he cares about.

Dinger's last company, Powderhook, was built around the belief that access to the outdoors shouldn't depend on who you are or where you're from. That same belief shows up in how he talks about the world: wanting more wild people, more wild places, more wild things, and building around that.



Eric Dinger
Founder & CEO

1,300

Farm programs across federal, state, local, and private organizations

He sold Powderhook in 2019. Afterward, he took a contract opportunity with the **Arbor Day Foundation** ❶ and found himself on the road in rural Georgia, trying to get landowners enrolled in a forestry carbon program. The process was too complicated, too fragmented, and way too much to ask of someone with a farm to run.

That road trip led to what became Landoption.

There are more than 1,300 farm programs across federal, state, local, and private organizations: conservation incentives, carbon credits, sustainability payments, compliance programs, and other funding opportunities. Most farmers don't know what they qualify for, and many who do can't face the paperwork, leaving money unclaimed.

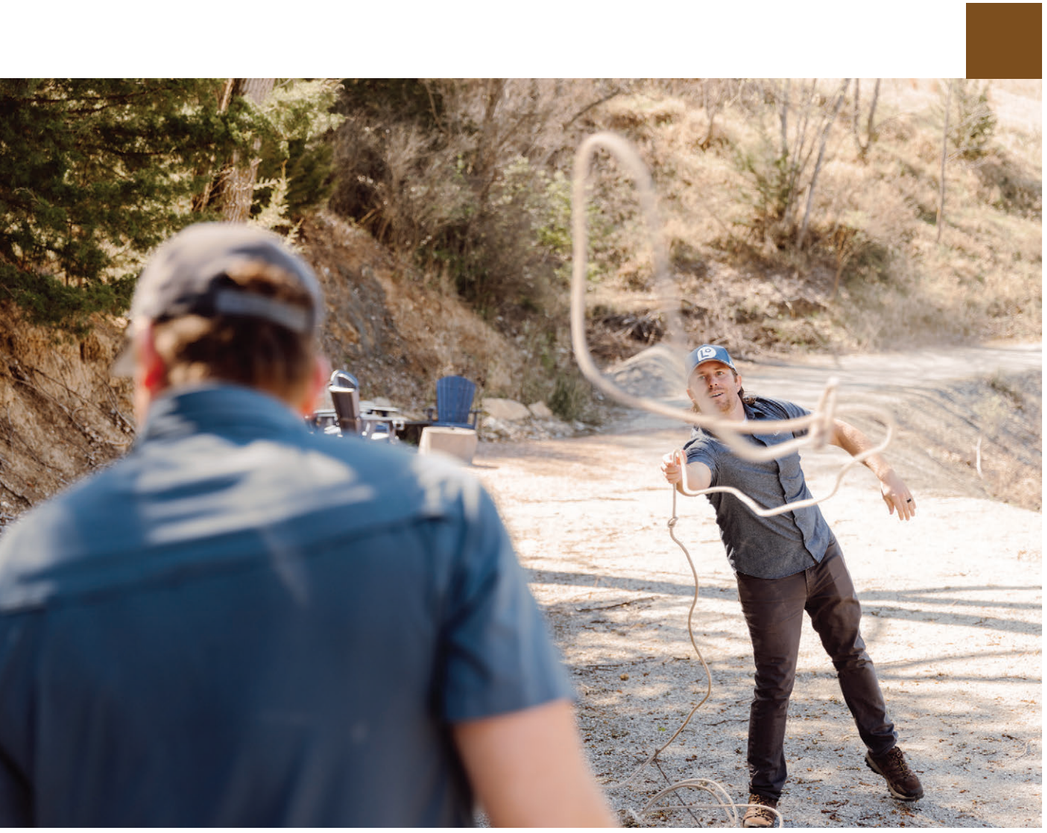
Dinger calls it the "program game." Landoption helps farmers and their advisors play it.

The company works through local advisors embedded in farming communities, including Dinger's father. The goal is to build a network of 2,000 dealers across the country.

The first real proof of concept came from a farmer who had spent years teasing his neighbors for planting cover crops, the practice of keeping something growing in a field between harvests rather than leaving it bare. Dinger's team showed him how cover crops could actually make him money.

❶ **Arbor Day Foundation**
A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1972 dedicated to planting trees and environmental conservation.







❷ Business Innovation Act
A statewide economic development program that provides grants and funding to local startups. **pg. 36**

"This guy's been farming his whole life, and you can still show him how working with nature is a good thing in new ways."



"This guy's been farming his whole life, and you can still show him how working with nature is a good thing in new ways," Dinger said. "That's been really fun."

It's a small shift, but it adds up. More land managed with nature instead of against it, which leads to more room for those wild places to exist.

That kind of change is part of what keeps Dinger doing the work. So is what happens to the people around him along the way.

One of the first people he ever hired, Dustin Tomes, grew up on a farm in Utica, Nebraska. He is now chief creative officer at TBWA\Chiat\Day New York, one of the advertising industry's most influential creative agencies. Not long ago, he sent Dinger a text.

"I'll never forget the fact that you gave me the start," it read. "I would not be where I am had you not gotten me started."

"Those are the flowers you get," Dinger said. "I feel way more from that than from any deal we have won or lost."

That perspective shows up in how he builds Landoption, and in how he thinks about the broader ecosystem around him. Dinger is also quick to point to the people who have helped along the way.

Ben Williamson at **Grit Road Partners** believed in the company early on, and Brennan Costello at **The Combine** has been a steady presence, sending introductions and opening doors on a near-weekly basis.

Sometimes, the support comes from places you might not expect.

When he was frustrated with the political landscape and what it meant for his industry, he wrote a letter to Myron Dorn, his state senator, about the **Business Innovation Act ❷.** Dorn responded that priorities were uncertain, but then agreed to co-sponsor the bill.

"At a local level, these people will listen to you," Dinger said. "Write a letter to your senator. You can have an absolute impact locally, and that is the stuff that actually affects your family every day."

It's how Dinger tends to operate: he sees what's missing, reaches out, and gets to work. It's how he cleaned birds at twelve, how he built and sold Powderhook, and how he's building Landoption alongside farmers and advisors today.

The scale has changed. The instinct hasn't. ●

[NAVE ANALYTICS]

Between Satellites and Soil

Three AgTech veterans believed soil moisture could be measured without expensive sensors in every field. Now they're using satellites to build a tool that could eventually monitor farmland anywhere in the world.



NAVE ANALYTICS

HEADQUARTERS
Wellfleet, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
AgTech

EMPLOYEES
3

WEBSITE
naveanalytics.com

SOIL MOISTURE is one of the most important variables in farming. It's also one of the hardest to measure at scale.

For years, existing solutions were expensive, limited, and difficult to deploy across entire operations. But advances in satellite imagery and remote sensing technology were beginning to change what was possible.

For Jessi Korinek, it was a question that followed her throughout her career. She had spent more than a decade working across corporate agriculture and AgTech. Along the way, she joined HydroBio as employee number six, where she met her future co-founder Bradley Griggs. After HydroBio's acquisition, she joined Climate, where she met scientist Val Kovalsky, who was responsible for advancing the acquired technology.

The three ultimately came together around the same question: could farmers measure soil moisture accurately without relying on expensive in-field sensors?

At Climate, they continued refining the technology they believed in, testing it, improving it, and pushing it forward. But over time, priorities shifted. The work they had invested in quietly lost its place.

"We still felt like there was a lot of potential there," Korinek said.

For the first time, the technology had caught up to the idea. The timing, finally, made sense.

Nave Analytics uses satellite imagery, weather data, and proprietary modeling to deliver near real-time insights on soil moisture and crop water use. Instead of relying on expensive in-field sensors, the platform gives farmers and agronomists visibility across entire operations, helping them make more precise planting and irrigation decisions.

What started as late-night conversations became a side project. Then a prototype. Then, slowly, a company. From there, it became a series of decisions about when to take the next step, including leaving stable jobs behind.

"I'm pretty open to risk," Korinek said. "There are a lot of cliffs you have to jump over. If it doesn't work out, I'll figure something else out."

Luckily, she didn't have to figure something else out. Early conversations with **The Combine** [1], including guidance from Matt Foley, gave the team structure where they didn't yet have it.

"It's an asset that AgTech companies have in Nebraska that isn't available to other states," Korinek said of the program.

Today, Nave Analytics is still early: three founders, a growing product, and a focus on expanding acreage and proving scale. But the ambition stretches far beyond Nebraska. If they can fully remove the need for in-field data collection, their platform could monitor farmland anywhere in the world.

Still, where they're building matters.

From Wellfleet, Nebraska, far from Omaha and Lincoln, Korinek is acutely aware of the distance between ecosystems.

"There's always kind of this separation and feeling of being forgotten if you're not in those areas," she said.

But for Nave Analytics, being outside those centers isn't a drawback. It's part of the point. The company is built closer to the farmers it serves, in the same environments where water, yield, and timing decisions are made every day. ●

"It's an asset that AgTech companies have in Nebraska that isn't available to other states."



[1] The Combine
A statewide initiative that supports high-growth AgTech startups through co-working space, one-on-one coaching, and networking opportunities.

[SERVICE STORIES]

The Long Way Home

Joe Toscano left Nebraska because he felt ahead of the technology curve. Fifteen years later, he returned with an idea built for a new era of AI search and the service businesses he understood best.



SERVICE STORIES

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2025

INDUSTRY
MarTech

EMPLOYEES
4

WEBSITE
servicestories.com

JOE TOSCANO left Nebraska because he didn't fit. He came back because he finally did.

In college, he was the kid talking about AI when no one else knew what to make of it.

"People just looked at me like I was some kind of radical," he said.

So he left for San Francisco, New York, and Boulder, spending years watching tech ecosystems bloom in cities that were ready for them.

He was also watching something else take shape. While consulting for Google on early chatbot work, Toscano had a front-row seat to how people naturally talked to machines.

"I was seeing people tell their deepest thoughts to this thing," he said. "And I knew the internet was going that way."

When he made his way back to Nebraska, working on content for his family's auto shop, he started pushing a different kind of SEO (how companies get discovered on Google). Instead of chasing keywords, he focused on writing the way people actually talk. The kind of questions that would eventually be asked of AI. For years, it kept them ahead of the curve.

He returned to Omaha to be closer to family, and because he thought Nebraska was close to its own tipping point. But coming back didn't mean he had it figured out.

In early 2024, he joined the **NMotion Accelerator** ❶ with an entirely different idea. He and his former co-founder spent months trying to make it work. By April, they both knew it wasn't going anywhere.

"We just lost the heart of it," Toscano said.

After the program ended that summer, they went looking for what came next. Toscano came back to the idea he had been circling for years, the same approach he had been testing for his family's auto shop.

"It felt almost stupid how simple it was," he said. "The same pattern could apply to every service business in the world."

That idea became Service Stories, a product that integrates directly into the platforms service businesses already use, pulls real operational data, and turns it into structured, AI-ready content built for a search landscape where answers are generated directly.

By mid-2025, they had committed. Their first customer signed on before anything was built and invested $15,000 to help get it off the ground. Something unusual followed.

"For the first time in my career, I didn't really have to sell it," Toscano said. "People were telling me how they would use it."

Early delivery was entirely manual. The team used ChatGPT, edited by hand, and delivered results while building in parallel. A working product was ready by December 2025. Since then, they've generated thousands of pieces of content with dozens of paying customers. They're fundraising, growing every month, and building toward something larger.

"I've never felt more excited about a product," Toscano said.

The goal is to become the default way service businesses show up in this new layer of the internet, not by chasing algorithms, but by turning real-world work into something AI can understand and surface.

Toscano spent the better part of 15 years getting to this point. Leaving, learning, circling back, and recognizing the right idea when it finally showed up.

Service Stories is the product of all of it, and Nebraska is where he chose to build it. ●

❶ **NMotion Accelerator**
A regional organization that runs comprehensive accelerator programs to bridge the gap between early-stage traction and long-term growth.



"It felt almost stupid how simple it was. The same pattern could apply to every service business in the world."

[NIGHTFOX AUDIO]

Tools for Tomorrow's Sound

After years of recording music wherever the road took him, Philip Zach began building the instruments and software he wished he had. Those personal tools grew into a platform serving thousands of creators.



NIGHTFOX AUDIO

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
Music Tech

EMPLOYEES
4

WEBSITE
nightfoxaudio.com

AS PART of an independent band, Philip Zach was on the road nearly 280 days a year, writing and recording music in locker rooms, green rooms, and basements. No matter where he was, he kept running into the same problem.

"I wished that I had the instruments that I have back at my studio at home," Zach said.

So he built them.

He began recording every note over and over, capturing subtle variations in how each one was played: a cello, a grand piano, guitars, synths. Eventually, more than 100 instruments.

For years, Zach learned the mechanics of survival in the music industry by booking shows, marketing, fixing equipment, and selling merchandise city by city.

"When you're in the band, you are doing all the things that an entrepreneur does, but you do it to survive," he said.

After opening his own recording studio, he wasn't just creating anymore. He was running everything. The work evolved from musician to producer to toolmaker. And as those tools improved, he began packaging and selling them to other producers, turning him from toolmaker to founder.

What began as a personal workaround became Nightfox Audio, a company focused on building audio plugins for creators.

"I wanted to bring this industry into the future and give plugin developers like myself the ability to make really great products, without worrying about all the backend and delivery headaches," he said.

That instinct, to build for people like himself, was there from the start.

After a conference conversation about MIDI plugins, tools that turn simple keyboard inputs into more complex musical ideas, Zach realized the product he wanted didn't exist. So he built it.

Over eight months, he developed a MIDI plugin that could turn a single note into full, in-key chords and progressions, making it easier for producers to write more dynamic music. When he shared it back with the team that sparked the idea, they stated they weren't looking for a partner currently. After months of perseverance and waiting for the right timing, a version of the plugin was rolled out to every user of a major audio platform: Avid Pro Tools.

It was an early win and proof that a solution built for one creator could resonate with many more.

"When you're in the band, you are doing all the things that an entrepreneur does, but you do it to survive."

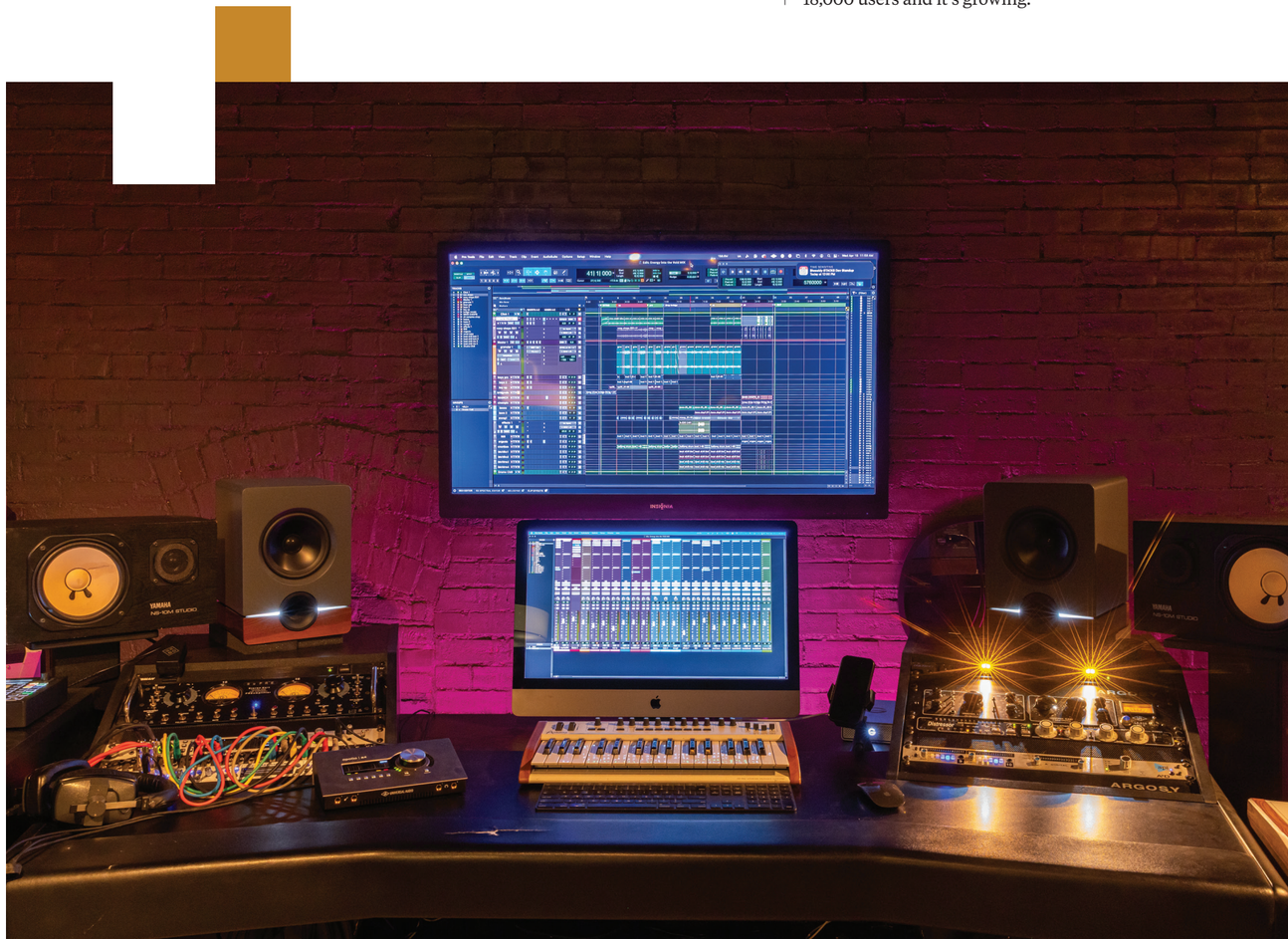
As Nightfox Audio grew, the team encountered a new set of operational problems around software distribution, licensing, and updates.

Those problems evolved into Stacks, a platform designed to solve the challenges of distributing, licensing, and managing audio plugins. It streamlined how Nightfox sold, installed, and maintained its own products, replacing a fragmented system with something cohesive and easy to use.

Other developers became interested in the plugins, but they also wanted access to the infrastructure behind them.

Stacks evolved into an all-in-one plugin marketplace and delivery platform that simplifies how audio software is discovered, purchased, and managed. Today, it powers Nightfox products and 20 other brands, serving as the engine behind how those tools reach creators.

"A year ago, we had fewer than 1,200 users on Stacks," Zach said. "We currently have around 18,000 users and it's growing."





18,000

Users on the Stacks marketplace and platform





Beyond adding more plugins and partners, Stacks is beginning to expand into social and commerce features, giving producers the ability to sell their own products directly through the platform.

In the early days, as Nightfox Audio gained traction, a friend encouraged Zach to connect with Nebraska's startup community.

"I had no clue that the ecosystem is so strong here," he said.

Through those introductions, Zach tapped into a network of investors and advisors who helped shape the path forward. The raise that followed gave the company room to keep building, iterating, and growing on its own terms.

It wasn't just capital. It was access to people who had built companies before, were willing to engage, and saw potential in what began as a personal workaround. That support is now translating into what comes next.

The team is expanding beyond instruments, developing a rhythm and percussion sequencer that brings the same approach to drums, while opening the door to new collaborators. Grammy-winning mix and master engineers, along with A-list producers, are exploring launching their own plugins on Stacks, using the platform as a tool and a distribution layer.

At the same time, the team has begun exploring a build-your-own plugin feature that would allow everyday musicians to create and release their own tools.

Zach is expanding into a physical recording studio and creating an education initiative called MusicBox, separate from Nightfox and Stacks, but rooted in the same idea of equipping creators with the tools and environment they need.

"It's about creating a moment for somebody to experience magic," Zach said.

The same problem that followed him from locker rooms to basements still guides what he's building today: giving creators access to the tools they need, wherever they are. ●

[FANWORD]

For the Athletes You Don’t Hear About

Christopher Aumueller came to Nebraska to play tennis and saw how many college athletes’ stories never traveled beyond a stat line. FanWord is helping hundreds of athletic departments change that.



FANWORD

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2018

INDUSTRY
Sports Tech

EMPLOYEES
10

WEBSITE
fanword.com

CHRISTOPHER AUMUELLER didn't come to Nebraska to start a company, he came to play tennis.

He left Germany for the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** (UNL), joining a program that, like most college sports, lived just outside the spotlight. Not invisible, but not the focus either. The attention often centered on the sports with the largest audiences.

What stayed with him wasn't just the lack of coverage for some of the lesser-known programs, but what that meant for the athletes behind it. The stories that made them human, the ones that made people care, rarely extended beyond a school's marquee sports.

"There are so many athletes doing incredible things that no one hears about," Aumueller said. "We wanted to change that."

This problem existed for thousands of college programs, particularly at smaller institutions where communications teams are often one or two people responsible for everything.

While he was still a PhD student at UNL, Aumueller started working on what would become FanWord. At the time, it wasn't software. It was an idea shaped by storytelling.

He was drawn to platforms like The Players' Tribune, where athletes spoke in their own voice. It gave fans a way to understand athletes beyond performance.

"I became a fan of athletes not just because of what they were doing, but because of who they were," he said.

He wanted to bring that same approach to college athletics, where thousands of athletes had stories that never made it past a stat line.

In 2017, he made the decision to go all in, leaving his PhD program to pursue the company full time.

FanWord's first version launched in 2018. The team partnered with schools to write first-person feature stories about their athletes, coaches, and alumni. The work resonated with the programs they worked with, and early customers started to come in.

The first was Nebraska Wesleyan University. Not long after, they landed The University of Alabama.

The range mattered. It showed the idea could work across levels, from small programs to national powerhouses. But the model had limits as custom storytelling is difficult to scale.

Around 2021, as NIL reshaped college athletics and COVID-19 disrupted the industry, the company began to evolve. They experimented with training athletes to tell their own stories and built internal tools to make content creation faster. Over time, those tools became the product.

