

## The Little Idea That Grew: Celebrating 20 Years of Educational Excellence

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Once upon a time, a young mother named Susan Seacrest learned about elevated nitrate levels in the Platte River Valley of Nebraska. Concerned, she began educating herself about the issue. After learning from University of Nebraska Medical Center epidemiologist, Dr. Dennis Weisenberger, that in his opinion no real progress could be made until citizens became educated and involved, she sprung into action. This little idea, combined with nudging from Dr. Weisenberger, was the catalyst that sparked this young mother's love of education into a national nonprofit organization that has been educating and motivating citizens to care about groundwater for more than 20 years. This was the little idea that grew and grew and grew.

Of course this was not an easy road; it was filled with many trials along the way. The first obstacle was skepticism when Susan decided to create an organization that would educate people about groundwater issues in a user-friendly, nonpolitical format. Critics commented, "There is no way you can create a water organization in this state that is not political" and "Do you really think anyone will pay any attention to education? It's going to take regulation to get people to change." Filled with determination and a true passion for groundwater, Susan recruited two others who believed in her vision and were willing to help her incorporate the idea as "The Nebraska Groundwater Foundation." The idea continued to grow directly from her kitchen table with a core group of volunteers who worked hard to develop such educational programs as the fall symposium; a quarterly newsletter, *The Aquifer*; and Groundwater Week.



During the 1988 fall symposium, traditionally an adult conference, a group of 5th grade students attended with their teacher and Foundation Board member, Marlene Rasmussen. The students' enthusiasm, involvement, and thought-provoking questions made Susan realize that it is the next generation of citizens who are the key stewards of groundwater. Inspired, Susan and the many volunteers who had worked with her in the past three years banded together to create and implement a groundwater festival for youth. This idea, too, met with its fair share of opposition. Comments such as "You will be lucky to get kids to an event on water" to "Groundwater is not a very interesting subject to teach" were meant as friendly advice. Not deterred, Susan launched the first Children's Groundwater Festival in Grand Island, Nebraska where she had anticipated about 50 children would attend. Instead, the band of volunteers was almost overwhelmed when over 1,700 students registered for the event in the first week.

Again, the little idea grew and grew. The water festival concept has since grown and been replicated in all 50 states and several countries. And students who attend water festivals do go



Students enjoy themselves at an early Children's Groundwater Festival.

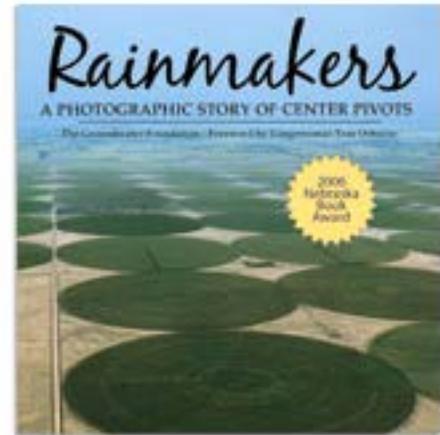
on to make a difference; in fact, the Foundation's current staff of 12 includes two water festival alums.

Making a difference – this is the goal behind the mission. By educating and motivating citizens to care for and about groundwater, the Foundation believes citizens will in turn, make a difference in their own communities by protecting the environment and the economic vitality of their communities.

Again the idea grew. It's 1994, and a new program is being developed with eight pilot communities. The program is Groundwater Guardian. Groundwater Guardian supports, recognizes, and connects communities taking proactive,

voluntary steps to protect groundwater. And again, questions emerged about the idea and the program: "What makes you think a community will take on groundwater protection efforts in exchange for recognition?" and "What can a team of local citizens really do to protect groundwater?" The Foundation met these challenges head-on. The citizens who participate in the Groundwater Guardian program have provided countless examples of on-the-ground activities that more than answered the doubters. Today, there are more than 150 communities actively protecting their groundwater through Groundwater Guardian implementing such activities as wellhead protection, water festivals, source water protection implementation, public education and outreach, household hazardous waste collection days, and proper well abandonment programs. And again, the idea grew and grew.

For example, recently, the Foundation has ventured into the realm of book publishing. Hot off the press is "Rainmakers: A Photographic Story of Center Pivots." This pictorial look at center pivot irrigation through the years and the humans who manage it is now available directly from The Groundwater Foundation, in stores such as Barnes and Noble and through the University of Nebraska Press. However, the five years it took to develop this book were not without challenge. Many thought the book would be "too controversial" or that "no one will buy a book about center pivots" or "What do you know about publishing a book?" Again, Susan Seacrest and The Groundwater Foundation staff took Susan's little idea and let it grow. Citizens from across the U.S. are buying the book and learning about a technology that utilizes groundwater to grow the world's food supply.



Over the past 20 years, the Foundation has continued to seek new ways to reach the public with the message that groundwater is an important resource – one that needs a voice, one that needs our attention, and one that is the lifeblood of our world. Susan's little idea – educate and motivate citizens to care about and for groundwater – can indeed make a difference if we just let it grow and grow and grow.