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Entrepreneur spurs investment in Pawnee City

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PAWNEE CITY, Neb. — There's more than one "Git-R-Done" guy from this hometown of comedian Larry the Cable Guy, who coined the catchphrase.



Steve Glenn, president of the Pawnee City Chamber of Commerce, is involved in many business and community projects, including a rent-to-own program that's placing families in five affordable homes.

Steve Glenn grew up here, too. And his track record of getting things done shows that one person can make a difference.

Glenn, 51, a former University of Nebraska football player, could be called Steve the Awning Guy because canvas awnings are a trademark on the eight buildings he's purchased and rehabilitated since moving back to Pawnee City in 1999.

"When he came to town, it was almost like the cavalry arrived," said Joe Stehlik, the city attorney for Pawnee City and a longtime civic leader. "It's been a real lift. He's always coming up with creative ideas."

Glenn attended high school with the brother of comedian Dan Whitney, aka Larry the Cable Guy. The longtime owner of Executive Travel in Lincoln, Glenn still has the build of an offensive lineman and isn't shy about tackling leadership roles or voicing an opinion.

Along with heading several organizations in Pawnee City and Lincoln, Glenn has been named Entrepreneur of the Year by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Business Owner of the Year by the Lincoln Independent Business Association.

When he and his wife, Marie, an accountant, moved back to their hometown, their plan was to kick back and retire

Soon, however, they were purchasing old buildings. The first, in 2000, was a hardware store that was about to close. They fixed up the building, beefed up inventory and expanded weekend hours. The store now draws customers from a wide area.

"We figured that if the hardware store closed, people would start going out of town for hardware and groceries and it would be the beginning of a real quick demise," Marie Glenn said.

She now operates a quilt shop in the building that formerly housed the Pawnee City church she attended as a youth.

Marie Glenn said she and her husband are "doers" rather than complainers. "If we believe in something, we put our whole heart and soul into it," she said.

In Pawnee City, projects have included renovating a dilapidated building that now houses a bank and insurance and real estate firms, turning that empty church into a quilt shop and organizing 25 community investors to finance the opening of Subway sandwich shop.

Glenn, Chamber of Commerce president for several years, got Pawnee City declared the "Redbud Capital of Nebraska" and has a goal of planting a redbud tree at every home in the community of 1,000.

Through the chamber, he started an outdoor movie series that draws 100 people on Saturday nights in June, launched a new town Web site and hopes to start a communitywide auction.

"There's 12 to 18 active projects going on all the time in the chamber," Stehlik said.

Glenn, whose first jobs out of college were running builders associations in Nebraska, Arizona and California, coordinated a rent-to-own program that's placing families in five affordable manufactured homes this spring.

He purchased a mechanic's shop that he plans to renovate and expand. He will then recruit a mechanic.

It's all about turning his passion for his hometown and its small-town lifestyle into action, he said.

"It's fulfilling to try and help the community. It's also something you can get your hands around," he said. "In a bigger town, you can do the same thing and don't feel like you can accomplish anything."

He's still active in Lincoln and sings in the choir at Indian Hills Community Church. He's a former president of the Nebraskaland Foundation, the Lincoln Rotary Club and the N-Club, the NU lettermen's group.

He was one of the first former players to criticize changes implemented by former NU football coach Bill Callahan and former athletic director Steve Pederson. Glenn, who walked on at NU before earning a scholarship, helped organize a meeting in 2004 so former players could air concerns about the end of some football traditions after Callahan's first season.

Glenn said he is passionate about the traditions of NU football, including the walk-on program. Small-town kids get a chance to play, and the towns from which they hail identify Nebraska as their team, he said.

On days he isn't working in Pawnee City, he leaves his rural home at 4:30 a.m. for the drive to Lincoln and 6 a.m. pickup basketball games. His sons, Paul and Matt, now run the travel agency and two hardware stores the Glens own in Lincoln.

Glenn acknowledges that he isn't a "committee guy. I'm a 'do the project and if you make a mistake, fix it' person.

That sometimes rubs people the wrong way, several Pawnee City residents said.

"The bottom line is, what he's accomplished here is good," said Ron Puhalla, the publisher of the Pawnee Republica and a chamber director.

Glenn said he has more ideas, including helping gain approval for a fitness center in town, establishing a theater that could double as a Larry the Cable Guy museum and helping the community buy a business to relocate to Pawnee City that could provide 25 good jobs.

"Thirty years from now, we'll be the envy of a lot of towns," he says.

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