By 2024, FanWord had transitioned into a software platform. It was the biggest evolution of the company to date, but the numbers show that it was the right decision.

Today, it supports more than 200 athletic departments at all levels, helping communications teams keep up with an increasing demand for digital content. Game recaps, athlete bios, and feature stories move faster, giving those teams more time to focus on the kind of storytelling that originally inspired the company.

That shift also expanded who could participate as FanWord was no longer limited by how

"I became a fan of athletes not just because of what they were doing, but because of who they were."







200

Athletic departments supported by FanWord

many stories its team could write. It could support programs that rarely had the resources to tell those stories in the first place.

Lincoln, Nebraska has a way of producing Sports Tech companies that think this way.

Hudl and **Opendorse** both grew in Lincoln. FanWord grew alongside them, part of a community that Aumueller describes less like an industry and more like a team.

He points to people like Blake Lawrence and Adi Kunalic as builders who were willing to share what they were learning in real time. It wasn't a formal mentorship as much as proximity to people solving similar problems, and that made a difference.

It also shaped how he chose to build the company.

FanWord has raised under $1 million to date, including a round in late 2023 backed by several Nebraska-based investors. The company is profitable, and its growth has come through product iteration and customer demand rather than speed at all costs.

"I'm not the type to just raise money and throw it against the wall," he said.

That approach reflects a certain mindset. There's a practicality to it, and a focus on building something that works before trying to make it bigger. It also reflects where he built it.

Aumueller never left Nebraska after college. The company is remote-first, and its customers are national, so there's nothing operationally tying it to one place. Still, he stayed.

Part of it is the community, some of it is familiarity, and most of it is the way Nebraska shows up, especially when you're building something from scratch.

"I have so much gratitude for the community and the team for sticking to it," Aumueller said.

That gratitude isn't performative. It's woven into how he talks about the company and about Nebraska, with the same honesty he brings to everything else, including the parts that are still hard.

"We're building something where there's no blueprint," he said.

There were stretches where the company stalled. Months without new customers. Pivots that didn't land. A pandemic that paused the sports world entirely.

But he kept going.

Aumueller competed in tennis at UNL and something about the sport shaped how he thinks. Tennis is solitary in a way most sports aren't. Every point won or lost belongs entirely to you, and every match follows the same pattern. You don't get to hide from mistakes. You sit with them, reset, and play the next point.

"In tennis, you lose and fail constantly. Every match," he said. "This sport teaches you how to deal with that."

That persistence has carried the company to where it is today.

FanWord has changed significantly since those early days. The product, model, and scale may be different, but the reason behind the company isn't. It's still about helping athletic programs share the stories that don't get told, so FanWord keeps telling them. ●

From Traction to Trajectory

These startups have found something that works. Now, they're navigating what comes next: reaching more customers, expanding into new markets, strengthening their teams, and building the systems needed to support continued growth. Across software, manufacturing, food systems, and other industries, their stories show that scaling isn't one milestone, but a new series of decisions.

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Scaling Builde

[MARBLE]

Fixing Food Processing

COVID-19 exposed how much meat processing still depends on difficult manual labor. Chafik Barbar saw an opportunity to bring robotics into the places where safer, more consistent systems were needed most.



MARBLE

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2020

INDUSTRY
Infrastructure; Food Tech

EMPLOYEES
40

WEBSITE
seemarble.com

LONG BEFORE he built robots for meat processors in Nebraska, Chafik Barbar was a kid in Syria imagining what it would be like to start a company.

After immigrating to Nebraska as a teenager, he spent years building a career in agriculture and food systems. Along the way, he developed a deep understanding of how the industry worked and where it struggled.

Then COVID-19 put those challenges on display. As the pandemic exposed major weaknesses in the U.S. food supply chain, Barbar saw an opportunity.

"COVID put a magnifier on the weaknesses in our supply chain, especially in meat processing, where there's a heavy reliance on labor," Barbar said.

Inside meat processing facilities, much of the work still relies on manual labor. Workers inspect, sort, and package products by hand in physically demanding environments where consistency depends on experience and repetition.

At the same time, processors are under pressure to improve yield, maintain strict food safety standards, and meet growing demand, all while navigating labor shortages and tight margins.

His earlier software company, focused on financial risk management for producers, was eventually acquired, but the exposure to the industry stayed with him. When he returned to the space during graduate school, he was surprised by how manual meat processing still was.

"We saw a clear opportunity to bring next-generation automation to where the technology is today, to make jobs easier, and the product safer," he said.

Marble builds automation and robotics for food processing, designed to take on repetitive, high-precision tasks across production lines. Its flagship system, Pack-Off, uses computer vision and AI-enabled hardware to inspect, sort, and package meat products with consistency.

Marble approached the work through customer discovery, and an early introduction to Greater Omaha Packing, a single-source supplier that processes premium Midwest cattle, soon became a defining partnership.

The Marble team didn't position itself as an expert. They showed up as a new entrant, clear about what they didn't know, and asked a simple question: what are your biggest challenges? That approach shaped everything that followed, turning a potential customer into a long-term collaborator.

"When you approach conversations with humility and transparency, customers open up and become partners," he said.

As Marble moved into product development, the team continued testing ideas with customers inside real processing environments. Those partnerships helped shape the product and exposed what worked, what didn't, and what needed to improve.

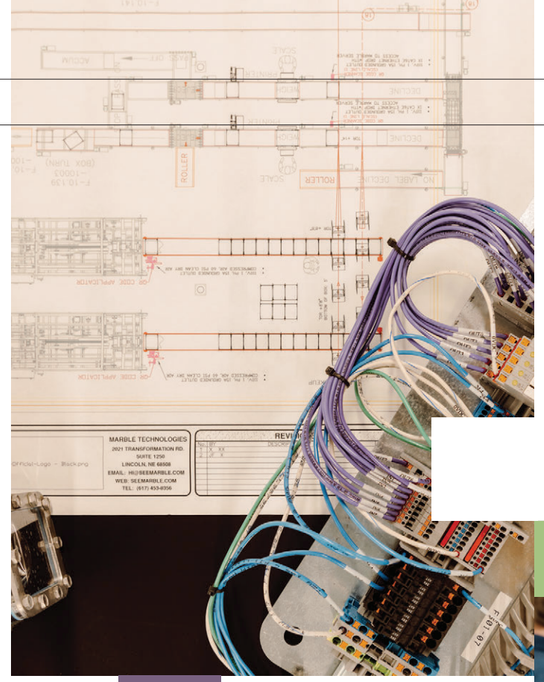
Eventually, customer interest became commitment.

"When people write you checks, that's when you start to know that you're on a good trajectory," Barbar said.

Today, Marble has reached commercialization and is now cash-flow positive, an important milestone in a capital-intensive category where sustained momentum is difficult. Building Marble required more than software; it demanded sustained investment to support hardware development, iteration, and manufacturing.

The company followed a structured path, starting with a seed round backed by friends and family, then raising venture capital as customer commitments grew and the product moved toward commercialization. In June 2026, Marble announced a $30 million Series A round to support its next phase of growth.

Support from the **Nebraska Prototype Grant** also played a key role early on, helping fund a portion of Marble's research and development as the team iterated toward a commercial product.



"We saw a clear opportunity to bring next-generation automation to where the technology is today."



Marble's growth has been shaped by relationships across Nebraska's startup ecosystem. **Nebraska Innovation Campus** [1] has been central to talent and collaboration, while **Invest Nebraska** and local economic groups helped create early connections and momentum.

Those relationships also influenced where the company chose to build and scale. The company operates in Lincoln, placing it in direct proximity to partners and customers.

"You have to integrate yourself with your potential customer so you know you're not missing the mark on what you're building," Barbar said.

Staying close to the customer requires a team that understands the work firsthand. Many employees bring personal connections to food processing through prior experience, geography, or family ties.

That firsthand understanding of the industry helps ground engineering decisions in the realities of the work.

"You've got brilliant engineers that understand the bigger context and the challenges of this industry," he said. "That makes an engineer a super engineer."

Now, Marble's focus has shifted to extending its automation across more workflows. Each layer adds complexity: hardware, software, machine learning, and operations must work together in environments where failure stops production.

The opportunity Barbar saw in 2020 remains largely unchanged today. As food processors continue balancing labor shortages, efficiency demands, and food safety requirements, Marble is building tools designed to help the industry adapt, turning a persistent challenge into an opportunity for innovation. ●

[1] **Nebraska Innovation Campus**
A community and innovation hub located outside of UNL designed to collaborate between the university and businesses for research and business development.

[ALPACA]

Making Teachers' Voices Heard

Karen Borchert started with coffee, a notebook, and a lot of tiny classroom chairs. By listening to teachers, she discovered that what schools needed most wasn't another care package, but a better way to hear their people and act.



ALPACA



KAREN BORCHERT didn't start Alpaca with a product roadmap.

She started with coffee.

During the pandemic, Borchert began sitting down with teachers after school, asking a simple question: what does this job actually feel like right now? As a parent of school-aged children, she had watched the strain building inside schools. Teachers were navigating uncertainty, shifting expectations, and a profession that had become harder with each passing year.

"I just started taking coffee to teachers after school," Borchert said. "I took a lot of notes in my little notebook and sat in a lot of tiny chairs."

Those early conversations quickly grew. One meeting would lead to another recommendation. Soon Borchert was visiting classrooms across the state, speaking with educators in urban and rural districts, large schools and small ones, collecting stories about what it meant to teach during one of the most disruptive moments in modern education.

As she listened, Borchert kept coming back to the same question.

"I was watching the teachers in our school who we loved under a lot of stress and fatigue," she said. "And I kept wondering, why isn't the same support available for teachers that exists in the private sector?"

School leaders cared deeply about their teachers, but they often lacked consistent insight into how their staff were actually doing day to day. Many districts relied on occasional surveys or informal check-ins, leaving administrators to make decisions about culture, retention, and support with incomplete information.

Those conversations became the foundation for Alpaca.

The company Borchert launched in 2022 looked very different from the platform schools use today. In its earliest version, Alpaca focused on supporting teachers more directly, sending care packages and classroom supplies into schools to offset the money educators often spend out of their own pockets.

The model was unconventional. Alpaca sold physical goods, partnered with parents and community supporters, and operated with a social mission that sometimes left people wondering whether it was actually a nonprofit.

But each delivery included something else: a short check-in for teachers.

The questions were simple: How are you doing? What's happening in your classroom? What support do you need?

Thousands of teachers responded. Over time, it became clear that the most valuable part of Alpaca wasn't the supplies being delivered. It was the insight those responses created.

Teachers wanted to be heard. School leaders wanted a clear understanding of their teams. The opportunity was to build something that connected the two.

Instead of focusing on supplies and recognition programs, Alpaca began evolving into a platform designed to help school leaders listen to teachers more consistently and act on what they learn.

Today Alpaca operates as a school leadership platform powered by teacher voice. The software gives principals and district leaders real-time feedback from their staff, along with tools



"I kept wondering, why isn't the same support available for teachers that exists in the private sector?"



HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2022

INDUSTRY
EdTech

EMPLOYEES
12

WEBSITE
getalpaca.com

“GROWING TALENT FROM THE GROUND UP MATTERS.”



> "Growth doesn't happen because you suddenly have a perfect product. It happens because a group of people made a hundred phone calls every day until it started to resonate."

that help them act on what they learn. Instead of relying on annual surveys or scattered data points, leaders can see patterns as they emerge and respond before small challenges become larger problems.

The shift from care packages to software didn't happen all at once.

"We pivoted our business model quite a bit over time," Borchert said.

That willingness to iterate reflects Borchert herself. Throughout her career she has been drawn to the process of taking an idea and building it into something tangible, whether inside a company, a community initiative, or a startup.

Long before Alpaca existed, she spent years helping build companies and communities in Nebraska's startup ecosystem, including time at **Flywheel**. Those experiences reinforced a belief she still carries into Alpaca today: strong organizations are built around people.

"Having lunch together matters," she said. "Growing talent from the ground up matters."

That philosophy shapes how Alpaca hires. The company intentionally builds a team that reflects the communities it serves. Several employees are former teachers who understand firsthand the realities of the classroom. Others come from nontraditional backgrounds, bringing experience from fields like hospitality or operations that translate naturally into customer success and relationship-building.

Support across Nebraska's startup ecosystem also helped Alpaca move from early experimentation to a growing venture-backed company. Partnerships with organizations like the **Lozier Foundation** [1] helped open doors inside schools, giving the company space to learn directly from educators and administrators.

Programs like the **Raikes School** at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have also helped create a pipeline of technical talent that understands both software development and the pace of startups.

Today Alpaca is growing quickly after raising roughly $5 million in funding. The platform now collects feedback from teachers across the country, each response contributing to a growing body of insight about how schools function from the inside.

Borchert is quick to point out that the company's momentum didn't come from a single breakthrough moment.

"Growth doesn't happen because you suddenly have a perfect product," she said. "It happens because a group of people made a hundred phone calls every day until it started to resonate."

As the company continues to scale, Borchert believes the information Alpaca collects could become something larger than a single platform.

"We're building what could become the largest dataset in the world built entirely on teacher voice," she said.

It's an ambition that traces directly back to the early days of the company, when the most valuable thing Borchert carried from school to school was a small notebook filled with teachers' stories.

What began as a series of conversations over coffee has grown into a platform designed to make sure those voices are heard long after the conversation ends. ●

[1] **Lozier Foundation**
A private family foundation headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska that supports the growth and impact of local nonprofit organizations.

Centered Around a Crowd

Andrew Prystai had the audience, partners, and programming, yet getting people to events was still harder than it should have been. Vesta grew from the realization that organizers didn't need to work harder, they just needed better tools.



VESTA

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2019

INDUSTRY
MarTech

EMPLOYEES
5

WEBSITE
eventvesta.com

ANDREW PRYSTAI didn't find entrepreneurship so much as recognize it.

Flipping through **Creighton University's** course catalog, something felt right when he landed on the entrepreneurship major. He'd grown up watching his mom run multiple businesses, seeing both the upside and the weight of building something from scratch. This felt like a continuation of that.

By the time he graduated, the path was set. He co-founded Drive Spotter, raised over a million dollars, and proved he could build. But the idea that would become Vesta was still forming, shaped less by a pitch deck and more by a problem he couldn't ignore.

That problem came into focus when Prystai stepped into a leadership role with the **Greater Omaha Chamber's** ❶ Young Professionals Council. As events chair, he had access to something most organizers would envy: a massive audience, strong partners, and consistent programming. And still, getting people to show up felt harder than it should have.

"It's not a lack of effort," Prystai said. "There's just something broken with the tools people have available."

The more he looked, the more consistent the pattern became. Venues, nonprofits, and businesses were all doing the same repetitive work, copying and pasting event details across platforms, chasing visibility without clear feedback on what actually worked. Events were central to how communities connected, but the infrastructure around them hadn't kept up.

Prystai left Drive Spotter in 2017. Two years later, he launched Vesta with co-founder Billy Martin.

The platform automates event promotion across local media, email, social, and digital channels, handling the manual, multi-channel work that consumes time without adding value. Early on, the team focused on a narrow but telling use case: getting events into local "things to do" guides and community calendars.



Andrew Prystai
Co-Founder & CEO

> "It's more focused on how we build a product that our customers really like and want to pay us money for."

It was tedious work, but customers immediately understood its value and were willing to pay for it.

That signal mattered. So did their first major customer.

The Omaha Storm Chasers had signed a letter of intent during early conversations and followed through once the product launched. For Prystai, it was proof that the problem extended beyond small organizations. If one of the city's most active event operators saw value, the opportunity was real.



Billy Martin
Co-Founder & Chief Product Officer

Building in Nebraska has shaped how he's approached that opportunity. He credits both the **University of Nebraska at Omaha** and Creighton University as consistent talent pipelines, along with community touchpoints like **1 Million Cups** and **Scale Omaha** ❷. Some of Vesta's strongest hires have come directly from those networks.

The environment has also influenced how the company has grown. Nebraska investors tend to prioritize traction over hype, a dynamic that pushed the team to focus on revenue and customer value early. During the peak venture market of 2021 and 2022, that mindset kept them from overextending.

"Instead of focusing on how we raise the biggest round with the biggest numbers, with the biggest hype, it's more focused on how we build a product that our customers really like and want to pay us money for," he said.

Looking ahead, Prystai sees AI as the engine for Vesta's next chapter, with ambitions to become the go-to platform for event marketing. The company is expanding beyond event calendars and local listings, building tools that help organizations automate more of the work that goes into promoting events.

But the reason Vesta exists hasn't changed. Events are how people build relationships, find opportunities, and connect to the places where they live. Vesta's goal is to make sure more of those moments get found. ●

❶ Greater Omaha Chamber
A nonprofit organization that promotes local businesses, economic development, and city prosperity for the greater Omaha area.

❷ Scale Omaha
A monthly event series that showcases local entrepreneurs and ecosystem builders who have scaled their businesses in Nebraska.

By the Numbers:

Nebraska Angels

How would you describe the founders or companies your program supports?

Nebraska Angels supports founders raising capital for venture-backable, high-growth startups. The companies we invest in are innovative businesses with the potential to scale significantly, disrupt existing markets or workflows, and generate strong returns for investors.

MEMBERS

100+

Including 13 corporate firms

PORTFOLIO COMPANIES

85

TOTAL CAPITAL DEPLOYED

$83M

TOTAL RETURNS TO MEMBERS

$67M

MOVE Venture Capital

From your perspective, what role do investors play in shaping Nebraska's startup and venture future?

Investors provide more than capital, although access to early-stage funding remains one of the biggest gaps founders face in Nebraska and a critical ingredient for growth. Investors can help connect founders to customers, talent, advisors, strategic partners, and future sources of capital. In emerging ecosystems, they also play an important role in creating momentum, confidence, and visibility for entrepreneurship.

FUND I CAPITAL INVESTED

$5M

ANNUAL REVENUE GENERATED BY PORTFOLIO

$35M

TOTAL INVESTMENTS

50

JOBS CREATED

300

Investors

Grit Road Partners

TOTAL CAPITAL RAISED

$46M

FUNDS

3

YEARS IN BUSINESS

5

TOTAL INVESTMENTS

25

What role do programs like yours play in strengthening Nebraska's startup ecosystem?

Despite Grit Road being massive supporters of Nebraska-focused economic development and investment programs, we fundamentally believe that when we build the Midwest into the Global AgTech Hub™ that will not just strengthen Nebraska's startup ecosystem but also create tremendous economic development.

Invest Nebraska

How long have you been investing in Nebraska, and what originally motivated you to get involved here?

Invest Nebraska has been investing in Nebraska startups since 2012, following the passage of the Nebraska Business Innovation Act by the Nebraska Legislature in 2011. The organization was founded in 2002 on the belief that venture capital can serve as a powerful economic development tool, helping retain talent, attract investment, and build the next generation of Nebraska-based companies. Since then, our mission has remained focused on expanding access to capital and strengthening the state's innovation economy.

TOTAL CAPITAL DEPLOYED

$64M

PORTFOLIO COMPANIES

225+

TOTAL INVESTMENTS (INCLUDING FOLLOW-ONS)

370+

REVENUE GENERATED BY PORTFOLIO COMPANIES

$712M

[FAST FORWARD]

Before the Powerlines Fail

Dusty Birge built Fast Forward to find powerline failures before they cause outages or fires. One early customer went from a fire every few months to none in three years.



FAST FORWARD

EVERY FEW months, a rural power company would get a call nobody wants: another utility pole fire. It was a recurring problem with no good solution. By the time anyone knew something was wrong, it was already too late.

Dusty Birge thought he had an answer, and it was perhaps his wildest idea yet: mount thermal cameras on cars to monitor powerlines at night, proactively detecting failing components before an outage occurs, or worse, a fire starts. It was expensive, impossible to self-fund, and potentially bigger than any business he'd started before. So, naturally, he got to work right away.

Birge had been running businesses since high school. When he was in middle school, he sold candy out of his school locker when he realized there wasn't a vending machine for snacks. Later, he fixed lawn mower engines for people. He'd always been driven by spotting a problem, solving it, and making his customers happy.

His most recent venture before Fast Forward was a drone inspection business, and he'd built real trust with his customers there. So when he needed traction, with no product or funding behind him, he called those customers and asked for a letter of intent: if he could build it, would they do business with him?

That was on a Monday morning. By Friday, he had five letters from prospective customers in hand.

"We thought you were crazy with your first idea," one of them told him later. "You pulled that off, so we figured if anybody could do this, you could."

And he did. After participating in the **NMotion Accelerator** in 2021, Birge officially launched Fast Forward, a service and technology company improving how electric utilities and municipalities document, inspect, and maintain infrastructure. He started driving with mounted thermal cameras on his car, and it worked.

That customer who'd been dealing with pole fires every couple of months? They haven't had a single fire in three years.

Momentum followed. Fast Forward later received the **Nebraska Prototype Grant** and a pitch competition award.

"In less than six months, I went from an idea to over a million dollars of backing," Birge said. "This was a really good idea, apparently."

After those first five Nebraska-based customers, Birge needed to prove he could scale. He went to a national trade show where he met two prospective customers from Massachusetts. The skepticism was immediate.

"You're going to drive a car all the way from Nebraska to come and inspect our utility poles in a single day?"

When Birge said yes, they did too. Massachusetts is now Fast Forward's second-largest state for revenue, thanks entirely to customer referrals.

"That's why we've survived this long," Birge said. "It's going above and beyond. It's our commitment to success, and ability to make things happen."

Fast Forward now has 18 employees. In 2025, the company secured additional backing from **Invest Nebraska**. This year, they're aiming to patrol 50,000 miles of powerline.

And Birge is already thinking further ahead. His long-term vision is to pair human drivers with self-driving cars, one person overseeing multiple autonomous vehicles, each patrolling a different powerline simultaneously. More ground covered, fewer miles driven at night, a big safety win. It sounds unrealistic, Birge admits. But then again, so did everything else.

