

## **Excellence in Action Award – ISAC**

Kate Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Ringgold County Conservation Board

In 2010, the Ringgold County Conservation Board hired Kate Zimmerman as their Executive Director. This was the beginning of a whirlwind of progress, perseverance and innovation that we had long been yearning for in the Conservation Department which was formed in 1964. Kate brought with her a determination to not only provide new and improved aspects to our department for the community, but she did so in one of the smallest counties in the state.

Ringgold County is one of the smallest and poorest counties in the state of Iowa. The Ringgold County Conservation Board works on a very limited budget and even more restricted staff, employing only 1 full-time staff member, Kate. This did not deter Kate in the least, applying for grants year after year to complete each project. Some of those projects included: updating all camping sites to 50 amp units, new playground equipment, trail improvements, caboose restoration, bridge construction, 200 acre wildlife pollinator seeding, fish habitat improvements and more! While managing 9 areas, encompassing over 1,000 acres, Kate managed to also start an environmental education program providing over 200 programs and reaching over 3,500 people each year through programming alone.

In 2017, Ringgold County Conservation opened the Dragoon Trace Nature Center. This was a monumental achievement for Ringgold County, to have one of the smallest budgets in the state, the smallest staff in the state and yet, we were able to build an environmental education center funded solely on grants, donations and fundraisers. Kate led the charge, writing all the grants, organizing the fundraisers and reaching out to anyone that would listen and want to collaborate with us on the project. Due to her persistence and passion for conservation, she inspired all of us to believe that these dreams were possible even in Ringgold County. Kate established creative funding partners like the Blank Park Zoo, persuaded local contractors to join the project and who all generously gave back and convinced local organizations that they should be a part of our success story. She rallied the community behind a project they never thought possible.

And we aren't done yet! Rather than sit back and enjoy the success of our Dragoon Trace Nature Center, we are yet again, planning an impressive project for our newest area Liberty Lake. Kate attended meeting after meeting for over a year with the City of Mount Ayr to make this possible.

*“Ringgold County Conservation is excited to announce that on September 1st, 2018 they acquired a new property currently known as the “Old Lake” from the City of Mount Ayr. The multiple public hearings about the property exchange were overwhelmingly supportive. After more than a year of working together with the City Council, the Conservation Board is pleased with the results. Both entities wanted to do what was best for the communities of Ringgold County. This takes much consideration and is not an easy decision for either board. “This has been a great partnership from the start. We both wanted to do what was right for the “old lake” and for the people of Ringgold County. It takes time to contemplate all the avenues we could have taken, but ultimately this was the right fit,” said Zimmerman.”*

The Conservation Board has owned the property for less than a year and Kate has already received a Fish Habitat Grant for lake improvements, updated the shelter house, made road and habitat improvements and is currently working with a design team to construct the layout of the park to include: cabins, RV camping, shower house, event lodge and more! This project will make a huge impact on the community by bringing assets like cabins to the Mount Ayr area that currently do not have such amenities.

These large scale projects take great leadership to tackle and Kate does all this and more. Not only does Kate plan, develop and implement these larger projects, but she does so while ensuring that all other aspects of her position are accomplished. Budgeting, grant writing, environmental education programming, serving on local, district and statewide committees, website maintenance, park maintenance (mowing, tree cutting, etc.), park projects (restroom, bridge, playground construction, etc.), equipment maintenance, managing a seasonal staff, enforcing park rules and regulations, developing trail maps, camping/shelter reservations, collaborating with other entities such as: ISU Extension, Iowa DNR, SWCD, FFA, Pheasants Forever, Ringgold Outdoor Alliance and more, brochure/newsletter development and other marketing efforts for the Conservation Board, meeting with contractors for larger projects, developing educational displays for the nature center, cleaning animal enclosures at the nature center, landscaping, prescribed burning and the list goes on.

All these projects are completed with grant funding as our budget does not allow for much flexibility. Not only is Kate making Ringgold County a tourist attraction and a great place to live for the local community members, but she does so by bringing more funding from grants and donations into the community and only hiring local contractors, ensuring that the money stays in Ringgold County!

She continues to do more with less every year. Kate's efficiency, work ethic and time management are exceptional and unmatched. Her love and passion for conservation and outdoor recreation is evident in everything she does. We are truly amazed at what Kate has accomplished here in Ringgold County and we cannot wait to see what the future holds.



### **Dragoon Trace Nature Center Grand Opening**

Back Row: Board Members – Susie Catanzareti, Jim Norris, Doug Frost, Dale Walkup and Randy Bishop

Front Row: Executive Director Kate Zimmerman



Dregon Trace Nature Center



Caboose Restoration and Trail Renovation



Kokesh Recreation Area Playground



Environmental Education Programming