Way from New Guinea

Peace Corps volunteer; now on staff at UNK

Kaskie said.

His interest in Peace Corps led to his master's in rural development planning.

"I went to the world, but it came to me," Kaskie said.

That's when she took me to the Peace Corps experience.

She attended grad school at West Virginia University to study rural development at the Center for Rural Development, where she said the master's program there is targeted to Peace Corps volunteers.

The AmeriCorps volunteer in an economic development project in northwest Missouri finished her bachelor's in rural economic development counseling.

She worked as a rural economic development specialist in Wisconsin.

In Wisconsin, she specialized in rural economic development in the state. After three years, she decided to move to Nebraska so their children could be near grand-
A long way from New Guinea

Kaskie found his calling on a Peace Corps trip to the small island; now he’s director of rural research at UNK

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story originally ran Aug. 20-21, 2011.

By Lori Potter
Hub Staff Writer

KEARNEY — Shawn Kaskie traveled a long way from home to discover a passion for “economic gardening.”

After graduating from Papillion High School and Hastings College, Kaskie, the director of the Center for Rural Research and Development at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, convinced his wife, Jessica, that they should join the Peace Corps. They were assigned to Papua New Guinea in 1999 and 2000.

“That’s where I sort of fell in love with community development work and entrepreneurial work,” Kaskie said. His focus was helping people in six villages form volunteer committees to do needs assessments.

Two needs identified were water supply systems and K-3 schools. Jessica, a Loup City native and now a teacher and counselor at Kearney High School, brought a Hastings College teaching degree to the South Pacific island just north of Australia.

“She taught the teachers who went to the elementary schools, and together we helped train the school boards,” Kaskie said.

He attributes his interest in the Peace Corps to his mother’s family vacation planning.

“I wanted to see the world, but not as a tourist,” Kaskie said.

“I hated it when she took me to a tourist trap.”

The Peace Corps experience also defined his grad school path. He enrolled at West Illinois University to study rural economic development at the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. Kaskie said the master’s degree program there is specifically targeted to Peace Corps volunteers.

He was an AmeriCorps volunteer for an economic development district in northwest Illinois while Jessica finished her degree in school counseling.

Kaskie then worked as a University of Wisconsin Extension educator specializing in community development in Marinette County. After three years, the couple decided to move back to Nebraska so their first child could be near grandparents.

Kaskie also is the adviser for UNK’s Students in Free Enterprise group. Its main project during the 2010-2011 school year was to help adult leaders and high school students in the small northwest Nebraska town of Cody develop a business plan for a new grocery store.

They arrived just as Loup City was forming its first economic development group. Kaskie was director of the Sherman County Economic Development Board from 2007 until he became the UNK center’s director in September 2009. He describes it as “a university outreach center” that networks with other resource providers within and outside of UNK.

His focus is the primary market research needed by business owners or start-up entrepreneurs to go next door at UNK’s West Center Building to seek assistance from the Nebraska Small Business Development Center.

“Let’s make sure this idea is feasible. That’s what we focus on,” Kaskie said.

He asks questions about business resources, product designs, target customers and other factors that go into successfully expanding or starting a business.

He recommends that entrepreneurs seek help from the NSBD or Rural Enterprise Assistance Program to write a comprehensive business plan.

Kay Payne created the first version of the center at UNK in the early 1990s by specializing in community needs assessments required for Community Development Block Grant applications, Kaskie said. She also worked with nonprofits, schools and hospitals.

Kaskie still helps small towns organize small groups to define needs. Also part of the Rural Research and Development is the Milliken Market Research Center.

Kaskie said he’s been more with UNK than he needs help to take on.
Global Marketing Research Lab

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Kaskie still helps small-town entrepreneurs to define questions for needs surveys and train local volunteers to conduct them. However, the center's priority work has shifted to primary research for business entrepreneurs.

He said Payne retired in 2006, and the original center was dormant until Deborah Murray stepped in to oversee the transition in 2007. An initial business consultation is free. Kaskie identifies many rural development outreach providers available to entrepreneurs. There can be costs at the next level if focus groups are used.

Also part of the Center for Rural Research and Development is a state-of-the-art Global Market Research Lab in the West Center. It has smart-board presentation and other technologies that can be used for focus groups, phone and Internet surveys by UNK market research class students, and offers product sample testing.

Kaskie said he'd like to work more with UNK students who need help to take the first steps toward developing their own businesses. The goal is to get student or community entrepreneurs on the right track before they've invested a lot of resources, time or money, he added.

The entrepreneurship message is delivered to students through homecoming week talks by UNK alumni who own businesses and through surveys about students' business interests.

The center's student and community outreach efforts include helping sponsor the Baldwin Free Enterprise Lecture Series and, in 2010, an export conference sponsored by 3rd District Rep. Adrian Smith. Kaskie said rural Nebraska entrepreneurs are the key audience for all Center for Rural Research and Development's services. The most promising economic development strategy is "to grow our own," he said, which is the economic gardening philosophy.

Business success depends on owners having the necessary skills, knowing their customers and how to produce their products, and understanding costs and prices.

Kaskie helped 26 small-town grocery store owners by using focus groups to define Extension's business practices to help them stay profitable in a tough market. He said much of what was learned can apply to all small-town retail businesses.

The NBDC used a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to contract with the center for that survey.

Kaskie also is the adviser for UNK's Students in Free Enterprise group. Its main project during the 2010-2011 school year was to help adults and high school students in the state of New Hampshire town of Cody develop a business plan for a new grocery store.

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