"We're just really fortunate to have started in a state that supports new ideas," Birge said. "Nebraska is a great state to build a business and raise a family. I'm really appreciative that this is where we ended up."

The candy, the lawn mower engines, the cameras on the car. Every time, the same thing: somebody had a problem, and Birge wanted to fix it. ●

HEADQUARTERS
Kearney, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
Utility Tech

EMPLOYEES
18

WEBSITE
ff-ai.com



"We're just really fortunate to have started in a state that supports new ideas."



[AUDITMINER]

Choosing Adventure

Kelly Mann launched AuditMiner while navigating cancer treatment, a pandemic, and parenthood. Even through chemotherapy, she kept prospecting, selling, and pushing the company toward launch.



AUDITMINER

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2019

INDUSTRY
FinTech

EMPLOYEES
20

WEBSITE
auditminer.com

KELLY MANN was in the middle of a chemotherapy session, in the middle of the pandemic, prospecting on LinkedIn.

She had built a list of 1,100 certified public accountants (CPAs) who might be interested in her new software, and audit season was rapidly approaching. If she missed it, she'd have to wait another year.

She was battling cancer and raising her kids during COVID-19, but it was time to launch. She uploaded her list into HubSpot, set up an email sequence, and hit send.

Within 48 hours, she made her first sale.

AuditMiner helps CPA firms perform employee benefit plan audits by transforming raw, unstructured data into a standard data model. These audits help protect participants' retirement savings and support their financial security.

Before AuditMiner, CPAs had to perform these audits manually. Mann discovered this gap as she set out to build her own firm. She had been a CPA for 10 years and was consistently told she was "a bull in a china shop." She had too many questions, too many ideas.

In October 2018, she attended a leadership academy. As she described her vision, she heard something new: "You're an entrepreneur."

She realized she was okay being a bull, just not okay being stuck in a china shop. The next Monday, she put in her two-week notice.

As she explored what audit technology she needed, she realized no one offered anything for employee benefit plan audits. In fact, several tech companies scheduled follow-up calls to pick her brain about the gap. She was the one with the answers.

"If all they want is my vision, then I want to own my vision," Mann said. "I canceled the Zoom calls and I Googled how to start a software company."

Her searching led her to **The Startup Collaborative**, which gave her instant validation. Their team believed she could get the business off the ground in six months and was willing to help.

"The easy thing about building in Nebraska is the community that wants to support you," Mann said. "There is this desire to help and build."

Next, she secured customer validation. She reached out to CPAs on LinkedIn, and the responses were full of people sharing the same frustrations with the current state of audit technology. They wanted a solution, and they were willing to pay.

She knew she had a market.

In the fall of 2019, progress happened fast: she put together a 49-page business plan, incorporated AuditMiner, applied for the **Nebraska Prototype Grant**, received it, and started working with developers to build the software.

Mann was on track to launch for the April 2020 audit season when the world shut down. Overnight, she became a full-time caregiver, teacher, and founder all at once, navigating life with three young children and no daycare support. Then Mann was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer.

"Life tried to throw everything at me," she said. "I had a million reasons to just quit."

Mann did everything but quit. She started her first round of chemotherapy in April, had a double mastectomy in October, underwent another surgery in November, then completed a second round of chemotherapy and 34 rounds of radiation.

Despite all of that, she launched AuditMiner in April 2021. That fall, she received an investment from **Proven Ventures** ❶. In 2022, she hired her first employees to keep up with demo requests. In 2023, she became cancer-free.

"If someone else went through all that, I would just be in awe. But for me, it was just life," Mann said. "The further out I get from it, the prouder I am of myself."

AuditMiner now has a distributed team of 20 people. The long-term vision is to move beyond annual audits toward continuous audits. Benefit changes happen throughout the year, not just during audit season. Mann hopes to provide companies with real-time data so they can make more informed benefits decisions year-round.

Mann has faced her share of big decisions in recent years, but she takes them in stride.

"The difference between hardship and adventure is perspective," she said.

A colleague shared those words with her after her initial cancer diagnosis, and Mann has carried them with her since. She repeats it to the AuditMiner team whenever things get tough. And as soon as she was declared cancer-free, she got it tattooed on her arm.

"I'm going to do this until I'm not having fun anymore," Mann said. "It brings me a lot of joy. And what else is there in life if you don't have joy?"

There's no doubt that Mann has experienced hardship, but she continues to see it as an adventure. It's all about perspective. ●



"I'm going to do this until I'm not having fun anymore. It brings me a lot of joy. And what else is there in life if you don't have joy?"

❶ **Proven Ventures**
Founded in 2020, a venture capital firm that invests in Nebraska-based post-revenue startups and growth-stage companies. Proven Ventures is supported by Burlington Capital.

How one company became one of the state's most active supporters of entrepreneurship.

Betting on Nebraska



Adapted by Open Range from original reporting by Lev Gringauz for Silicon Prairie News

In many ways, Nelnet has spent the last two decades betting on Nebraska.

THE COMPANY is one of the state's most active startup investors, backing businesses like **Hudl** and CompanyCam while helping founders access the capital, connections, and support needed to grow. Its influence can be found across the state's startup ecosystem.

"Beyond their investment in Hudl, Nelnet's long-term partnership and strategic support have been instrumental in helping many companies like ours scale right here in Nebraska," said David Graff, CEO of Hudl.

For Nelnet, supporting innovation in Nebraska and helping keep talent in the state is meaningful work.

"We've always enjoyed investing, and it's fun to watch new companies grow," said Mike Dunlap, the executive chairman and co-founder of Nelnet.

The goal isn't charity, though. Like any investor, Nelnet expects financial returns. But Dunlap believes those returns can exist alongside something bigger: a stronger startup ecosystem, more opportunities for entrepreneurs, and more reasons for talented people to build their careers in Nebraska.

"We believe you can do both at the same time," he said.

Nelnet's startup investing journey began alongside **Nebraska Angels**.

In 2006, Mike Dunlap and Chuck Norris, now managing director of Nelnet's venture arm, attended one of the organization's first meetings. There were only 20 or so people in the room, but Dunlap was already thinking about what a stronger startup community could mean for Nebraska and for Nelnet.

"One of our goals was, if we can help seed the tech ecosystem in Lincoln and Nebraska, then as that ecosystem grows... We can potentially hire more people in the state to do our technical work," Dunlap said.

With the Nebraska Angels, Nelnet got a crash course in startup investing.

"We really didn't know that much about angel investing when we started, and neither did the angels," Norris said. "So we all learned together and have been learning since."

Among the lessons: not every startup is going to succeed. Many investments will fail, and others will break even. But the few that make it can bring an outsized financial return.

It takes patience to invest in a portfolio of startups and hunker down for the decade or so needed to see returns. Not every company is willing to make that kind of long-term commitment. Nelnet has.

Brian Ardinger, Director of Innovation at Nelnet, has seen plenty of organizations

Mike Dunlap
Executive Chairman & Co-Founder



"We've always enjoyed investing, and it's fun to watch new companies grow."

abandon startup investing before those returns have a chance to materialize.

"I've worked on and seen a lot of corporate innovation efforts out there, and typically what happens is, 18 months in, three years in, it's like, 'Well, this isn't working, so we're gonna give up,'" said Ardinger.

Nelnet's mindset is different.

"We don't wake up in the middle of the night because we have an investment that didn't work ... We wake up in the middle of the night if we didn't make an investment that did work," Norris said.

For Ben Jackson, the CEO of **Guardify**, Nelnet is "sort of like a lighthouse in Nebraska. They're just looking after everybody."

Funding is critical for early-stage companies. So is guidance and a sense of support. Otherwise, running a startup can feel like lonely, disorienting work.

Jackson knows that firsthand. Nelnet is a lead investor alongside Invest Nebraska and has invested more than $1 million into Guardify since the company's founding in 2019. But the relationship extends far beyond capital.

Norris serves as a board observer for Guardify, helping maintain transparency and good financial stewardship. He's also become a confidant and "huge cheerleader" for Jackson.

Outside of its venture investments, Nelnet's other resources are also a benefit. Having another company to exchange ideas with, one that isn't competing for the same customers, has helped Jackson identify new opportunities for growth.

The two companies have compared notes on everything from government contracting to business development. Nelnet also regularly shares opportunities and connections that could benefit the company.

In Jackson's experience, many corporations and investors keep their distance from early-stage startups or aren't closely connected to what's happening across the local startup community, but Nelnet stands out for its willingness to take risks, according to Jackson.

In a region often associated with caution and risk management, Jackson sees the company as proof that supporting startups doesn't have to come at the expense of strong business fundamentals.

For him, Nelnet demonstrates that companies can support entrepreneurs, strengthen their communities, and still deliver strong returns.

"We need more corporate innovators like Nelnet," said Jackson.

By investing in startups, Nelnet gets another kind of positive return. Corporations can get stuck on the status quo, too busy to be flexible and innovative. That can be risky as technology and business evolve at the speed of light.

But working alongside startups helps Nelnet stay curious. Norris attributes some of that shift to the company's investment work and to Ardinger, who joined the venture team seven years ago.

"It's taken those six or seven years to get people to think about how you create new things in the organization that is more like a startup than the traditional, 'Put together a 50-page business plan and ask for five million bucks' approach," Norris said.

Nelnet has also helped support that culture of innovation in the broader Lincoln community. It financially supports both the **Lincoln Chamber of Commerce** and the **Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development**, and company leaders serve on both organizations' boards.

Jason Ball, CEO of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and Partnership for Economic Development, said Nelnet has consistently encouraged organizations to think bigger and take calculated risks in pursuit of long-term growth.

"Lincoln's in so much of a better place economically than it was going back 25 or 30 years... And it's the engagement of Nelnet, along with a lot of other great corporate leaders in this community, that has really made that possible," said Ball.

For nearly two decades, Nelnet's investment strategy has been rooted in a simple idea: a stronger startup community benefits everyone.

Some of those investments became companies like Hudl and CompanyCam. Others never reached that scale.

But the larger bet was never on any single company. It was on Nebraska. ●

$190M

INVESTED SINCE 2006

80%

INVESTED IN NEBRASKA

171

INVESTMENTS

$100K

TYPICAL STARTING INVESTMENT

"We really didn't know that much about angel investing when we started, and neither did the angels. So we all learned together and have been learning since."



Chuck Norris
Managing Director

[GUARDIFY]

Ready for the Role

Ben Jackson spent years seeking out bigger problems and building the experience he'd need to lead another company. So when Guardify needed someone to turn a mission-driven product into a scalable business, he was ready.

GUARDIFY

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2018

INDUSTRY
GovTech

EMPLOYEES
24

WEBSITE
guardify.com

BEN JACKSON didn't go looking for Guardify, but over the course of his career, he had been quietly preparing for it.

Jackson built his first company in the Bay Area in his early twenties, a fitness startup experimenting with subscription-based training long before the model became common. The idea was promising, but the company eventually ran out of money.

After that experience, he made a promise to his wife. He would step away from startups until their kids' college funds were secure.

So Jackson went to work.

He joined LinkedIn during its early growth years, where he developed a reputation for doing one thing particularly well: finding problems and solving them. Jackson rarely followed the typical corporate playbook. Instead, he asked questions, sought out the biggest challenges inside the company, and volunteered to tackle them.

"I'm pretty good at solving problems," he said. "So all I ever did was look for bigger problems to solve."

That mindset followed him to Omaha, where he joined **Flywheel** during the company's growth phase. There he built a close working relationship with CEO Dusty Davidson and expanded his experience across product, engineering, and go-to-market leadership.

Jackson had always hoped to run another company one day, but he knew there were gaps in his experience. At Flywheel and later WP Engine, he intentionally worked to fill them, taking on product leadership roles that pushed him deeper into the technical side of building software companies.

Somewhere along the way, he started thinking seriously about returning to the CEO seat.

Meanwhile, a different story was unfolding. Sara Boyd was running a small GovTech startup called VidaNyx, a platform designed to solve a surprisingly outdated problem inside the justice system. The product had emerged from a collaboration between Giving Tech Laboratories, a Seattle-based incubator with Nebraska roots, and Project Harmony, Omaha's nationally recognized child advocacy center.

When VidaNyx launched, roughly 95 percent of child advocacy centers in the United States were still transferring forensic interview recordings used in child abuse investigations using DVDs or USB drives.

Evidence moved slowly, and the chain of custody was fragile. Collaboration between agencies was unnecessarily complicated. Boyd and the VidaNyx team built an early product to solve the problem. What the company needed next was someone who could turn that product into a scalable business.

Jackson already understood the mission. Through volunteer work and his own interest in protecting vulnerable communities online, he had spent years thinking about how technology could help address issues like human trafficking and child exploitation.

So when Boyd and Davidson approached him about stepping in as CEO, it wasn't a cold pitch. It was a conversation between people who had worked together, trusted each other, and knew that Jackson had been preparing for this kind of role.

He still took the decision home to his wife, but they both knew the answer.

In 2023, Jackson stepped in as CEO. His first discovery was surprisingly simple: nobody could pronounce the company's name.

VidaNyx had been created as a placeholder during the company's early incubation phase. It carried symbolic meaning tied to life and protection, but customers struggled to say it, let alone remember it.

Jackson began asking a simple question during customer calls.

"How do you say the name of this company?"

No one was confident.

Working with Omaha-based advertising agency, Fruitful Design, the team reintroduced the company as Guardify, a name built around the idea of protecting and sharing sensitive information securely.

Today Guardify serves more than 800 organizations and over 400,000 justice workers. More than 110,000 forensic interviews with children have been protected through the platform, allowing law enforcement, prosecutors, child advocacy centers, and protective services to capture, manage, and share digital evidence without a disc ever changing hands.

Building the company in Nebraska required a different playbook than the one Jackson had used out west. In Silicon Valley, employees often moved from one high-growth startup to the next. In Omaha, teams stayed and took ownership of problems.

That difference shows up in how Guardify hires and operates. Rather than relying solely on experienced hires from larger markets, the company built an intern pipeline with Nebraska universities, betting it's easier to develop the right people than import them. It takes longer, Jackson admits, but the people tend to stay.

Nebraska's growth-stage capital market is thinner than the coasts, and Jackson is candid about it. When Guardify closed its most recent round, he did the work of assembling enough local checks to keep the money in Nebraska. Organizations like **Invest Nebraska**, **MOVE Venture Capital**, and **Nelnet** invested in the company, while longtime partner Project Harmony supported its growth.

"Guardify is really a Nebraska-built company," Jackson said.

Guardify's office sits in the Mastercraft building in north downtown Omaha inside the **Millwork Commons** community, one of Omaha's growing innovation districts. On most mornings Jackson still runs into former Flywheel colleagues grabbing coffee nearby.

Companies change, but the community around them often doesn't.

Recently, Guardify launched a second product, expanding its platform from digital evidence management into case management tools that help agencies coordinate investigations. The response from customers was immediate, a sign that the trust the company built early is carrying forward.

Three years into the role, Jackson is still doing the same thing that has defined most of his career: finding difficult problems and building teams capable of solving them. ●

"I'm pretty good at solving problems, so all I ever did was look for bigger problems to solve."



[CARINARA]

Solving Pasta Night

Jacque and Jake Burklund couldn’t find a pasta sauce that didn’t cause heartburn. An old carrot-juice experiment became the answer and, eventually, CARINARA.



CARINARA

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
CPG; Food & Grocery

EMPLOYEES
5

WEBSITE
carinara.com

JACQUE AND JAKE BURKLUND stood in front of a wall of pasta sauces, scanning the familiar lineup of marinara, Alfredo, and pesto. They sighed; every option would give them heartburn.

Pasta night had started to come with a side of Tums.

But Jacque had an idea. A few years earlier, during a cocktail competition with friends, she had made a Bloody Mary using carrot juice instead of tomato juice. The drink ended up being the crowd favorite.

Standing in that grocery aisle, something clicked. What if the same concept could work for pasta sauce?

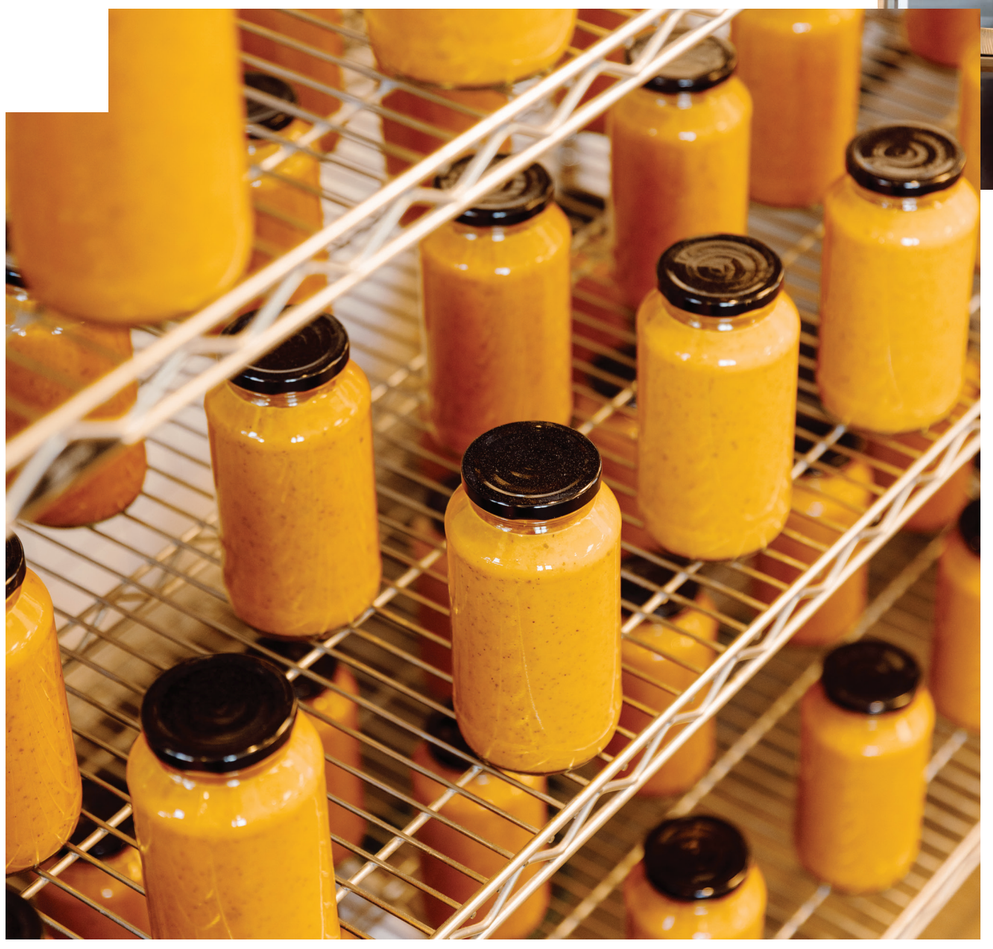
Jake came up with the name almost immediately. Carrot marinara. CARINARA.

Jacque began experimenting in the kitchen, working toward a recipe that could capture the flavor and texture of a classic marinara while removing the tomato. The result was a tomato-free sauce built around carrots that still felt familiar.

By 2023, the couple started taking their product to the Aksarben Village Farmers Market. The Burklunds sold out quickly during their early market appearances, and the conversations at their booth confirmed something important: they were not the only ones looking for an alternative.

“So many people would walk up and say they hadn’t eaten pasta in years,” Jake said. “Then they’d try it and say, ‘This is amazing.’”

For Jacque, who had no formal culinary training and had spent her early career in nursing and healthcare sales, the response was validating.









200

Stores carrying CARINARA across the Midwest

"I remember thinking, is this actually good enough to compete with a regular red sauce?" she said. "When people tried it and gave us the stamp of approval, that meant everything."

Turning the farmers market hit into a consumer packaged goods business came next. The Burklunds formed Humbl Roots to bring CARINARA to market.

Because CARINARA is a shelf-stable product, the founders needed FDA approval before they could scale production. That meant leaving their home kitchen and finding a commercial facility. They found one across the river in Council Bluffs.

Kitchen Council, a shared culinary workspace, became CARINARA's first production home. Holly Benson Muller, the managing director of the Kitchen Council at the time, helped Jacque and Jake navigate the complicated process of preparing the kitchen for federal inspection.

"None of us had done it before," Jake said. "The FDA basically told us, here are the regulations. Figure out how to make them work."

The inspection lasted nearly nine hours. By the end of the day, they had their approval. The company suddenly had its first chance to grow.

After applying to a Hy-Vee pitch competition focused on women- and minority-owned businesses, Jacque presented CARINARA to a panel of judges in early 2024. They won the competition, earning a $30,000 prize and exposure to buyers across the Hy-Vee network.

The chain's structure turned out to be uniquely helpful. Unlike many national grocery retailers, Hy-Vee allows individual store managers to decide which products they carry. That meant the Burklunds could introduction CARINARA store by store and build traction locally.

As stores in Omaha began carrying CARINARA and the product gained traction, the momentum reached corporate leadership. Hy-Vee's health markets team directed the chain's distributor to carry CARINARA, making the sauce available to store managers across the network who wanted to bring it onto their shelves.

Seeing their product on a grocery shelf for the first time felt surreal.

"It's next to Rao's and all the big brands," Jacque said. "We've spent so much time standing in pasta aisles studying the shelves. Suddenly our jar was sitting there too."

In January 2025, Jacque left her job to join the company full-time alongside Jake.

Today CARINARA is carried in roughly 200 stores, with distribution across the Midwest and a growing presence in California and Nevada.

But scaling a food company brings a different set of challenges than most startups.

Unlike software, growth means more ingredients, more equipment, and more hands in the kitchen. Much of the sauce is still produced in the Council Bluffs facility where it first received FDA approval.

At times, the demand has pushed the team to its limits.

"One viral social media post can break everything," Jake said. "It's great to have orders coming in, but then you have to figure out how to make all that sauce."

Moments like that have made one thing clear. They could not build the company alone. Jake's father helps with sales and operations, and friends and other family members have stepped in everywhere from childcare to kitchen shifts.

For Jacque, that support made the hardest moments possible.

"So many people believed in what we were doing before it was obvious that it would work," she said.

Now the focus turns to scale. The couple is working with manufacturing partners and is currently expanding distribution beyond the Hy-Vee network, steps that could bring CARINARA to hundreds more stores in the coming years.

What started as a kitchen experiment is slowly becoming something bigger. But the idea behind it is still simple: a pasta sauce for people who thought pasta was off the table. ●

[GRAIN WEEVIL]

“Every Nerd’s Dream”

Chad and Benjamin Johnson had spent years building things together before one of their robots went viral. Now the father-and-son team is sending machines into grain bins so people no longer have to risk going inside.



GRAIN WEEVIL

HEADQUARTERS
La Vista, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
AgTech; Industrial

EMPLOYEES
14

WEBSITE
grainweevil.com

CHAD JOHNSON will be the first to tell you he's not the smartest person in the room. In fact, he will tell you he's probably fourteenth.

"It's a wonderful feeling," he said. "To know you're not the smartest guy in the room, not anywhere close."

At Grain Weevil, that's not a confession. It's a management philosophy.

The La Vista-based robotics startup has spent the last five years building a machine designed to go where humans should not, into grain bins where routine work still carries real risk. Entrapment, suffocation, and unpredictable conditions have long been accepted as part of the job. Grain Weevil's robot takes on that work instead, moving through stored grain to manage flow, reducing spoilage, and removing the need for a person to step inside.

The idea didn't begin as a company. It began as something much smaller, and much more personal.

Chad and his son Benjamin Johnson had always built things together: competitive robotics through middle and high school, tinkering in the shop, an electronics kit Chad bought him for Christmas that eventually became a homemade drum set. So, when they started working on a robot for a grain bin in 2019, it was just another project.

At the time, Chad was running education programs at Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), teaching students to think like engineers. Benjamin was finishing college. The early versions of the robot were just that, early. A project to learn from.

By March of 2020, the prototype worked. Someone filmed a short clip and it immediately went viral. Within days, hundreds of messages came in.

Years earlier, at his first performance review at NPPD, his boss had asked what it would take to leave a job he loved, one built around teaching kids to think like engineers. Chad's answer was that if he ever got the chance to build robots with his son. So when that moment came, there was no debate about next steps.

"If you're a nerd, every nerd's dream is to build robots with his kid," Chad said.

Early on, someone suggested they move away from the father-son story, arguing it would never work in tech. But Chad and Benjamin, co-founders, weren't pitching to tech companies. A farmer on the same panel said it plainly: their customers were father-son operations. That wasn't something to distance from; it was exactly who they were building for.

And for them, it works.

Chad is the one who wakes up in the middle of the night with ideas, while Benjamin is the one who works through them, methodical and precise, deciding what actually holds up. They have been building that way for years, long before anyone called it a startup.

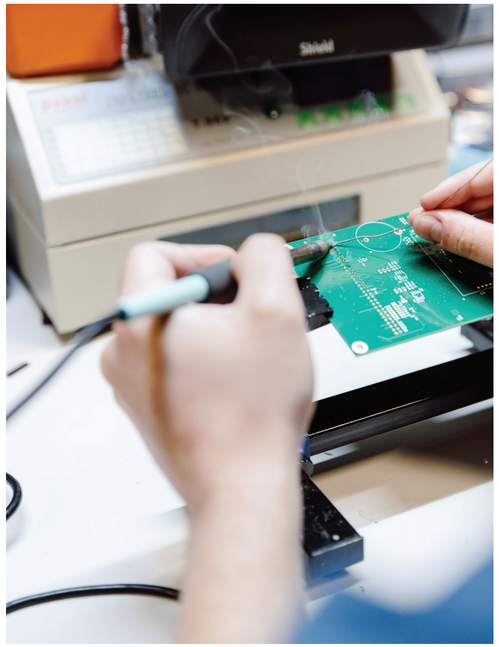
The company started to take shape through **The Combine** and then through **AgLaunch** ❶ in Tennessee, where farmers helped pressure-test the product under real conditions. Neither Chad nor Benjamin had experience inside a grain bin when they first started. They learned by listening, testing, adjusting, and working alongside the people who understood the problem best.

Along the way came early support from across Nebraska's startup ecosystem. Investors including **Grit Road Partners**, **Invest Nebraska**, **Nelnet**, and the **Nebraska Angels** stepped in. Advisors, operators, and other founders showed up with time, perspective, and connections.





❶ **AgLaunch**
A national program designed to guide, support, and invest in AgTech startups building sustainable, future-ready farms.



"It's a wonderful feeling to know you're not the smartest guy in the room, not anywhere close."

“FIGURING IT OUT IS AN EMPLOYABLE SKILL.”



At the same time, non-dilutive funding helped make the timeline possible. Grain Weevil secured both Phase I and Phase II **SBIR grants** [2] from the National Science Foundation, along with state matching funds and supplemental awards tied to commercial progress, totaling more than $2.2 million in grant funding alongside more than $5 million in invested capital.

For a company building hardware, that combination matters.

"Hardware startups are hard," Chad said. "Hardware startups that go inside a facility where no electronics should ever go are tremendously hard."

Although a robot can be assembled in a few hours, it still requires careful planning. Batteries and parts take months to arrive. Inventory has to be balanced carefully against demand and cash flow. And once deployed, the robot operates in an environment that was never designed to support it.

"I could probably name a hundred people that if they weren't a part of our company in some way, shape, or form, we wouldn't be here," Chad said.

That list stretches from farmers who opened their operations for testing to people who offered tools, facilities, and expertise. It includes a patent lawyer in rural Nebraska who had written patents for the same sensors the team would later explore, and access to a vacuum molding company in Aurora where they could shape robot bodies whenever they needed.

Today, Grain Weevil employs 14 people, most of them based in Nebraska or in neighboring states. Some came through the robotics programs Chad once mentored. Others found their way in through referrals or curiosity. Interviews happen on the shop floor, not across a table.

Chad watches what people do when they are dropped into the environment, whether they ask questions, whether they try to understand the work.

"Figuring it out is an employable skill," Chad said.

The company is now approaching its 100th robot shipped, a milestone that signals traction without signaling completion. The product works, demand is real, but the company is still early in what it's building.

"We haven't made it yet," Chad said, "but the path is mapped."

By 2027, the team expects to reach what Chad describes as a "disruption point," when the next generation of the robot, fully autonomous, fully certified, and ready to scale globally, comes together. Investors have understood from the beginning that this is a longer build, one that unfolds over several years.

The work continues, sometimes in ways that are difficult to predict.

When NASA called in March of this year, interested in how the robot performs in granular environments that behave more like the surface of the moon than a Nebraska grain bin, the team packed up and headed to the agency's lunar testing facility in Florida.

Chad takes it in stride. There is a steadiness to how he talks about the company, the milestones, and the pressure that comes with them. At one point, feeling overwhelmed, he stopped and reframed it.

"I've got nothing to be stressed about," he said. "I'm living my dream."

That perspective carries through everything: how he builds his team, how he talks about the work, how he hands the credit off without thinking twice.

"The only credit I should get is getting the right people to help us," said Chad.

He says it plainly and he means it. Because building the kind of company where people can challenge you, where curiosity matters more than credentials, and where progress is measured over years instead of months is not accidental. It takes a particular kind of discipline to hold that line, especially as the opportunities get bigger.

Chad Johnson might not be the smartest person in the room, but only because he built it to be that way. ●

[2] SBIR/STTR Grant Program
A Nebraska program that helps small businesses apply for federal SBIR/STTR funding and provides matching grants to those that receive awards.

Entrepreneurial at Scale.

As Tenaska approaches its 40th year, CEO Chris Leitner says the company's greatest advantage may be the same mindset that helped build it in the first place.



Tenaska has spent nearly four decades adapting.

FOUNDED IN Omaha in 1987, Tenaska has grown into one of the largest privately held energy companies in the U.S. Today, its businesses span natural gas marketing, power marketing, power generation, and energy infrastructure development, helping move energy across an increasingly complex system.

Nearly 40 years later, both Tenaska and the industry around it look very different. The company has continued to evolve, finding new ways forward without becoming defined by what worked before.

"Tenaska became large because it stayed entrepreneurial," said President and CEO Chris Leitner.

It's an unusual description for a company approaching its 40th year. Entrepreneurial is typically reserved for startups and fast-growing technology companies, not organizations operating at Tenaska's scale. But throughout a conversation that ranged from risk management and artificial intelligence to talent and Nebraska's future, Leitner returned to the same idea: companies endure when they remain willing to evolve.

STAYING AHEAD OF THE MARKET

When asked what innovation looks like inside Tenaska, Leitner laughed.

"Probably doesn't look like what you're used to," he said.

For many companies, innovation is closely associated with technology. At Tenaska, it begins with understanding markets. Because the company operates across multiple parts of the energy value chain, employees often have visibility into changes that are difficult to see from any single vantage point.

"We can connect dots in a way that people don't necessarily see all the time," Leitner said.

That ability has become increasingly important as the energy industry grows more complex. New technologies, shifting customer demands, changing regulations, data centers, artificial intelligence, and growing infrastructure needs are all reshaping the market simultaneously.

"Innovation is simply about where is the market heading and how do you position yourselves in the way of that opportunity," Leitner said.

Tenaska's private ownership structure has given the company the ability to pursue those opportunities over longer time horizons.

"Sometimes you need to move more slowly and let the conviction play out over time," he said.

But that doesn't mean avoiding risk. Tenaska has spent decades building systems designed to understand, measure, and manage risk before acting.

"We're very focused on measuring our risk and managing our risk, but it doesn't mean we're afraid," Leitner said.

FOSTERING A COMPANY THAT DISAGREES

When asked what startups could learn from Tenaska, Leitner's answer had little to do with energy.

Instead, he pointed to the relationship between two of Tenaska's founding partners.

Howard Hawks, who co-founded Tenaska in 1987, was highly commercial, visionary, and comfortable pushing into new opportunities. His co-founder, Tom Hendricks, approached the business differently.

Together, they created a balance that still shapes the company today.

"We've built our teams around this natural conflict," Leitner said.

The goal is not consensus. In fact, Leitner said he becomes more concerned when everyone immediately agrees than when there is disagreement around an important decision.

"When we do see that, I actually get more nervous than if I find that we have some dissension," he said.

The philosophy extends beyond leadership. Employees are encouraged to challenge assumptions, bring competing viewpoints to the table, and think in probabilities rather than certainties.

As organizations grow, it becomes easier for institutional certainty to take hold. Processes become established. Incentives become aligned. The path forward begins to feel obvious.

Leitner believes companies have to actively resist that tendency.

One way Tenaska does that is by creating space for disagreement before decisions are made. Another is by building trust strong enough to withstand those disagreements.

"You can't delegate decisions if you don't trust people," he said.

The approach can be uncomfortable at times, but Leitner believes it remains one of the company's greatest advantages.

QUIETLY PLUGGED IN

Despite its size and influence, Tenaska is not always the first company people mention when discussing Nebraska's startup and innovation community.

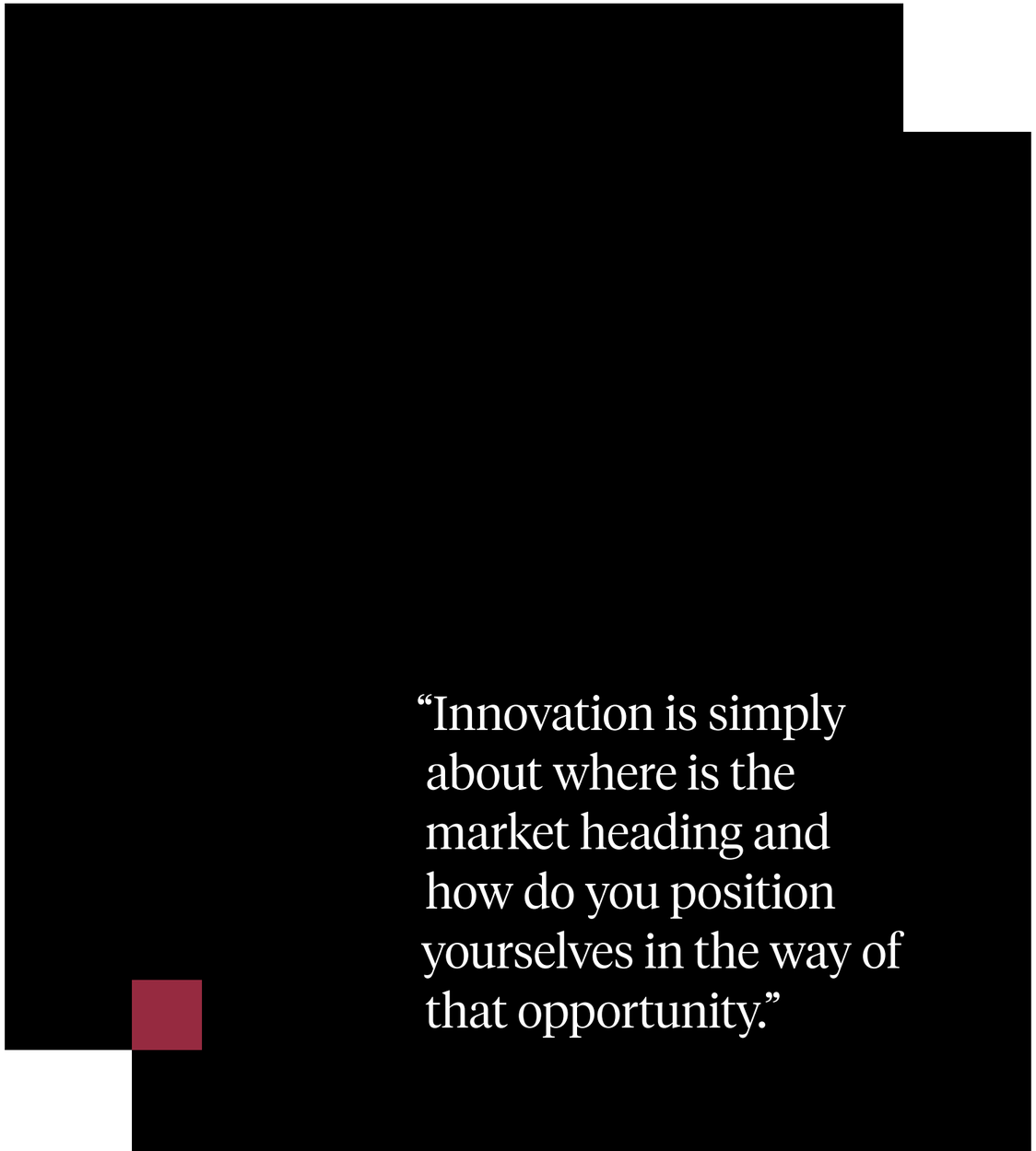
Leitner understands why. Tenaska operates in an industry that feels far removed from software startups, venture capital, and entrepreneurship programs. Yet when asked about the company's involvement, his first instinct was not to list accomplishments.

"I think we probably could do more and should do more," he said.

The answer was striking not because of what it revealed, but because of what followed.

Over the years, Tenaska has worked with students through the **Raikes School** at the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** and supported initiatives through the UNL College of Business. The company recently sponsored UNO's Omaha x AI Conference and has spent the last several years running an internal "Innovation Cup" designed to encourage employees to explore new technologies and solve problems in new ways.

Beyond the organization itself, Tenaska's influence often shows up through its people. Employees serve on boards, invest in companies, mentor founders, and support organizations across the state.



“We may have to innovate in ways that we haven’t experienced in the past.”



Chris Leitner
President & CEO

Viewed individually, those efforts can seem disconnected. Together, Leitner believes they point toward something larger.

“It feels like we’re really close,” he said. “A lot of times when you innovate, that goal line can seem like a long way away. Then all these what appear to be disparate pieces you’ve been working on, all of a sudden they start to come together.”

BUILDING THE NEXT AIRPLANE

For much of Tenaska’s history, innovation unfolded gradually. However, the pace of change feels different today.

The rise of AI, increasing power demand, the growth of data centers, and the need for new energy infrastructure are forcing companies across the industry to rethink long-standing assumptions. Tenaska is no exception.

Leitner describes the challenge through an analogy that has become increasingly common inside the company.

“Our regular business, our day-to-day business, we’re over here flying the airplane,” he said.

At the same time, another group is focused on imagining what comes next.

“What we’re doing is we’ve got another team over here building a new airplane.”

The analogy captures a tension facing organizations of every size. Existing businesses still need to operate. Customers still need to be served. Teams still need to execute. Yet leaders also need to create space to rethink the future before competitors do it for them.

For Tenaska, AI sits at the center of many of those conversations.

The company already processes enormous amounts of information through its operations, including roughly a trillion data points each day through its power marketing business and more than 1,000 large transactions daily through its gas marketing business.

As AI continues to evolve, Leitner believes companies like Tenaska will have opportunities to rethink not only how work gets done, but how entire businesses are organized.

“We may have to innovate in ways that we haven’t experienced in the past,” he said.

When asked what concerns him most about the future, his answer extended beyond Tenaska.

The technology itself is advancing quickly. Whether society is keeping pace with the implications is a different question.

“I don’t know if as a society we’re giving it enough thought to managing those disruptions,” he said.

In that sense, Tenaska isn’t all that different from the startups featured in this publication. Many are trying to understand where markets are headed, which opportunities are worth pursuing, and how to build for a future that remains uncertain.

Tenaska’s story is a reminder that innovation doesn’t always look like a software company or a venture-backed startup. Sometimes it looks like a privately held company in Nebraska that keeps reading markets correctly, taking disciplined risks, building talent, and staying willing to reinvent itself over nearly four decades. ●

[CODEBUDDY]

For the Ones Who Don’t Code

Devon Seacrest knew firsthand how difficult it was for a non-technical founder to build reliable software. CodeBuddy pairs AI with human expertise to make custom tools more accessible to businesses that don’t have engineering teams of their own.



CODEBUDDY

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
Development Tools

EMPLOYEES
6

WEBSITE
codebuddy.com

THE FIRST insight behind CodeBuddy was not about what software could do. It was about where software kept breaking down.

For Devon Seacrest, that realization came after years of trying to build software as a non-technical founder and running into the same wall: misalignment between the people with the business problem and the people tasked with building the solution.

"There's such a big gap between a non-technical individual and a technical individual," Seacrest said.

That friction became the foundation for CodeBuddy, an AI-powered software studio and professional network built to help non-technical businesses create reliable internal software. Its model combines an AI Software Studio with a network of professionals who support businesses through the design, development, and deployment of custom tools.

The aim is practical: lower the cost and complexity of building software so small and mid-sized businesses can create systems that support growth without hiring a large internal engineering team.

"We think of ourselves as 'software sherpas,' helping individuals who already have something successful built go on the journey of building out software," he said.

The idea was shaped by experience, including failure. This is Seacrest's third software company, and after difficult earlier attempts, he decided he needed to understand the technical side. He stepped away, became an engineer at Penlink in Lincoln, and met co-founder Hunter Dorhout.

The company's first concept was a developer chatbot in early 2021, before generative AI became mainstream. Through testing, one pattern became clear: users didn't just want automation; they wanted access to someone who had solved the problem before.

That insight pushed the company toward a hybrid model: a system that helps businesses plan, build, and deploy internal tools, while also giving them access to human support when the work becomes more complex.

That human layer remains central, especially for the customers CodeBuddy is targeting.

"There were so many tools out there to help developers be greater developers," Seacrest said. "But the niche we went into was helping individuals who wanted software to support themselves but didn't know how to."

That gap matters because custom software was out of reach for most small and mid-sized businesses. The cost was too high, the timelines too long, and the results often too generic.

Seacrest saw an opening: businesses that didn't want to become software companies, but needed better systems for operations, finance, and day-to-day workflows.

"There's this huge market of businesses that aren't trying to build software," he said. "They want technology to support their operations."

CodeBuddy's premise is that custom internal software no longer has to mean a six-figure project or a year-long build. By pairing AI with a focused network of technical experts, the company aims to make development more accessible and realistic.

"We call it 'AI plus human experts,' and that combination is powerful," Seacrest said.

Instead of trying to support every use case, the company made a more constrained bet. It focused on a single, highly structured technology stack and trained both its AI and developer network around it. The tradeoff is intentional: less flexibility in exchange for more reliability. By standardizing how software gets built, they can reduce costs and maintain quality.

That focus began to resonate. Early cold outreach brought in responses from businesses that had been waiting for exactly this kind of support: teams with clear needs but no practical way to build custom software.

As demand grew, so did the company's backing. It gained traction through Nebraska's startup ecosystem, joining the **NMotion Accelerator** and receiving early support from **Invest Nebraska** and the **Nebraska Seed Investment Program** [1]. Additional investment followed from firms including Cultivation Capital and South Dakota First Capital, bringing total funding to about $1.5 million across two rounds.

Just as important, Seacrest points to the broader network behind the company's progress.

"It's an entire community that's launching every single startup," he said.

Even with that momentum, the company is still navigating a central tension: how far software can go on its own, and where people still need people. Seacrest is candid that the company has not solved everything, including how fully non-technical users can operate independently.

"We always thought we could make the system easy enough for every non-technical user, and while we've seen several successes, there is still a lot of work ahead," he said.

That unfinished work shapes what comes next. Seacrest's vision is not only to help businesses build larger systems, but also to make it easier for individuals to create smaller tools that remove friction from daily work.

"I'm a strong proponent of letting technology work for you," Seacrest said.

That tension still defines the work ahead: not whether more software can be built, but whether it can be built in a way that is reliable, affordable, and grounded in how real businesses actually run. ●

[1] Nebraska Seed Investment Program
An equity financing initiative that provides early-stage businesses with venture capital to commercialize their products; managed in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Invest Nebraska.

"There's this huge market of businesses that aren't trying to build software. They want technology to support their operations."



The Problem He Couldn’t Ignore

After years in freight and logistics, Charley Dehoney kept seeing the same bottleneck: getting paid was still one of the hardest parts of the job. Upwell grew from the problem that followed him from one company to the next.



UPWELL

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2023

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
35

WEBSITE
upwell.com

CHARLEY DEHONEY had already built and sold a company before he started Upwell, so he knew what a real problem looked like. This one wouldn't leave him alone.

Dehoney went to school in the heart of Silicon Valley and spent years working in logistics and freight tech on the West Coast. In 2018, he acquired an Omaha freight brokerage and figured he'd stay in the heartland for a stretch of time. He never left.

What he found instead was an ecosystem that moved differently: smaller, more relationship-driven, faster to trust. But that didn't change what he was seeing inside the business.

"I was constantly running low on funds in the checking account," Dehoney said. "Then I'd go look and see who hadn't paid us."

The problem wasn't just getting paid. Invoices were incorrect, data lived in disconnected systems, and finance teams spent countless hours resolving issues before money could move.

Later, while running a logistics tech accelerator, he saw the same issue from the other side. Across more than a hundred problem statements from large companies, a disproportionate number pointed back to the office of the CFO.

Getting paid was still the hardest part.

The timing felt significant. Gartner had just reframed accounts receivable automation as its own market category, and ChatGPT had just become commercially available, making the AI side of the vision feel suddenly achievable rather than theoretical. The question wasn't whether the opportunity was real, it was whether Dehoney was willing to go build it again.

"I thought 'humans aren't going to be doing accounting in ten years,'" he said. "If I don't build this for trucking, someone else will."

In late 2022, he called Aaron Freeman, a longtime collaborator and the future Chief Technology Officer of Upwell, with a simple message: "if you're ready to start something, I think I can get this off the ground." The two had met years earlier when Dehoney sold his first brokerage and Freeman was CTO of the acquiring company.

By 2023, the company was formed. Upwell would automate freight invoicing and accounts receivable workflows for carriers, brokers, and 3PLs, helping them reduce manual work and get paid faster. But first, they had to build it.

"There's something very serene, but also anxiety-inducing, about building with nothing to sell," Dehoney said.

He could only talk about theoretical software for so long. In the meantime, he raised an initial round with help from **Invest Nebraska**, then closed a pre-seed not long after. With capital in the bank and expectations rising, staying at his day job was no longer an option. He quit and started Upwell.

He cast a wide net, talking to 50 to 60 potential customers at once as he shaped the product. The first real customer came through his network, and the problem they needed solved became the foundation of everything that followed.

He points to relationships across the Nebraska ecosystem as a meaningful part of Upwell's trajectory, but for him, those relationships aren't abstract. They're specific.

People like Rick Knudtson at **Workshop**, who invested early and helped open doors. Leaders at **Werner**, including Daragh Mahon, who helped move the company from early conversations into something more tangible, first as a design partner and eventually as a customer. The same was true of local carriers, brokers, and industry leaders at Able Transportation, Morehouse Trucking, JJT Transportation, and Greater Omaha Express, who shared their time, ideas, and perspective as Upwell took shape.



"When you start to think about the journey, all of these conversations compound," he said. "Every little bit of encouragement goes a long way."

That proximity is what made Nebraska work. The ecosystem is smaller than the coasts, but that scale creates something different. Relationships form faster. Trust builds earlier. And when something starts to work, people notice.

"If you have a good business, there are plenty of people who want to invest in it," Dehoney said.

That support shows up in the customers as much as the capital. Companies that might not consider themselves tech-forward are willing to try something new. Others come back after initially passing.

Inside Upwell, that same dynamic carries through. In many ways, it's a family operation. Dehoney's wife, Katie, is deeply involved in the business, his sister was the company's first employee, and the early team reflects the kind of trust that tends to form when people build something together over time. Today, the company has 35 employees.

That foundation has helped the company move quickly, even as the environment around it has been anything but steady. The past few years have brought a freight recession, shifting market dynamics, and increased competition from well-funded players entering the space.

Through it, the focus has narrowed. Upwell is no longer trying to prove the problem exists. It is working to execute against it.

"The hardest part now is just managing priorities," he said. "There's not a lot of margin for error when you're talking about people's money."

That shift has changed his role as well. In the early days, Dehoney spent much of his time externally, creating awareness and helping define a category that didn't fully exist yet. Now the category has found him. Well-funded competitors have entered the space, and the window for being first to get it right is closing quickly.

His focus has turned inward, shaping product direction, aligning the team, and making sure what Upwell builds matches what it promises. For Dehoney, it's familiar territory. ●

> "There's not a lot of margin for error when you're talking about people's money."



Charley Dehoney
Founder & CEO



Aaron Freeman
Chief Technology Officer

[LOGICA]

Clarifying Financial Friction

Carissa and Leandro Castro built Logica to replace spreadsheet-heavy financial planning. They thought startups needed it most, but mid-market finance teams proved otherwise.



LOGICA

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2020

INDUSTRY
FinTech

EMPLOYEES
2

WEBSITE
logica.cloud

CARISSA CASTRO and her husband, Leandro Castro, decided to start a company together in January 2020. The idea had been building for years, shaped by experience and a growing sense that something wasn't working in how businesses handled financial planning. Then, the pandemic hit.

But the decision had already been made. And in many ways, the timing, imperfect as it was, forced clarity.

Carissa didn't grow up planning to be a founder. Raised in Blair, Nebraska, in a family shaped by traditional careers and farming roots, entrepreneurship wasn't an obvious path. She spent the first decade of her career as an engineer in a large corporation, focused on operations, budgets, and running a business at scale.

The shift started when Leandro launched his first company, MultiMechanics. What began as curiosity turned into proximity, attending events, asking questions, and absorbing a new language of venture capital and startups. Over time, that exposure became recognition.

"Once I realized that entrepreneurship is really about solving problems for people, that was the thread that connected," Carissa said.

The problem they kept returning to was one they both knew well. Inside large companies and startups alike, financial planning lived in spreadsheets, which were fragile, manual, and difficult to scale. Carissa had lived it firsthand managing budgets. Her husband had seen it while raising venture capital and navigating an acquisition. Different contexts, but same friction.

That became the foundation for Logica.

Logica is a financial planning and analysis platform designed for mid-market companies whose financial models have outgrown traditional tools. It replaces spreadsheet-heavy workflows with structured, collaborative systems, sitting between DIY spreadsheets and complex enterprise software.

Early validation came quickly. Within their network, especially among founders, the idea resonated. People were excited and understood the pain.

A FinTech fellowship sponsored by First National Bank of Omaha and **The Startup Collaborative** ❶ reinforced it, surfacing the same problem and pushing them to take action. What had been a loose idea became something to test.

That early momentum pushed them forward, but the reality of building set in quickly. Through their network, they got in front of more users and started testing the idea. Founders understood the problem and were excited by the concept, but they weren't the customers who ultimately got the most value from the product.



"Once I realized that entrepreneurship is really about solving problems for people, that was the thread that connected."

The more Logica learned, the clearer it became that the market they had imagined wasn't quite the market they were finding.

"There's what people tell you, and then there's what happens when you put it out there. Will they really buy it?" Carissa said.

The first customers who paid weren't early-stage founders. They were operating inside larger, more established organizations. The use case was different and the expectations were higher. And the product, as originally built, didn't fully fit.

That shift clarified who the product was for, but not yet whether it fully worked.

For her, the clearest signal wasn't a metric. It was behavior. A customer stayed, renewed, and advocated. It wasn't just retention. It was proof that the product was solving a real problem.

"That's when it shifted for me," Carissa said.

The company has moved further upmarket, focusing on mid-market finance teams and building a product that aligns with their needs. The work now is less about searching and more about scaling, without losing the adaptability that got them here.

That same adaptability shapes how they've built the company itself. While Logica operates as a remote-first team with employees across multiple countries, its roots remain grounded in Nebraska.

"We love being from Nebraska. Our headquarters is here because we live here," Carissa said.

Early on, Carissa was deeply embedded in the product, working through workflows and user experience. Today, her focus has shifted more toward growth and go-to-market while staying close enough to maintain context.

"It's not linear," Carissa said. "I've had to become more adaptable, figuring out where the business needs structure to run smoothly."

Like many software founders, she's also navigating the uncertainty created by AI and the pace of change reshaping the industry. But for now, the focus remains the same: keep building, keep adapting, and continue solving real problems for customers. ●

❶ **The Startup Collaborative**
An accelerator and incubator-first program that offered startups a proven framework for moving from idea to funding and first customers.

What Happens When It Works

These companies offer a longer view of what it means to build from Nebraska. They've moved beyond early traction to establish meaningful reach, staying power, or influence within their industries. Their stories reveal what changes as a company grows, what remains from its earliest days, and how one successful company can create opportunities far beyond itself.

Breakout Builders

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[PINATA]

A Matter of Time

Kyle Tut spent more than a year watching Pinata stall at around 50 daily users. Then the market caught up, and the numbers took off.



PINATA

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2018

INDUSTRY
SaaS; Web3

EMPLOYEES
10

WEBSITE
pinata.cloud

KYLE TUT pulled up his dashboard: Only 43 daily active users. Again.

For over a year, he and his co-founder had been calling people about their new blockchain software, Pinata. They built a way to make token data more trustworthy, but the response was often the same: it was just not that important.

Tut knew he had the right idea. It solved a problem he experienced firsthand at his blockchain consulting company. But according to Tut, being right and being early can be the same as being wrong. Despite a good idea and all of those phone calls, Pinata plateaued at around 50 users.

The next day, he pulled up the dashboard again: 48 active users. More phone calls. The next day, 55 users. Still more calls.

Then, they surpassed 100 daily active users.

"From there, it just blew up," Tut said.

Pinata manages file storage for distributed systems like blockchain and artificial intelligence customers. Every file added to their platform gets a unique identifier that helps track where it is, where it came from, where it's going, and who last changed it.

"We came from a pressure cooker in crypto where everybody's trying to attack you," Tut shared. "They're trying to change files and data. We prevent that."

When Tut first learned about crypto in 2015, he was working at a startup with the goal of eventually building his own. He was so interested in the technology that even without a plan, he took the leap.

He attended hackathons, learned the technical side of crypto, and started a consulting company. He also started a blockchain meetup group in town, which led him to his co-founder and chief technology officer, Matt Ober.

"We went out and found the problem just by placing ourselves in the industry and trying to figure it out," Tut said.

They launched Pinata in the fall of 2018. The technology inspired the name: you don't just store files, you "pin" them. Their first growth strategy? Colorful Pinata logo stickers.

"We needed stickers that developers would put on their laptops at hackathons," Tut said. "With a pinata character, it's fun and ends up on everybody's laptop."

The stickers weren't enough to land product-market fit, but the company held on thanks to a small seed round and self-funding. In 2020, the market caught up, Tut's dashboard finally showed growth, and it never slowed. In 2022, they raised $21 million.

"It was nice to know that the smartest people in the industry were relying on us," Tut said. "That gave us confidence that we were on the right path."

In Tut's view, there's a lot of hype in crypto and AI, and falling into a "hive mind" about what to build next is one of the most dangerous things that can happen to founders. He enjoys connecting with industry experts in Silicon Valley, but he's grateful to be building in a place that fosters practicality.

Intern Nebraska
A program in partnership with the Aksarben Foundation and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development that connects students with paid work opportunities.

"The ability to go talk to someone who will ask 'Why would I want this?' is actually very valuable," Tut said. "Omaha gives you the space to think critically and not just follow the herd."

Today, Pinata is a team of 10 people. While they're technically distributed, Tut is passionate about building industry knowledge within the state. They partner with **Intern Nebraska** to invest early in young employees.

"We certainly have the talent," Tut said. "You probably shouldn't have the same strategy in Nebraska that you do in Silicon Valley, but the talent, drive, and competitive spirit is certainly here."

With funding and talent in place, Pinata is ready to tackle the new age of computing. They have new AI products coming soon and are keeping a research-first approach to everything they do. The ultimate goal is for Pinata's file system, ID tracking, and methodology to form the basis of how good agents interact with one another.

"My whole life has been a path to becoming a founder at some point," Tut said. "I saw entrepreneurs in tech doing things, and that showed me that I could do them in Nebraska, too."

When Tut was five, he told his mom he wanted to be a mechanic. She told him that he could be a mechanic, but he better own the mechanic shop. That framing has always stuck with him, from lemonade stands, through failed startups in college, to 43 users in the dashboard. For Tut, the vision was never the question. It was always just a matter of time. ●

"We came from a pressure cooker in crypto where everybody's trying to attack you. They're trying to change files and data. We prevent that."



[ELEVATOR]

The Space Between Home and Scale

Shannon and Emiliano Lerda needed a workspace that fell somewhere between the kitchen table and a massive warehouse lease. When they couldn't find it, they created a new kind of space for businesses growing through that same in-between stage.



ELEVATOR

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
Business Services

EMPLOYEES
15

WEBSITE
elevatorspaces.com

SHANNON LERDA didn't set out to start a coworking and warehouse space company. She was trying to solve a problem inside her own house.

At the time, she was running an e-commerce pet supply business from home with her husband, Emiliano Lerda. As the business expanded, they started looking for space that could support their next stage. What they found instead felt misaligned with the realities of small business growth.

"They were dark, dirty, old, or too big," said Shannon. "They also wanted a three- to five-year commitment for 5,000 square feet."

The mismatch wasn't just about space. Traditional warehouses asked for long leases and large footprints. Coworking spaces offered flexibility and community, but they were built for laptops and meetings, not pallets, shipping, and inventory.

That gap became visible because the Lerdas were living inside it. Shannon wanted the energy and connection of coworking, but for businesses that needed dock access, storage, and room to move product.

"One day I was venting to Emiliano and said I like coworking, but somebody needs to do co-warehousing," Shannon said.

Emiliano still remembers the moment. What started as a passing comment quickly became something more, an idea that felt both obvious and urgent.

That conversation became Elevator, a workspace platform that combines flexible offices, coworking, and warehouse units under one membership. Its members are small and mid-sized businesses, including founders who have outgrown a spare bedroom or garage but are not ready for the cost and rigidity of a conventional industrial lease. The model also includes business-focused amenities, programming, and community support designed to help members grow alongside one another.

The company's core idea is that space matters, but so does what surrounds it. Elevator is not just leasing square footage. It is creating an environment where small businesses can operate more efficiently, meet peers facing similar challenges, and grow without being pushed into commitments that do not match their stage.

"We help small businesses and communities," Emiliano said. "That's our purpose, that's our passion, that's our mission."

Before they ever opened a building, the Lerdas tested the idea in the most practical way they could. They talked to strangers, friends, investors, and small business owners.

Shannon went further, walking through events like Junkstock, Dundee Days, and farmers markets, asking business owners where they worked and how they managed production and storage.

"People would say they were working out of their kitchen, basement, or garage," she said. "We got that customer validation."

That early signal turned into real backing. The company began with the founders' savings, then secured an SBA 7(a) loan. From there, Elevator raised a $1.7 million pre-seed convertible note round, followed by a $1.6 million seed round. Most of their early investors were based in Nebraska and were part of the founders' existing network. In 2026, the company received a fully committed $1.25 million SAFE note. What began as one proof-of-concept location in Omaha has since grown to five locations across Nebraska, Missouri, and Iowa.

The first year, though, was far from secure.

"It was terrifying in the days prior to opening," Shannon said. "What if we just did all this work and nobody comes?"

For a time, that fear was not theoretical. The company had to build its sales and marketing systems in real time, learning quickly that demand would not materialize on its own. The team cold called, ran sales sprints, and built

"We help small businesses and communities. That's our purpose, that's our passion, that's our mission."



awareness person by person. Viability came only after that first year, when the Omaha location reached 90 percent occupancy and became cash-flow positive.

That growth did not happen in isolation. The Lerdas credit Nebraska's startup community with helping them move from idea to execution through early feedback and access to people willing to invest time in the concept.

From their perspective, Nebraska is a strong place to start a company. But scaling presents a different set of challenges. As Elevator has grown, access to capital has become more complex. Emiliano points to a gap in debt financing for companies in the middle stage, beyond small loans but not yet large-scale.

While smaller loans are more accessible, larger financing options are limited and often come with stricter underwriting, heavier collateral requirements, and longer approval timelines. The system, he said, is built to help companies start, but not always to help them grow.

"We have work to do to make Nebraska a great state to scale a company," Emiliano said.

That tension now defines Elevator's next chapter. The company is operating in two timelines at once: executing across five active locations while building a pipeline for what comes next in real estate, where every new site requires long lead times, capital, and discipline. The ambition is larger than what has already been built. So is the challenge.

"Our goal is to learn so we have fewer misses as we scale more rapidly," Emiliano said.

That is the unfinished work ahead: not proving the idea, but building the systems, team, and capital stack strong enough to carry it further. ●

The Flywheel Effect



How an Omaha startup lived up to its name by setting the next generation of founders and leaders in motion.

Photography by Kimberly Bailey

Every Monday morning, Karen Borchert can hear Workshop's all-hands meeting through the ceiling of her office at Alpaca.

THE TWO companies are stacked one on top of the other in the Ashton building at **Millwork Commons**. Each is led by someone who helped build Flywheel, the Omaha startup WP Engine acquired more than seven years ago.

Even the timing carries a trace of Flywheel. Its all-hands meetings happened on Monday mornings, too.

You don't have to go far to find other traces. Former Flywheel employees, or Flywheelers, have become founders and executives at Guardify, Grapple, and CompanyCam, or carried that experience well beyond Nebraska to Webflow, Kismet Golf, The New York Times, and Shopify.

Flywheel proved that a design-driven software company could start in Omaha and scale around the world. Its longer legacy may be the people it trusted along the way and what they've gone on to build with that experience.

PROVING IT COULD BE BUILT HERE

When Rick Knudtson, Dusty Davidson, and Tony Noecker started Flywheel in 2012, Omaha wasn't exactly overflowing with examples of venture-backed software companies. The idea grew out of Knudtson's years in the creative agency world, where hosting and managing client websites was a constant frustration.

Beginning with a $135,000 angel round, Flywheel grew to around 250 employees and expanded globally over the next several years. For Knudtson, building it in Omaha was part of the point. He remembers reading TechCrunch in college when the assumed paths for graduates were to join a traditional corporation or leave for the coasts.

"We always joked that maybe we could just do it here," Knudtson said.

Flywheel wasn't the first technology company built in Nebraska or the only one growing at the time, but it became a point of proof that a design-driven software company could start in Omaha, scale globally, and reach a successful exit.

Its impact extended beyond the acquisition. Along the way, hundreds of employees gained firsthand experience building a fast-growing startup. After WP Engine acquired Flywheel in 2019, they put that experience to work inside WP Engine and across the companies, teams, and careers that followed.

THE CULTURE EVERYONE REMEMBERS

Of the people interviewed, no one mentioned what Flywheel actually did: managed WordPress hosting for creatives. They talked about lunches, Monday morning all-hands meetings, intentional hiring, freedom to solve problems, and the feeling that people worked hard but also genuinely wanted to spend time together.

For Jack Sellwood, now the founder of **Grapple** [1], Flywheel was his first formal job after years of running his own business. It became his first impression of what working inside a company could feel like.

"It's an act of magic building a community and culture where people try hard but also have fun," he said.

At Flywheel, he found that combination in people who cared about customers, worked toward a shared goal, and laughed along the way. It's the culture he set out to rebuild at Grapple.

"Flywheel was a generational company," Sellwood said, "not just because of the exit, but because of the reverberations it created in the community."

[1] Grapple
Jack Sellwood arrived in Omaha without deep roots or a network waiting for him. Through Flywheel, the city's startup community, and years of persistence, he found both a place to belong and a place to build. **pg. 62**

[2] Alpaca
Karen Borchert started with coffee, a notebook, and lots of tiny classroom chairs. By listening to teachers, she discovered that what schools needed most wasn't another care package, but a better way to hear people and act. **pg. 134**

Karen Borchert saw those reverberations firsthand. She joined Flywheel as chief operating officer and now leads **Alpaca** [2], where she watched the company develop employees who had come from coffee shops, creative agencies, and companies that had nothing to do with tech. She also learned that shared meals and frequent communication mattered, and that a few clear expectations about taking care of one another could be more powerful than a binder full of policies.

"We benefited from three founders who put culture first, second, and third in lots of ways," Borchert said.

The founders intentionally set out to build a company with a strong culture, though co-founder and chief technology officer Tony Noecker said its ability to develop future leaders emerged more organically. In the early days, trusting people was partly a function of necessity.

"We were a small team, and trust really was a requirement," he said. "I think our success with that early trust gave us the confidence to continue trusting folks as we grew."

Those choices shaped how Flywheel hired, communicated, and made decisions. They also shaped how much responsibility someone was allowed to carry before their résumé said they were ready. For Borchert, that willingness to bet on people is the clearest explanation for what followed.

"I have never seen a company grow talent the way that Flywheel did," she said.

BUILDING BUILDERS

Flywheel's internship program didn't place students at the edges of the company to observe. Interns worked on real products, supported real customers, and contributed to teams navigating real growth.

Kat Slump was one of Flywheel's first engineering interns and found herself reporting directly to Noecker. He was deep in the company's most critical engineering work, but consistently made time to help her get unstuck or talk through a problem. Senior engineers did the same, treating her work like it mattered, because it did.

"As an intern, having real responsibility and real access to leadership was pretty surprising," Slump said. "It set a bar for me early on and shaped how I think about mentorship and supporting people earlier in their careers."

Slump moved to San Francisco shortly after her time with Flywheel and became an engineering manager at Humu, a workplace technology platform, and a founding engineer at Phia, an AI-powered shopping assistant, before launching Kismet Golf, golf tournament software, in 2024. Now as a founder and CEO, she credits Flywheel with setting an early standard for how leaders can trust and support people at the beginning of their careers.

Erin Depa also began at Flywheel as a customer success intern while she was still in school at Creighton University. When she realized she wanted to be closer to the competitive side of the business, Flywheel let her move into sales. She advanced to senior account executive and, at 26, became a sales manager.

Depa helped build Flywheel's first expansion sales motion without a playbook, using only a customer list and some data. When results dipped, she told Knudtson, then her manager, the team had tried everything it could think of.

"Erin, if you say there's not more revenue to be found this month, I trust you," she remembers him saying.

There was no disappointment in his response, only confidence in her judgment. Later, another leader encouraged her to accept a promotion before she felt ready. She became the top-performing senior account executive the following year.

"Several times throughout my time at Flywheel, people believed in me even more than I believed in myself," Depa said. "That made all the difference."

Depa, now director of sales at Workshop, still encourages her team to move quickly, test ideas, and rewrite the playbook when something better might be possible. Her experience reflected a broader pattern at Flywheel, where interns and early-career employees were trusted early and given room to become leaders.

That development sometimes began with an employee being candid about what they still needed to learn. Ben Jackson joined Flywheel to lead sales after working across several customer-facing roles. He told Davidson he hoped to become a CEO again someday, but knew he had never led a product or engineering team. Through opportunities at Flywheel, and later WP Engine, Jackson moved into product management and eventually led a large product team.

"I'm not a designer, but I know what good and what bad looks like because of Flywheel," Jackson said.

Today, he's co-founder and CEO of **Guardify** [3], where he brings that same attention to detail to the product, sales process, and customer support.

THE MOMENTUM MULTIPLIED

The clearest concentration of former Flywheel employees may be inside **Workshop** [4], which Knudtson co-founded with Derek Homann and Ben Stevinson. Ex-Flywheelers now work across nearly every part of its team.

Knudtson carried lessons from Flywheel about scaling teams, communicating through growth, and recognizing the people who make a culture work. At Workshop, the founders waited a full year before formalizing the company's values, giving themselves time to see which behaviors created the kind of workplace they wanted. Optimism became the first trait they hired for, something Knudtson said Flywheel had taken years to recognize.

As Flywheel grew, its founders also became more intentional about developing talent. The company invested heavily in management and leadership training, while Noecker looked for more ways to pair junior engineers with experienced ones.

"Working side by side with someone who is a master of their craft is incredibly valuable," Noecker said.

The approach built on an ethos that had shaped Flywheel's internship program and some of its earliest engineering hires from coding schools.

Building Workshop has also given Knudtson a new appreciation for his former co-founders. He said he now has "a lot more empathy for Dusty" as a CEO, and credits both Davidson and Noecker with influencing how he leads today.

Knudtson recognizes employees at Workshop who want to start companies of their own. Some even ask him to coffee to talk through their ideas. He knows they may eventually leave, but he welcomes it.

"I'm the first champion of any employee leaving to go start something interesting," he said.

The entrepreneurial thread extends beyond traditional startups. Former Flywheelers have also launched agencies, consultancies, and independent careers across design, development, marketing, and other creative fields. Others now hold senior roles at Werner Enterprises, The New York Times, Webflow, CircleCI, Shopify, and elsewhere.

3 Guardify
Ben Jackson spent years seeking out bigger problems and building the experience he'd need to lead another company. So when Guardify needed someone to turn a mission-driven product into a scalable business, he was ready. **pg. 162**

4 Workshop
After helping build one of Nebraska's defining startup successes, Rick Knudtson assumed the second company might come easier. Workshop's first year proved otherwise, pushing the team to rethink the product before it found traction. **pg. 216**

"I'm the first champion of any employee leaving to go start something interesting."

Rick Knudtson
Co-Founder & CEO
Workshop





WHAT CARRIED OVER

Knudtson stayed after the acquisition to help integrate Flywheel into WP Engine. When the pandemic made internal communication more urgent across the 1,200-person company, he got a firsthand look at the challenge Workshop would later take on.

While Knudtson eventually moved on, more than 20 former Flywheel employees remain at WP Engine today. Adam Trabold, now director of product design, has lived through both chapters.

"The biggest thing I walked away from Flywheel with was an understanding of the importance of individuals," Trabold said. "Not in some generic 'you matter' sort of way, but the specific person being critical to achieving an outcome."

WP Engine also adopted "Design Matters" from Flywheel's core values. For Trabold, the idea extends beyond how a product looks or works. It reflects a belief that every part of the work can be intentional, an approach that shaped Flywheel's product, brand, culture, and employee experience.

"We are just as focused as ever on providing the right products to make our customers' lives easier," he said.

Seven years later, Trabold still works alongside many former Flywheelers who have grown into new roles. That same care for the work and the people doing it remains recognizable inside a much larger company.

STILL SPINNING

Years before Borchert could hear Workshop's Monday meeting through the ceiling, she showed an early pitch deck for Alpaca to Kaitlin Grohmann, another ex-Flywheeler who is now Workshop's chief of staff. Grohmann asked questions, listened, and ended the conversation with three words: "Just keep going."

"There's something about when you've worked with people and they know you and they say keep going," Borchert said. "It's different than when you're starting from scratch."

That familiarity has continued to open doors for former Flywheelers. Flywheel was the only job Sellwood ever applied for without a connection. Nearly every opportunity since has come through someone who knew someone else.

Jackson put it another way.

"Flywheel folks never really left Flywheel," he said. "The community never went away. The problems just changed."

Noecker never saw developing future founders and leaders as an explicit plan. He believed that finding good people, giving them autonomy, and trusting them to do their best work naturally helped them develop the skills to lead.

Looking back, he's proudest of building a company that "resonated with so many people, both customers and employees."

The two Monday morning meetings at Millwork Commons are a small sign of what that became. One floor apart, former Flywheelers are still gathering teams, passing on what they learned, and building what comes next. ●

[WORKSHOP]

Leading the Second Time Around

After helping build one of Nebraska's defining startup successes, Rick Knudtson assumed the second company might come easier. Workshop's first year proved otherwise, pushing the team to rethink the product before it found traction.



WORKSHOP

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2021

INDUSTRY
SaaS

EMPLOYEES
100+

WEBSITE
useworkshop.com

MOST TEENAGERS get their first job bagging groceries or waiting tables. Rick Knudtson built websites.

At 14, he was teaching himself HTML and CSS through MySpace, finding freelance web design clients, and earning money long before he knew he was becoming an entrepreneur.

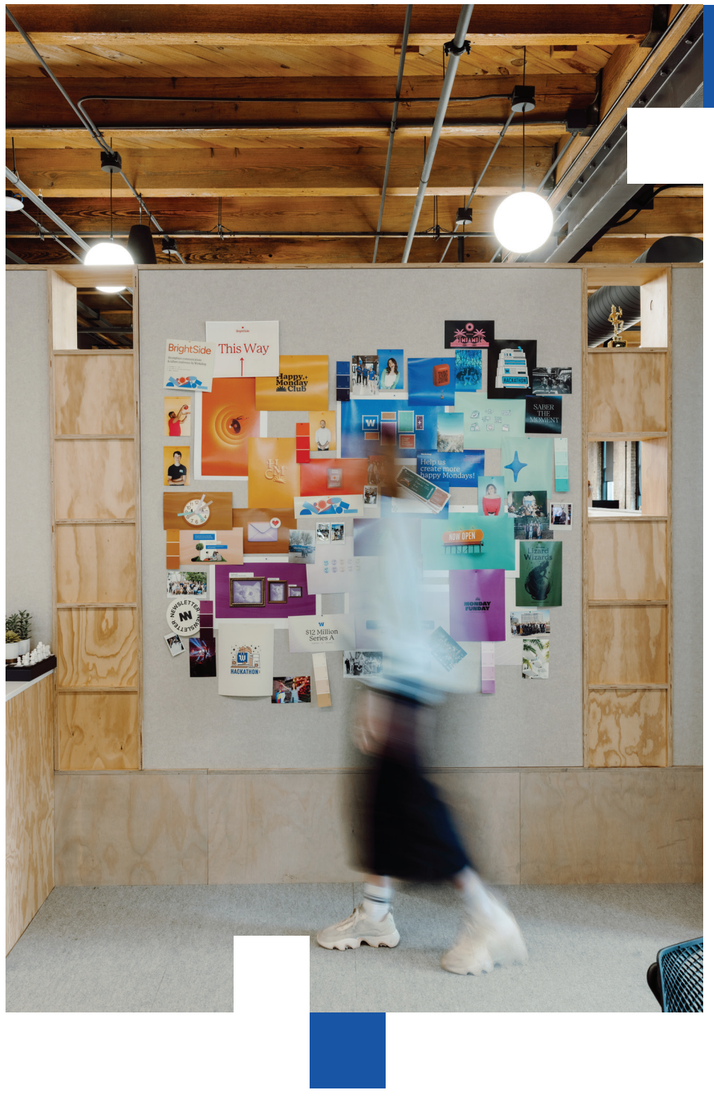
"I think from an early age I had the knack for spotting a problem, talking to a client, and solving it," said Knudtson.

Knudtson has never been interested in inventing something entirely new. His instinct is to study markets that already exist, understand why customers settle for the tools they have, and figure out how to make them better.

"I want to know that there are big companies that have done this before," he said. "I just want to do it better."

That approach first led him to co-found **Flywheel** [1] with Dusty Davidson and Tony Noecker in 2012 after recognizing how difficult web hosting was for creative agencies like the one he was running. He and his co-founders built the platform they wished they had, growing Flywheel into one of Nebraska's defining startup success stories before the company was acquired by WP Engine in 2019.

Most founders might have taken a hiatus after an acquisition, but Knudtson stayed to help guide Flywheel's integration into WP Engine, making sure the team was in a good place before moving on.



[1] Flywheel
An Omaha-founded web hosting company built for designers and creative agencies. Founded in 2012, the company was acquired by WP Engine in 2019.

> "If we can put a lot of optimistic people in the room, they're going to be excited about really hard things."

During that transition, he found himself thinking less about web hosting and more about the challenge of building teams. As WP Engine worked to integrate the Flywheel team into a company of more than 1,200 employees just as the pandemic reshaped the way people worked, internal communication suddenly became one of the company's biggest priorities.

"It was kind of inspiring to me again that this communication thing is more challenging than ever," Knudtson said.

During the pandemic, Knudtson reconnected with former Flywheel teammates Ben Stevinson and Derek Homann, who had recently sold their own software company. Working remotely, the three spent evenings exploring software ideas before focusing on internal communication.

When Knudtson left WP Engine, he started at Workshop the following Monday.

"My wife was not happy about that," he said, laughing.

Workshop launched in 2021 with a simple mission: creating happy Mondays for employees everywhere.

"We started this company with a mission statement," he said. "It doesn't say anything about what we're building. It doesn't say we're a tech company. It doesn't say we're going to build software. But it does say we believe that's work worth doing."

The Co-Founders

Left to right:
Rick Knudtson, CEO
Ben Stevinson, CTO
Derek Homann, COO









“THE NUMBER ONE THING WE HIRE FOR IS OPTIMISM.”

Coming off the success of Flywheel, Knudtson assumed it would be easier the second time around. Instead, the first year of Workshop became one of the most humbling experiences of his career.

"We spent nine months building things, trying to sell them, and being told no every day," he said.

In September 2021, Knudtson, Stevinson, and Homann met for drinks after work to decide whether Workshop had reached the end of the road. After months of rebuilding and burning through their angel funding, they debated returning the remaining capital to investors and walking away.

Instead, Homann challenged the team to stop chasing new ideas and solve the problem customers kept describing. Over the next month, they rebuilt Workshop around an email-first internal communications platform.

Within weeks, Workshop signed 10 customers. A few months later, it had 30.

"It was pretty obvious this was resonating," Knudtson said.

Today, Workshop helps enterprising organizations communicate with employees at scale. The company has grown to more than 100 employees and raised $27 million in funding. By the end of the year, Knudtson expects Workshop to surpass Flywheel's peak revenue.

Building a second company gave Knudtson something he didn't have the first time around: perspective. This time, he knew exactly what kind of company he wanted to lead.

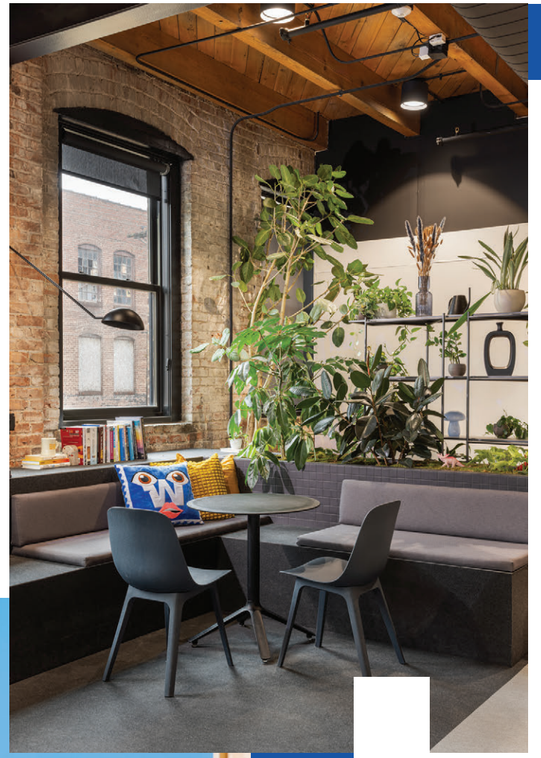
His role changed, too. Instead of growing departments, he now spends most of his time helping leaders succeed and giving them the direction they need to run. Becoming a CEO also gave him a new appreciation for the role Dusty Davidson played at Flywheel, and the weight that comes with guiding an entire company instead of a single department.

That perspective also shaped Workshop from the beginning. Rather than writing company values on day one, the leadership team waited a year, giving those values time to emerge from the people and the work itself instead of becoming aspirational statements on a wall.

"The number one thing we hire for is optimism," Knudtson said. "If we can put a lot of optimistic people in the room, they're going to be excited about really hard things."

$27M

in total funding





Years ago, Knudtson was the founder looking for someone else to take a chance on him. Today, he tries to be that person for someone else.

He still remembers one of the moments that shaped that philosophy. Shortly after launching Flywheel, then **NMotion** founder Brian Ardinger stopped by the office. Knudtson jokingly offered to migrate NMotion's WordPress site if Ardinger would become Flywheel's newest customer.

"He said, 'Awesome. I have a meeting. I'll be back in 30 minutes. Here's my credit card,'" Knudtson said. "I thought that was the coolest thing in the world."

Today, Knudtson tries to pay that generosity forward by becoming an early customer, investing in founders, and cheering on former teammates as they build companies of their own. He's also quick to credit the people who helped shaped both companies, including Flywheel co-founders Davidson and Noecker, Workshop co-founders Stevinson and Homann, and the longtime investors who have backed him more than once.

He credits Dr. Dale Eesley, Director of the Center for Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Franchising, and the College of Business Administration at the **University of Nebraska Omaha**. Although Knudtson earned a computer science degree, he says the college has welcomed him as one of its own, giving him another way to stay connected to the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Above everything else, though, he points to his wife, Heather.

"I've had business partners," he said. "But she's the best partner I've ever had. I couldn't do any of this without her."

Knudtson has always taken pride in building companies in Nebraska. In Flywheel's earliest days, he and his co-founders joked that instead of moving to Silicon Valley, maybe they could simply build a great technology company in Omaha.

More than a decade later, he hopes Flywheel and Workshop have become proof that they were right: you really can build a great technology company here. ●

[OPENDORSE]

From the Football Field to Co-Founders

Former Nebraska football players Adi Kunalic and Blake Lawrence knew how difficult athlete endorsements could be to coordinate. They built Opendorse to connect athletes and brands, then helped shape the infrastructure behind NIL.



OPENDORSE

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2013

INDUSTRY
Sports Tech; NIL

EMPLOYEES
55+

WEBSITE
opendorse.com

ADI KUNALIC and Blake Lawrence sat in their first small office. They had recently launched Hurrdat, a marketing agency for brands and athletes. Suddenly, the phone rang with a big opportunity: a hospital wanted to partner with a former teammate from their **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** football days.

They texted him, thinking it would be a quick and easy deal.

Their former teammate was interested, but told them to call his marketing manager. He was interested, too, but told them to loop in the financial advisor as well. Then the financial advisor wanted a lawyer involved. This easy partnership quickly became an exhausting game of phone tag.

Kunalic and Lawrence started searching for something to simplify all this, only to realize there was nothing.

"We should go build that," Kunalic said. "That deserves to exist."

Lawrence got to work. Of the two co-founders, he's the creative visionary, dreaming big and drawing mockups on napkins. Kunalic deconstructs those ideas, pressure-testing what's viable and figuring out how to turn vision into execution.

This new idea made the cut.

Opendorse is a marketplace that connects student-athletes and brands while helping athletic departments streamline name, image, and likeness (NIL) operations and compliance. It educates and activates the entire NIL ecosystem, one of their biggest advantages.

"The best ideas are always when you're trying to solve a problem for yourself or people that are very closely related to you," Kunalic said. "Then you have a close connection to the actual issue."

Lawrence and Kunalic have been dreaming up business ideas since they were roommates in college. Over lunches on O Street, they'd start breaking down the business in front of them: menu design, costs, promotions, positioning. And most importantly, how they would do things differently.

"Everything is made up," he said. "But that sort of demystifies anything you want to do. You learn along the way."

It's a philosophy Kunalic has carried for years and still shares with founders, students, and teammates who are staring down a challenge for the first time.

The opportunity behind Opendorse felt especially familiar. Both co-founders had played college football, and Kunalic went on to play in the NFL. They experienced firsthand how difficult it was for athletes and brands to connect for these opportunities.

When brands started reaching out to Hurrdat, asking Kunalic and Lawrence to connect them to former teammates, the co-founders knew they were on the right track with the idea for Opendorse.

Lawrence became the CEO of Opendorse, while Kunalic remained the CEO of Hurrdat. For two and a half years, they ran the two companies as a mutually beneficial competition. They could bounce ideas off each other while staying focused on one lane. It was scrappy, but it forced operational discipline early.

In the summer of 2014, Hurrdat was acquired by B2 Interactive. For the first time, Lawrence and Kunalic could focus their full attention on Opendorse.

Their focus paid off. Within six months, they received a call from the NFL Players Association (NFLPA). The organization loved their vision for transparent, compliant endorsements and social media at scale. They asked whether Opendorse would fly to Washington, D.C., to manage all its sponsors and athletes.

It was an instant yes.

"We'll build you whatever you want," he said.

The NFLPA deal was massive validation and an open door into the world of sports advertising: Pepsi, Tide, Marriott, EA Sports. Suddenly, all the big-name brands and their advertising agencies knew about Opendorse.

"We still had to earn the business, but after that, it was different," Kunalic said. "We weren't just some small Nebraska company."

Building in Nebraska did have its perks, however. In Kunalic's opinion, the cost of living and compensation expectations made it easier to scale compared to the coasts. They were able to reinvest heavily back into the company.

Talent density has been more difficult, specifically on the sales side. Many of Opendorse's buyers (advertisers and agencies) are located in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, and other major cities. Kunalic and Lawrence had to get comfortable hiring outside of Nebraska and supporting a distributed team.

"Being a founder is 90 percent just constant obstacles, constant problems, constant issues," he said. "There is a little bit of fun, but as a founder, you're seeking out to solve problems."

Now, Opendorse is a team of 55 people that touches every corner of the athletic NIL partnership ecosystem. Kunalic and the team feel responsible for ensuring Opendorse endures. The athletes who rely on it are real people connecting to real opportunities. It's money and athletes' livelihoods on the line.

"We built a brand in this space that deserves to exist," Kunalic said. "At this point, we have a responsibility to make sure that it lasts."

The long-term vision is to completely reimagine what athletic representation looks like in the modern world. Kunalic pictures a model that's tech-driven, data-driven, and truly in the hands of athletes, during their playing days and beyond.

Since the start of the NIL era, Opendorse has helped drive more than $500 million to student-athletes. The company's goal is to put $1 billion in athletes' pockets by the end of 2029.

"That's the decade-long vision, and that's the one worth dreaming about," he said.

Lawrence and Kunalic have been teammates on and off the field for 15 years. They've always dreamed big, whether it's during a game, over lunch, or while scaling a company.

The problems change, but the playbook stays the same: solve problems, be great teammates, and build something great with people they care about. A winning combination. ●

$500M

driven to student-athletes since the beginning of NIL



[HUDL]

Home Field Advantage

How three University of Nebraska-Lincoln students turned an idea for Nebraska football into a global sports technology company without leaving Lincoln behind.



HUDL

Adapted by Open Range from original reporting by Ben Goeser for Silicon Prairie News

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Hudl was three **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** students, one football team, and an idea.

Today, the sports technology company supports hundreds of thousands of teams around the world. Its products span video, data, and analytics, including software and physical cameras that help coaches study performance, athletes share highlights with recruiters, and organizations stream games to fans.

The scale is a long way from where co-founders David Graff, Brian Kaiser, and John Wirtz started in 2006.

"When we started Hudl back in the day, we were just really passionate about it and did it with a couple friends and thought we were on to something, but certainly could not imagine where it's at today," Kaiser said.

That growth was on display when employees from 27 countries and 38 states came together in Lincoln for Hudl Week 2026, a celebration of the company's 20th anniversary. Nearly 1,800 "Hudlies" and invited guests attended.

The gathering itself was a sign of how much the company had changed. Hudl once held company retreats in Las Vegas. Eventually, the logistics of bringing everyone together became too difficult.

"We have about 1,600 full-time employees," Kaiser said. "Plus, we have an additional about 3,500 employees in India and Egypt that are full-time Hudlies, but it's a little different. They do a lot of our tagging and analysis work for us."

Hudl has also expanded through 19 acquisitions, along with exclusive agreements and partnerships across sports leagues. One of those acquisitions was StatsBomb, a United Kingdom-based sports data company Hudl acquired in 2024.

That acquisition brought Martha Reyna to Hudl.

Originally from Mexico, Reyna attended college in West Virginia before moving to the United Kingdom, where she now lives and works as a customer success manager. She knew of Hudl before the acquisition, but Nebraska had never really been on her mind.

Then she came to Lincoln.

"You see so many faces that you normally just message," Reyna said. "And now actually seeing them in person, being able to talk to people from very different parts of the world, like speaking with someone from Europe and speaking with someone from Japan and speaking with someone from Nebraska, it's just incredible to see everybody in the same place."

For a company that has grown far beyond Nebraska, Lincoln remains at the center of Hudl's story.

Ten years after its founding, Hudl was constructing a new global headquarters in the city's Haymarket district. At the time, the company had more than 400 full-time employees across five continents and 12 countries. The office opened in 2017.

Even as Hudl has continued to expand, Kaiser said there has never been serious thought about moving its headquarters elsewhere.

He credits the support of the community, the culture of the Midwest and the investors who helped Hudl grow. He also said Lincoln has become a recruiting advantage of its own.

"We've had a bunch of people move here after visiting from Barcelona, from London, from other international locations, moved to Lincoln because they like this place," Kaiser said. "So, it's not just me kind of making this up. The proof is actually in the results, and we see it."

STAYING CLOSE TO THE START

Hudl's connection to Nebraska goes back to its first customer.

Graff, Kaiser, and Wirtz started the company while students at UNL and its **Jeffrey S. Raikes School of Computer Science and Management**. The Nebraska football team became Hudl's first customer. Two decades later, Hudl remains closely connected to the university that helped launch it.

The company has supported classroom guest speakers, internships, and sponsored projects for the Raikes School. Samuel Nelson, director

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2006

INDUSTRY
Sports Tech

EMPLOYEES
5,000+

WEBSITE
hudl.com

"The future of Hudl is one where every moment in sports gets captured."

The Founding Team

Top to bottom:
David Graff, CEO & Co-Founder
Brian Kaiser, CTO & Co-Founder
John Wirtz, Executive Advisor & Co-Founder







5,000+
FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES

27
COUNTRIES

38
STATES

19
ACQUISITIONS

of the **UNL Center for Entrepreneurship**, said Hudl's name recognition and the presence of its leaders in the university's backyard give the school and its entrepreneurship programs an advantage when recruiting talent.

"I just don't want to understate what Hudl does with the entire university because I'm just one sliver of what they do with the university," Nelson said.

That connection has also continued through Hudl's founders.

Graff remains CEO and Kaiser serves as chief technology officer. Wirtz has stepped away from his former role as chief product officer and now serves Hudl in a part-time role as executive adviser. Michelle Henry is the company's current chief product officer.

"John taught me so much about how to think about product strategy tied to market outcomes, lead a team from the front, and stay connected to our customers," Henry said. "It's a big role. But I felt well-prepared to take that on because I had learned from one of the best."

Wirtz has also continued working with founders across Nebraska. He mentors startups and student founders, serves on the board of Kearney-based utilities startup **Fast Forward**, and chairs the advisory board for the UNL Center for Entrepreneurship.

Hudl's impact can be seen beyond the university. Its success helped put Lincoln on the map for sports technology and offered proof that a global company in the industry could be built from Nebraska.

But even after 20 years of growth, Hudl's leaders say they still think about how to preserve some of what made the company successful in its earliest days.

"We have a lot of the benefits that come from being a more established company. We have the funds to invest and pursue good ideas. We have an incredible team," Graff said. "But we certainly try to keep all the great things that come with being scrappy as a startup."

BUILDING WHAT COMES NEXT

The sports industry Hudl serves today looks different from the one the company entered in 2006.

Hudl has spent two decades adapting alongside it, expanding into shareable and streamable video as platforms like YouTube and Netflix changed expectations around how people watch and consume video.

Now, AI is creating another shift.

Kaiser said sports' reliance on a "passion in humanity" makes the industry uniquely positioned to weather complete disruption from AI. At the same time, Hudl is exploring how the technology could change the experience for athletes, coaches, and others around the game.

Henry pointed to possibilities including AI-powered coaching assistants and cameras capable of providing statistics immediately after a game ends.

"We're building a single platform that connects coaches, athletes, analysts, sport scientists, parents, recruiters, and fans around the most complete library of sports video and data in the world," Henry said. "The future of Hudl is one where every moment in sports gets captured, every athlete gets the recognition they deserve and every program has the tools to win."

As the company has evolved, so have the needs of its workforce. Hudl has responded in ways that reflect its approach to building the company for the long term, including opening a childcare center inside its Lincoln headquarters to support working parents.

Its leaders also remain connected to the lessons and people that helped Hudl grow. They credit mentors in Nebraska with helping them navigate the challenges of scaling a company and encourage other founders to seek experienced advisors, understand their customers deeply, and build teams of people they trust to challenge their thinking.

"Find something you're really passionate about, you really care about learning more about," Graff said. "Root the products you build in those customers' problems and finding great solutions for them."

Twenty years after Hudl began with three students and one football team, the company is still building from the same place it started. Its customers, employees, and ambitions now stretch around the world, but Lincoln remains more than the location of its headquarters. It is part of how Hudl became what it is today, and where the company is choosing to build whatever comes next. ●



[TRAVEFY]

For People Making Travel Possible

Travel advising is deeply personal work supported by historically fragmented systems. Travefy has spent more than a decade quietly building the infrastructure advisors need to run their businesses in one place.



TRAVEFY

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2012

INDUSTRY
Travel Tech

EMPLOYEES
50+

WEBSITE
travefy.com

TRAVEL ADVISING, at its core, is deeply human work. But behind the scenes, it has been historically fragmented.

Advisors juggle itineraries, invoices, client communication, and back-office operations across disconnected tools. The work is high-touch, but the systems weren't built to support that complexity.

In 2012, the founding team saw the gap clearly: an industry built on relationships was being slowed down by its infrastructure. The opportunity wasn't to reinvent travel, it was to support the people who make travel possible. David Chait, Chris Davis, Matt Posvar, and Scott Rutz built Travefy around that idea.

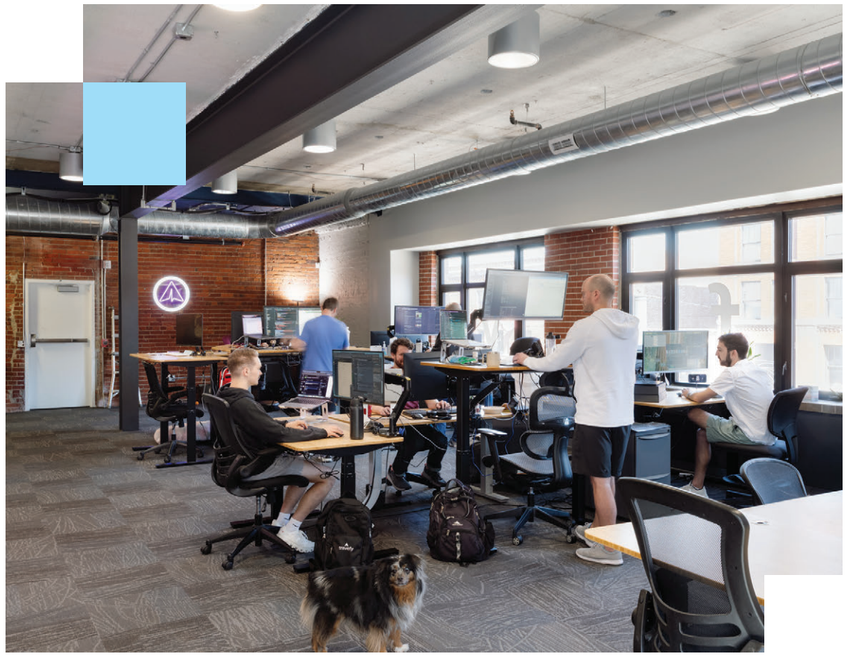
Travefy is a technology platform designed for travel advisors and agencies to manage their business and deliver client experiences. It brings proposals, itineraries, client forms, invoicing, customer relationship management functionality, and back-office tools into one system.

"Travefy helps connect all parts of today's travel business," Rutz said. "You can run your travel business in one place."

The focus wasn't on adding features, it was reducing friction in the day-to-day work of advisors, most of whom operate in the leisure travel space as small businesses. That clarity of audience mattered.

"You have to know the market because if you don't, you could make the right decision for another market and drive your business into the ground," he said.

Over time, that focus translated into depth. Nearly 14 years in the same space gave the team an edge, not just in product, but in judgment.





Scott Rutz
VP of Commercial

Growth came in small milestones.

In 2016, the team celebrated their 1,000th customer, a clear sign of traction. Revenue milestones followed, but they weren't the only signal.

At the same time, competitors were being acquired, often slowing down the process, while the company kept building. That contrast clarified what they had: a business designed to last.

As annual recurring revenue climbed and peers plateaued, it was clear their strategy was holding. The product was resonating and the team wasn't just keeping pace, they were pulling ahead. It was quiet validation that Travefy's customers continued to choose them as the business grew.

"There are billions of gross booking value and transactions happening on our platform," Rutz said.

That number reframes the company's role, not just a tool, but infrastructure supporting real economic activity. The first real signal of entrepreneurship wasn't scale, it was responsibility.

"You start realizing this is entrepreneurship when you start writing others' paychecks," he said. "People are depending on it."

What once felt like building became something heavier: decisions with consequences, growth tied to people, and a business that had to work, not just exist.

From the beginning, the company was rooted in Nebraska, backed by local investors, who were investing not just in a company, but in building the region's startup ecosystem. With roughly $1 million in total funding, the support went beyond capital; these were partners who prioritized long-term success and stayed in the company's corner.

"You find some of the best quality people in Nebraska. People that care about each other, that care about working somewhere they enjoy, and that means something to them," Rutz said.

That mindset shaped how the company grew: deliberately and with a focus on people. It also showed up in how they operated day to day, making disciplined decisions about how and when to scale.

That efficiency helped the company avoid over-leveraging, something that proved critical when COVID-19 hit. The travel industry didn't just slow down, it came to a halt.

But the company had been built differently. Rather than chasing rapid growth, the founders chose to grow sustainably, avoiding overextension and building a business that could withstand uncertainty.

For more than two years, the market was defined by unpredictability. Travel restrictions shifted. Demand dropped. The future was unclear. But that earlier discipline created room to endure.

Instead of retreating, the team leaned in.

"Our product team went into product mode," he said. "We just kept building."

When travel resumed, they weren't catching up. They were ready.

The platform now sits at the center of a global network of advisors and travelers, its reach measured in billions of dollars and millions of experiences. But the work hasn't gotten simpler, as the market is still personal and unpredictable.

"You have to know the market," he said. "That's the premise of everything."

Because nothing stays solved for long. Another shift is always coming, and with it, another decision about what to build next. ●

> "You start realizing this is entrepreneurship when you start writing others' paychecks. People are depending on it."

[BUILDERTREND]

Still Building

20 years after launching Buildertrend from a basement in Omaha, the company is still guided by the same customer-focused mindset that got it started.



BUILDERTREND

Adapted by Open Range from original reporting by Ben Goeser for Silicon Prairie News

TWENTY YEARS after launching Buildertrend from a basement in Omaha, Jeff and Steve Dugger still think a lot like they did when they started.

Buildertrend now serves more than 20,000 customers across 100 countries and employs more than 700 people. But the company's growth has never changed the way its founders think about building products.

When Jeff Dugger, Steve Dugger, and co-founder Dan Houghton launched Buildertrend in 2006, they weren't trying to build a startup.

"In the mid-2000s, the whole phrase 'startup' didn't really exist yet, or at least not in the circles that we ran in," Steve said.

They began creating websites and digital tools for businesses across Omaha and Lincoln. Through those relationships, they noticed a recurring problem among contractors and home builders. The industry needed a better way to keep homeowners, subcontractors, and project teams aligned throughout the construction process.

"It was a pretty daunting task. We just felt confident that we could do it differently and we could do it better," Jeff said.

That relationship with customers became a defining part of the company. Rather than building products in isolation, Buildertrend stayed close to the contractors and home builders using its software, regularly gathering feedback and adapting the platform around the problems they were trying to solve.

And as the industry changed, Buildertrend changed with it.

When the housing market crashed during the Great Recession in 2008, Buildertrend expanded into remodeling. As smartphones became common on job sites, the company invested in mobile tools and applications. New technologies created new opportunities, and customer conversations continued to shape the product roadmap.

"When we started this company, the iPhone had not landed yet and completely changed the industry. You never know what's coming," Jeff said.

Over the years, Buildertrend expanded its product offerings, customer base, and team while remaining headquartered in Omaha.

Early on, hiring software engineers was a challenge. The local talent pool was smaller, and larger technology companies often attracted candidates elsewhere. Today, the founders see a different picture.

"We have a lot of boomerangs. Senior engineers graduate from college, go work for Microsoft, go work for Google, and then decide they want to raise a family in Omaha," Jeff said.

The rise of remote work expanded those opportunities even further.

"Once remote work became part of our organization and just part of the industry, those walls were broken down," he said.

Charlotte Bradley joined Buildertrend as chief product officer in 2025 and works remotely from California. Having worked across the U.S. and internationally, Bradley said culture was one of the factors that attracted her to the company.

"I strongly believe there is talent everywhere, and I'm proud to work for a company that believes that as well," Bradley said.

As Buildertrend grew, the company became increasingly involved in supporting the broader community.

One of those relationships began in 2014, when Buildertrend donated its software to Habitat for Humanity of Omaha. Since then, the organization has used the platform to help manage projects, coordinate timelines, and keep home builds moving forward.

For Habitat Omaha, those efficiencies matter. The families it serves are often working within tight timelines, balancing lease agreements, move-out dates, and the uncertainty that can come with a major life transition.

"When we started this company, the iPhone had not landed yet and completely changed the industry. You never know what's coming."

Raikes School
An undergraduate program through UNL that provides computer science and business management education.

Curt Caldwell, COO in Construction at Habitat for Humanity of Omaha, said Buildertrend's software has become an integral part of the nonprofit's operations and planning.

"Any way that we can keep the overall cost of building down, it's going to be beneficial ultimately for Habitat and for the homeowners," Caldwell said.

Buildertrend has also invested in the people building what's next.

The company has been a longtime supporter of the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Raikes School**, serving as an internship pipeline, sponsoring Design Studio projects, and helping students gain experience solving real-world problems.

Rob Nickolaus, Raikes School Design Studio Director, credits Buildertrend leadership with helping launch Startup Studio, a program where students form teams and build ventures of their own.

"We still kind of call Buildertrend a startup, but when you hit 20 years, you're probably a bit more mature than that. But it's that model that our students look to," Nickolaus said.

It's a description the founders would probably recognize.

"We're still a startup in the sense that we're very customer focused," Steve Dugger said.

"The product is never done."

Buildertrend has grown far beyond the basement where it started, but the mindset that shaped the company remains largely unchanged. The founders still think about customers first, still expect the product to evolve, and still look for new ways to solve problems. ●

HEADQUARTERS
Omaha, NE

FOUNDED
2006

INDUSTRY
Construction Tech

EMPLOYEES
700+

WEBSITE
buildertrend.com

20,000
CUSTOMERS

100
COUNTRIES WHERE OPERATING

700
EMPLOYEES

[BULU]

Designed to Pivot

Paul Jarrett has shut down more good ideas than most people have started. Bulu's story is a lesson in listening closely, stopping what isn't working, and rebuilding around the problem directly in front of you.



BULU

HEADQUARTERS
Lincoln, NE

FOUNDED
2012

INDUSTRY
Manufacturing & Logistics

EMPLOYEES
100+

WEBSITE
bulugroup.com

PAUL JARRETT, owner and CEO of Bulu, has shut down more good ideas than most people have started.

Before Bulu existed, Jarrett and his wife and co-founder, Stephanie, were building a pet services platform in San Francisco, essentially Uber for dogs before Rover existed. They were deep into development when Rover announced a major funding round. Then more competitors followed.

"If you have an idea, go build an MVP. Even if there's nothing there, just go build it," Jarrett said.

They moved fast on the next one. Jarrett had spent years watching product sampling drive real purchase behavior, first in advertising, then at Complete Nutrition, where he helped grow the company from a handful of stores to over $80 million in revenue. Brands were spending millions on samples with no way to measure return. Nobody had solved it. When he searched for a vitamin and supplement subscription box, nothing came up.

So they built it. From that idea to $1.5 million in the bank took less than 60 days.

Bulu launched in 2012, connecting brands to consumers through a sampling subscription model. Traction was real, 60,000 monthly subscribers and growing, but so was the tension. Subscription commerce was still unproven, and investors wanted profitability before the model had room to mature.

At the same time, companies kept reaching out, but brands like Walmart and Walgreens weren't interested in the subscription. So, Jarrett started picking up the phone and found out for himself what they actually needed.

"They wanted to know what products to put on the shelf to be successful, because they were guessing," he said.

That insight became Bulu Marketplace, a platform that eventually sold and became RangeMe.com.

But over time, friction with investors began to overshadow the work itself. Different ideas about the company's future eventually forced a more fundamental question: who should be deciding what comes next?

The founders bought the company back.

"If something is not working, stop. Don't even know how you're gonna fix it yet, just stop," Jarrett said.

Once the deal was done, he went back to what he'd always done: picking up the phone.

With the company back in their hands, Jarrett started calling former colleagues, potential customers, anyone who might recognize a problem worth solving. He was looking for Bulu's next chapter, and he wasn't shy about pitching ideas that didn't fully exist yet.

"Don't go into those calls trying to sell. Go in being like, 'how do I team up with somebody to get to the next level?'" Jarrett said.

Those conversations kept pointing at the same gap: logistics. Inventory, fulfillment, and shipping were fragmented across vendors, and nobody had stitched together a clean, scalable solution.

"We found a problem that was right in front of everybody. It was so obvious, but nobody had put it together," he said.

From there, customers helped shape the product, and the system grew alongside them.

In May 2025, Bulu entered a new chapter through its acquisition by Avid, a Canadian apparel company. The deal combined U.S.-based fulfillment with global apparel manufacturing, expanding both reach and capacity without disrupting operations.

It came together fast, by design. After a two-year negotiation to buy the company back from investors, Jarrett told Avid upfront that the winner would close in under 30 days, keep the team intact, and let Lincoln stay Lincoln. They agreed.

"I still feel like we're waiting for the friction. Usually you sign a deal and everything changes. Nothing changed with them," Jarrett said.

Part of what made it work wasn't just the terms, it was the culture. Avid's core values were nearly identical to Bulu's. Some were named exactly the same. And there was something deeper.

"I truly think the Midwest and Canada are so much more similar than the Midwest and the East Coast or West Coast. They're just as apologetic as we are," he said.

Nebraska had always been a strategic choice, not a default. Early on, accessibility was the deciding factor. Investors, operators, and peers were reachable, and problems got solved fast. Jarrett credits **Nebraska Angels**, **Linseed Capital** [1], **Dundee Venture Capital**, and **Invest Nebraska** with being foundational, along with individuals like Jeff Slobotski and Dusty Davidson.

That same accessibility extended to hiring. Nebraska talent wasn't chasing the next big exit. They wanted stability, culture, and clarity. Jarrett's approach was simple: hire people better than you and be honest about the risk.

Today, Bulu x Avid delivers end-to-end apparel solutions, concept, sourcing, printing, packing, and shipping for growing brands across direct-to-consumer, Amazon, and retail channels. The company has grown again, reaching 100 employees with a clearer structure, stronger alignment, and a focus on long-term sustainability over rapid scale.

"What drives me is building great teams. I love unlocking the potential in people," he said.

Looking ahead, the constraint isn't demand or talent. It's infrastructure, specifically how fast they can get new warehouse facilities operational to keep up with growth.

"We went from an online retail company sampling products to a software company to a logistics firm, and now we're an apparel production company," Jarrett said.

Big jumps, each one triggered by the same instinct: stop, listen, find the next problem. ●

> "We went from an online retail company to a software company to a logistics firm, and now we're an apparel production company."



[1] Linseed Capital
Founded in 2005 in Omaha, a private venture capital and angel investment firm. It focuses on early-stage startup investments.

After the Exit

For the founders of Quantified Ag, LifeLoop, and LiveBy, acquisitions marked the end of one company and the beginning of what came next.

Adapted by Open Range from original reporting by Lev Gringauz for Silicon Prairie News

Nebraska experienced a record-breaking year in 2025 for venture capital raised by local startups. That influx of funding sits right alongside the realities of building a company, the experimentation, the setbacks, and the recalibration that happens along the way.

Where a company goes from there is less predictable.

For Dan Hoffman, CEO of Invest Nebraska, it depends on both the founder and the environment they're building in.

SOME AIM to build a long-term, profitable business, while others go public or exit upon achieving a high valuation.

"At the end of the day, when you think about entrepreneurship, it's building wealth," Hoffman said.

That wealth tends to move.

According to **Invest Nebraska's** 2026 Venture Capital Report, nearly $530 million was invested in Nebraska startups in 2025. When companies exit, that capital often flows back into the ecosystem.

Hoffman said local exits, such as **Flywheel's** back in 2019, can create a waterfall effect. Investors receive back capital to expand their portfolios, and founders (and often employees) go on to become mentors, community connectors and serial entrepreneurs, or investors themselves.

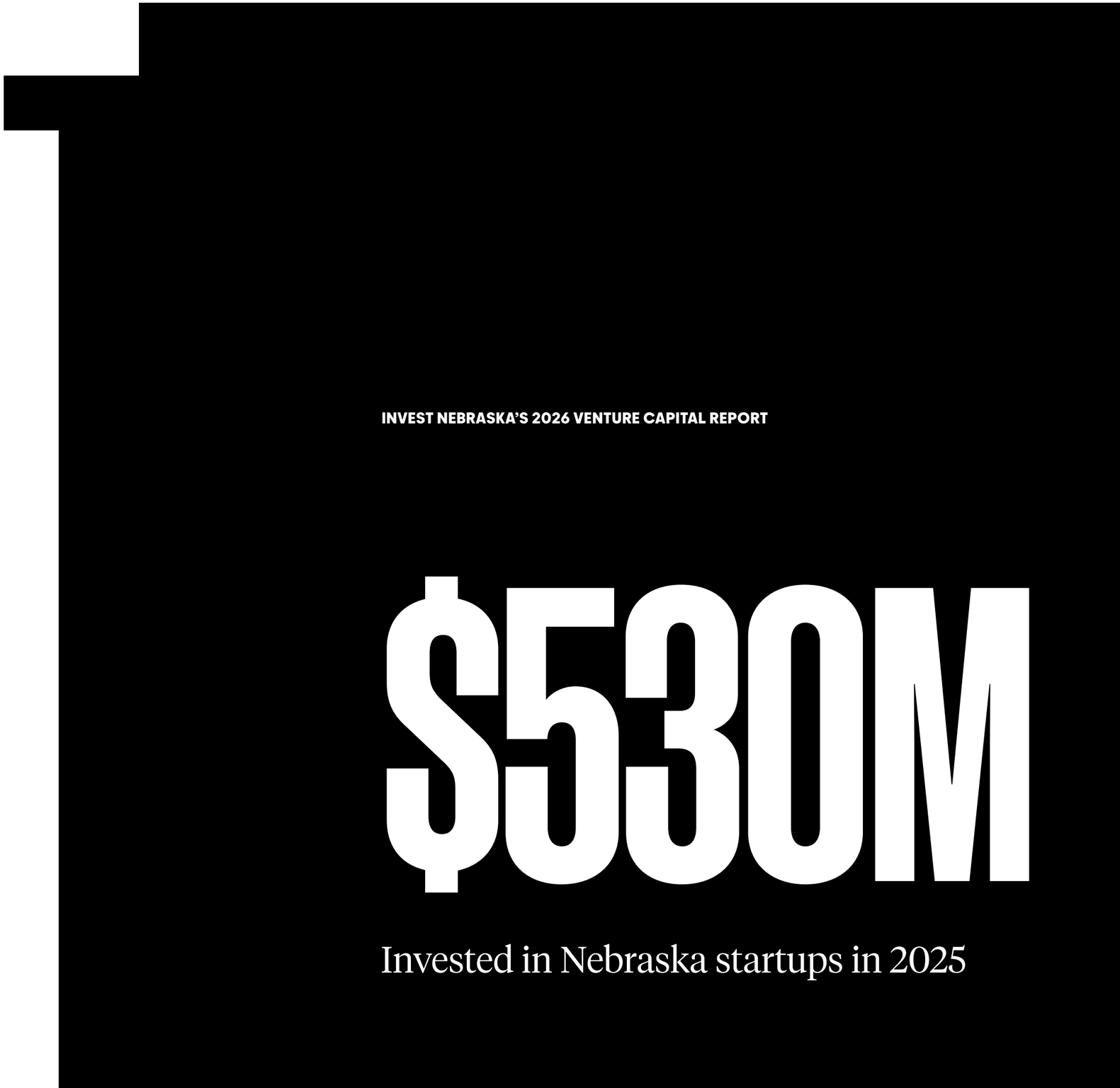
Some acquisitions and mergers from the early 2020s include in-home care provider Home Instead, clinical workflow management platform Nobl, shopper analytics company Retail Aware, video intelligence company Engage Vision, and third-party logistics company **Bulu**.

Exits bring capital and attention, but they also leave behind experienced teams that have what it takes to build and scale, and who often stay and keep building here. That kind of workforce can be a deciding factor for acquiring companies to maintain and grow teams in Nebraska.

"You can't really find that in a textbook," Hoffman said.

That accumulated experience can shape what gets built next, especially in a younger ecosystem where patterns are still forming.

Quantified Ag, LifeLoop, and LiveBy were acquired between 2020 and 2022. Their founders reflected on the journeys that led them there and what came next.



Quantified Ag

> “It made sense to be there for other people who are also building their companies.”



Vishal Singh
Co-Founder & former CEO

IT HAD been a while since Vishal Singh, co-founder and former CEO of Quantified Ag, last shared an update on the AgTech startup he built in Lincoln.

Quantified Ag started taking shape around 2014. Singh spent time in the **NMotion Accelerator** as the idea evolved from drones into something more practical: modified ear tags designed to collect data on livestock and surface potential health concerns.

The team stayed small. It started with three people and grew to around 10 or 11 over the years, with most of the focus on research, development, and field trials.

“The six years that we spent on growing the company, the growth was all focused on really developing the hardware because that took a lot longer than we thought, as did the algorithms,” Singh said.

Even at the point of acquisition, the company was still early.

Quantified Ag was acquired in 2020 by Merck Animal Health, a division of global biopharmaceutical company Merck. The company had already been both an investor and a partner, with early interest in bringing the startup in.

For Singh, the timing made sense. He was drawn to the creativity and problem-solving that come with building something from the ground up. Scaling it further required a different kind of infrastructure and resources.

He helped guide the transition, then stepped away from the company.

A significant number of Quantified Ag team members have continued working under Merck, such as his co-founder and former chief technology officer Brian Schupbach.

Schupbach has been able to focus more directly on product development, without the constant tradeoffs that come with running a small startup. The technology has continued to evolve under the name SenseHub, with additional releases on the way. While the team is now distributed, many of those original employees still work from Nebraska.

Singh’s path after the acquisition stayed close to the ecosystem.

He moved into mentorship and advisory roles, most recently serving as entrepreneur in residence for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s **Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program**.

He was motivated to share his lived experiences and offer the same kind of guidance he once received.

“It made sense to be there for other people who are also building their companies,” said Singh.

That perspective has shaped the roles he’s taken on since, staying close to founders who are earlier in their own journeys.

LifeLoop

LIFELOOP STARTED with something personal.

The idea took shape in 2013, rooted in Amy Johnson's family wanting a better way to stay connected with a loved one in an assisted living community. By 2015, that idea had turned into a company.

From this idea and through customer outreach, a platform developed. LifeLoop's purpose was to support assisted living communities with non-clinical operations while keeping families, staff, and residents connected. It included scheduling calendars, tracking resident engagement, and fulfilling maintenance and transportation needs.

With her founding team not having a background in the assisted living industry or software, Johnson's strategy became focused on finding the right staff to fill gaps, such as former vice president and partner Nick Nemer. Through these efforts, LifeLoop expanded to nearly 40 employees with a reach in all 50 states.

The pandemic was a major turning point for LifeLoop. What had once been considered a nice-to-have quickly became essential. Demand accelerated, and at the same time, larger players started entering the space. The team was faced with a decision.

"It was either raise a bunch of money or get acquired," said Johnson. "We assessed all of our options and picked the one that made the most sense at that time."

LifeLoop was acquired in 2022 by iN2L, a Vista Equity Partners portfolio company. At the time, the platform was in more than 700 communities across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

iN2L has since rebranded to LifeLoop and continues operations today. While its main office is in Colorado, it still has an office in Omaha.

Johnson and Nemer stayed through the transition before stepping into advisory roles. Since then, Johnson has joined the board of **Invest Nebraska**, and together they now run a consulting firm focused on startups and small businesses.

"The people you meet along the way doing these things, when you're growing a company like this, they become family," Nemer said. "I think Amy and I have talked to each other every day, for the last 10 years."

The work may have changed, but the relationships haven't.



"It was either raise a bunch of money or get acquired. We assessed all of our options and picked the one that made the most sense at that time."

Amy Johnson
Co-Founder & former CEO

Cory Scott
Co-Founder & former CEO



"I wanted to pay attention to my life, my lifestyle, the things that I enjoy and try to solve those problems, so that's what I did."

LiveBy

LIVEBY LAUNCHED in 2015 following its two co-founders' participation in the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development's JumpStart Challenge. It sparked from a need expressed in the reverse pitch competition, specifically for how local real estate networks could compete with platforms like Zillow.

Around that time, Cory Scott, co-founder and the eventual CEO of LiveBy, was already plugged into the community and thinking about what came next. He had reached a point in his career where he wanted to join a startup. When the opportunity showed up, he realized he would be building his own.

After winning the JumpStart Challenge with Matan Gill, his co-founder, they were accepted into the **NMotion Accelerator**. The company began to take shape, but the product didn't stay the same for long.

What started as a consumer-facing neighborhood matching application evolved into a business-facing platform with hyper-focused neighborhood data and content.

"The product changed probably three different times, and we just didn't get romantic with our first idea," Scott said. "If we would have, I don't think we would have lasted two years."

The startup grew to around 20 employees and built a database covering the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands. Due to its traction and data access, LiveBy drew acquisition interest more than once. One early offer didn't go through, pushing the team to keep building and refining the business.

Momentum picked up again during the pandemic, as housing demand surged. With more traction, more fundraising, and renewed interest from buyers, LiveBy was eventually acquired in 2021 by Fathom Holdings.

Scott stayed on in a leadership role with the acquiring company while continuing as CEO of LiveBy. A few years in, as the housing market began to shift and development slowed, he made the decision to step away.

Since then, LiveBy has continued on, but its structure has changed. The team is now primarily remote, but still maintains a strong presence in Nebraska. Product updates have continued, and the company was recently acquired again in December 2025.

For Scott, the next chapter looks different.

Starting with some consulting work, he began building a group of businesses in Nebraska focused on lake homes and boating, shaped more directly by his own interests.

"I wanted to pay attention to my life, my lifestyle, the things that I enjoy and try to solve those problems, so that's what I did," Scott said.

That shift has guided what he's building now.

For current & future founders

Stories like these matter.

They show that it's possible to build, grow, and exit a company without leaving Nebraska.

"The good thing with being able to tell a story where you start a company, grow it, and then successfully exit with it, is that other people can see that it's something that can be done right here in our state," Singh said. "You don't have to go to the coast to find those types of stories."

Scott emphasized the difficulties that come with growing a startup, though. From high failure rates to not having time to slow down, it's important for early entrepreneurs to be honest with themselves about what they can handle.

Even exits themselves don't always look the way founders expect. Outcomes can shift. Markets change. Timing forces decisions, something Hoffman has seen play out across companies in the state.

Still, the founders looked back on their journeys with appreciation and ahead with a desire to keep building. They saw that same drive in their teams.

"Everybody is always trying to recreate what we had at that moment, which I think is also an awesome thing, but it's really hard to do," Johnson said. "When you create that magic, just enjoy it."

That sense of momentum, of building something meaningful with a team, tends to carry forward. And in many ways, it raises the question of who will be next. ●

AFTERWORD



It’s no surprise that when Nebraskans encounter a problem, our first instinct is to get to work.

Story after story, the idea begins with a problem the founder knows firsthand. They have seen where an industry falls short, who feels the consequences, and why the usual way of doing things is no longer good enough.

That experience is now fueling startups across nearly every industry in our state. Founders are taking on deeply nuanced challenges and building solutions informed by what they’ve learned. Their ambition, persistence, and ingenuity captured in these pages should make Nebraska proud.

One of Nebraska’s clearest advantages in that work may be its proximity to customers. The degrees of separation between a founder and the right customer, mentor, investor, university, or corporate partner are often just one or two. Throughout these stories, a relationship becomes a first customer, pilot, design partner, investment, or sometimes the opportunity that keeps a company alive.

Those relationships are one of Nebraska’s greatest startup strengths. The opportunity now is to ensure even more people can benefit from them.

This founding issue of Open Book offers encouraging signs. Women are building some of Nebraska’s most promising early-stage, tech-enabled companies across a wide range of industries. But as the publication moves into the scaling and breakout stages, that representation narrows. Founders of color are also underrepresented throughout. Those patterns reflect longstanding differences in access to capital, customers, professional networks, technical careers, and the time and flexibility needed to keep building.

The stories in these pages inspire Open Range to keep expanding opportunity so more people, across gender, race, geography, and lived experience, can find a path into entrepreneurship.

This community is entering its second generation. People who learned inside earlier startups are now founding companies of their own, while experienced founders are becoming mentors and investors. The knowledge, talent, relationships, and capital created by one company are helping another begin.

As that cycle continues, we have an opportunity to preserve the generosity and connection that make Nebraska’s startup community powerful while opening those relationships to even more people.

Open Book captures just a piece of what Nebraska’s founders have built so far. I’m excited to see where the next generation takes it and what they build from here.



Laurel Oetken
Chief Executive Officer
Open Range

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FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS & INVESTORS

Dundee Venture Capital: Founded in 2010 in Omaha, the firm actively bridges the capital gap for high-growth tech startups operating outside traditional coastal hubs, primarily targeting regions across the Midwest.
Bulu 242

Grit Road Partners: Founded in 2021 in Omaha, a venture capital firm that invests in seed-stage agriculture technology startups.
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Invest Nebraska: Founded in 2002, a nonprofit venture development organization that provides early-stage investment capital, strategic support, and entrepreneurial resources to startups in Nebraska. In partnership with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Invest Nebraska administers portions of the state’s Business Innovation Act, investing in high-growth companies.
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Linseed Capital: Founded in 2005 in Omaha, a private venture capital and angel investment firm. It focuses on early-stage startup investments.
Bulu 242

MOVE Venture Capital: Founded in 2022 in Omaha, an early-stage venture capital fund investing in tech startups across Nebraska and the Midwest.
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By the Numbers: Investors 146
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Nebraska Angels: Founded in 2006, a network of angel investors who meet once a month to review early stage, venture-backed startups for potential investment.
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Nebraska Seed Investment Program: An equity financing initiative that provides early-stage businesses with venture capital to commercialize their products; managed in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Invest Nebraska.
CodeBuddy 186

Paul G Smith Associates (PGSA): An Omaha-based investment and development firm whose work spans hotels, mixed-use real estate projects such as Millwork Commons, and

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venture capital. Its venture arm invests primarily in Nebraska and Midwest companies at the Seed and Series A stages.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8

Proven Ventures: Founded in 2020, a venture capital firm that invests in Nebraska-based post-revenue startups and growth-stage companies. Proven Ventures is supported by Burlington Capital.
AuditMiner 152

Skyline Point Ventures: Founded in 2021, an investment firm with a focus on private equity, commercial real estate, and venture capital.
GearLocker 80

ACCELERATORS & ESOS

1 Million Cups: A community-led nationwide networking initiative that meets every Wednesday to support entrepreneurs, creators, and business leaders over coffee.
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Vesta 142

AgLaunch: A national program designed to guide, support, and invest in AgTech startups building sustainable, future-ready farms.
Grain Weevil 172

Grow Nebraska: A nonprofit organization that provides education, marketing, and assistance to businesses, entrepreneurs, and artists in Nebraska.
Cup of Coa 76

JumpStart Challenge: A program from the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development designed to encourage innovators to co-create solutions for key industry problems and generate new businesses in Lincoln, Nebraska.
After the Exit 246

Nebraska Startup Academy: A nonprofit organization that provides mentorship, online curriculum, educational events, co-working space, and growth opportunities for early-stage entrepreneurs.
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NMotion, powered by gener8tor: A regional organization that runs comprehensive accelerator programs to bridge the gap between early-stage traction and long-term growth.
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Open Range: A backbone organization for Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem that connects founders to resources; reducing friction, closing gaps, and turning ideas into action.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8

Scale Omaha: A monthly event series that showcases local entrepreneurs and ecosystem builders who have scaled their businesses in Nebraska.
Vesta 142

Techstars: A global startup accelerator and venture capital firm that helps early-stage entrepreneurs scale their businesses.
By the Numbers: Accelerators 66
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The Combine: A statewide initiative that supports high-growth AgTech startups through co-working space, one-on-one coaching, and networking opportunities.
By the Numbers: Accelerators 66
DARO 84
Grain Weevil 172
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Nave Analytics 108

The Startup Collaborative: An accelerator and incubator-first program that offered startups a proven framework for moving from idea to funding and first customers.
AuditMiner 152
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PUBLIC PROGRAMS & GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Business Innovation Act (BIA): A statewide economic development program that provides grants and funding to local startups.
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The Infrastructure of Innovation 36

Intern Nebraska: A statewide internship program run by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development in partnership with the Aksarben Foundation that helps employers create paid internships for students and recent graduates.
Pinata 200

Nebraska Department of Economic Development: State agency responsible for supporting business growth, attracting investment, strengthening communities, and administering economic development programs and incentives across Nebraska.

↳ **Nebraska Prototype Grant:** A matching program that helps Nebraska startups obtain financial assistance to develop new products, managed by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.
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Nebraska Governor's New Venture Competition: An annual statewide competition for undergraduate and graduate students to submit startup ideas for cash prizes.
FuturHerd Solutions 68

Small Business Innovation Research/Small Business Technology Transfer (SBIR/STTR) Grant Program: A Nebraska program that helps small businesses apply for federal SBIR/STTR funding and provides matching grants to those that receive awards.
Grain Weevil 172
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UNIVERSITIES & RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Creighton University: A Jesuit, Catholic university located in Omaha.
The Flywheel Effect 208
Vesta 142

Nebraska Innovation Campus: A community and innovation hub located outside of UNL designed to collaborate between the university and businesses for research and business development.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8
Marble 130

University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL): A public university located in Lincoln, Nebraska most known for its strong athletics, agricultural and natural resources research, and Big Ten academic programs.
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Hudl 228
Mission Accomplished 58
Opendorse 224
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SheMate 32

↳ **Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program:** A program at UNL that provides students with hands-on entrepreneurship learning opportunities.
After the Exit 246

↳ **Jeffrey S. Raikes School of Computer Science and Management:** An undergraduate program through UNL that provides computer science and business management education.
Alpaca 134
Buildertrend 238
Hudl 228

↳ **Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship:** A program through UNL that provides entrepreneurship education, coaching, competitions, and events for future founders.
Hudl 228
Set Your Sites 22

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University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO): A public university located in Omaha, Nebraska known for its synergy between students and top, local employers.
Fleet Defender 98
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VisionSync 54
Workshop 216

↳ **Nebraska Business Development Center:** A statewide center hosted by UNO's College of Business Administration that provides confidential, one-on-one consulting, and business development services to entrepreneurs and business owners.
Mission Accomplished 58
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University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC): A public academic health science and research center with its primary campus located in Omaha, Nebraska.
DARO 84
VisionSync 54

UNeMed: The technology transfer and commercialization office for UNMC and UNO.
VisionSync 54

FOUNDATIONS & COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Arbor Day Foundation: A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1972 dedicated to planting trees and environmental conservation.
Landoption 102

Big Omaha: An annual week-long event focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology that ran from 2009-2018 by Jeff Slobotski and Dusty Davidson, co-founders of Silicon Prairie News.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8

Greater Omaha Chamber: A nonprofit organization that promotes local businesses, economic development, and city prosperity for the greater Omaha area.
The Infrastructure of Innovation 36
Vesta 142

Lincoln Chamber of Commerce: A business organization supporting economic growth in Lincoln through advocacy and initiatives that strengthen the city's businesses.
Betting on Nebraska 156

↳ **Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development:** A public-private group created in partnership with the City of Lincoln and the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce to drive job creation, business attraction, entrepreneurship, and talent recruitment.
Betting on Nebraska 156

Lozier Foundation: A private family foundation headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska that supports the growth and impact of local nonprofit organizations.
Alpaca 134

Millwork Commons: A collaborative commercial and residential community located in Omaha, Nebraska designed to inspire and support innovators and creators.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8
Guardify 162

Silicon Prairie News: A nonprofit media organization that covers stories related to technology, innovation, and startups primarily in Nebraska.
Creating the Silicon Prairie 8

Tech Nebraska: Nebraska's first statewide technology trade association, via the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, with a focus on public policy and advocacy for innovation.
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Credits

The People Behind Open Book

This publication would not exist without the people who reported, wrote, edited, designed, photographed, printed, and produced it. We're deeply grateful to everyone who helped turn this ambitious idea into the physical book you're holding.

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Voices in This Issue

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Kristen Bernhard, *DARO*
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Carissa Castro, *Logica*
Adriana Cisneros Basulto, *Maxwell*
Corey Collins, *Driive*
Dustin Dam, *Set Your Sites*
Stacy Dam, *Set Your Sites*
Charley Dehoney, *Upwell*
Josh DeMers, *DARO*
Tim den Hoed, *Major Talent*
Eric Dinger, *Landoption*
Teresa Friesen, *SheMate*
Aaron Holliday, *FuturHerd Solutions*
Ben Jackson, *Guardify*
Paul Jarrett, *Bulu*
Chad Johnson, *Grain Weevil*
Rick Knudtson, *Workshop*
Taylor Korensky, *VisionSync*
Jessica Korinek, *Nave Analytics*
Adi Kunalic, *Opendorse*
Emiliano Lerda, *Elevator*
Shannon Lerda, *Elevator*
Kelly Mann, *AuditMiner*
Keenan McCurdy, *GearLocker*
Jasmin McGinnis, *Cup of Coa*
Brooke Parrish, *FuturHerd Solutions*
Andrew Prystai, *Vesta*
Terry Reinert, *Fleet Defender*
Andrew Rogers, *docology*
Scott Rutz, *Travefy*
Devon Seacrest, *CodeBuddy*
Jack Sellwood, *Grapple*
Nick Small, *Driive*
Quinn Small, *Driive*
Joe Toscano, *Service Stories*
Kyle Tut, *Pinata*
Jenilee Woltman, *Mission Accomplished*
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With Gratitude

Open Book is ultimately a story about community and collaboration, so we asked each founder who they would like to thank. Their answers recognized the mentors, teammates, partners, early believers, and community members who helped make their work possible. We've also included the co-founders who helped bring these startups to life.

No singular list could recognize everyone who played a part, but these are some of the people behind the stories:

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