

# The Bluestem Post



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PROFESSIONAL  
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*On the cover:  
The Villa Partners present a check to Schowalter Villa for funds raised for special resident and staff projects in 2025. Photo by Tyler Stutzman.*

## LIVE WELL WITH BLUESTEM COMMUNITIES

Bluestem Communities is a nonprofit organization in south central Kansas that serves seniors through various living options, care settings and care-centered services. Bluestem Communities locations include The Cedars in McPherson, Kidron Bethel Village in North Newton, Schowalter Villa in Hesston and Bluestem PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly) in McPherson and Hutchinson.

### MISSION STATEMENT

*Bluestem Communities' mission is to have a positive impact on quality of life by promoting lifelong wellness, purpose, choice, genuine connection and personalized care with Christian compassion.*



*To learn more about Bluestem Communities' services and locations visit [bluestem.org](https://www.bluestem.org)*

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Members of the Villa Partners staff a bake sale at a community farmer's market. The Villa Partners are an auxiliary volunteer organization that raise funds for resident and staff-centered projects at Schowalter Villa. All photos by Sheri Esau.

## It takes a village

In Hesston – and really throughout the surrounding communities – some truths are simply understood. One is that a Villa Partners' bake sale means you're about to encounter the kind of homemade treats people still talk about weeks later. Another is that the regular garage sales have earned a reputation as a must-visit treasure hunt, drawing loyal crowds time after time.

What may be a little less obvious, is just what exactly the group is doing when they are out serving and fundraising in the community.

As a non-profit senior care community, Schowalter Villa recognized from its earliest days that providing residents with exceptional care and experiences would truly take a community.

The Villa Partners are a committed group of volunteers focused on raising funds for special projects that enhance daily life for residents at Schowalter Villa. Formed in 1963, just a couple of years after Schowalter Villa opened its doors, the Villa Partners have long been a force for resident

well-being. Their decades of service reflect a shared belief that every resident deserves meaningful experiences, comfort and connection.

"We have such wonderful, creative, hard-working and caring people as part of the Villa Partners group," said Phyllis Weaver, who has served as chair of the Villa Partners council for about a year and a half. "The mission of the group is to give service, financial support and assistance as needs and opportunities arise, and to maintain contact and communication between the Schowalter Villa resident community and the greater Hesston community."

Initially organized as a women's auxiliary group, the organization was first called the Schowalter Villa Auxiliary, and they committed to hosting two resident parties each year. They soon incorporated fundraising socials for special projects, the first of which were a coffee maker, hair washing and drying equipment and a piano.

Over the years, membership has grown to include both women and men from the Hesston community, along

*Continued on next page*

*It takes a village cont.*

with residents of Schowalter Villa's independent living neighborhoods. While the group has expanded and evolved, its commitment to serving Villa residents has remained steadfast throughout more than 60 years of dedicated work.

In 2025, the Villa Partners raised \$35,000 for special projects at Schowalter Villa, which included the Good Samaritan Caring Fund, nursing scholarships for staff pursuing advanced nursing degrees, maintenance of the bird aviaries in health care and assisted living, new plates for health care dining rooms, new light-weight tables in the chapel, a bladder scanner in health care and new seating and side tables along Lake Vista.

"Half of the money raised each year is earmarked for the Good Samaritan Caring Fund," explained Weaver. "That ministry of Schowalter Villa is so important in ensuring health care residents who face unexpected financial hardships won't have to forfeit their home or care."

A full slate of community supported fundraising events fuels the Villa Partners' impact and has long made the group an invaluable auxiliary to Schowalter Villa. Volunteers can regularly be found hosting bake sales at local farmers markets, raffling gift baskets filled with goods and services from area businesses during the town's annual homecoming celebration, and coordinating nearly monthly garage sales. These garage sales, the organization's most successful endeavor, draw eager crowds from miles around, many of whom line up well before opening in hopes of being the first through the door.

"The garage sales have really established a reputation for selling good stuff at a reasonable price," said Abe Schmidt, who along with his wife, Judy, have been volunteering with the garage sales for six years, and chair of the committee

for five years.

Garage sale items, ranging from big-ticket pieces like furniture to everyday household goods, come from several generous sources. Many are donated by residents as they downsize in a transition to another level of care, as well as resident families sorting through belongings after their loved one's passing. On occasion, the Schowalter Villa Maintenance department contributes appliances that have been upgraded from resident homes.

"We're really glad to be able to contribute to the Villa in this way," said the Schmidts. "When a resident moves or passes away, they or their families can leave behind the things they don't want. The garage sale team then goes into the home to sort and pack up the items, and then works with Maintenance to get the items to the garage sale building or to storage until there is room on the sales for them. It's doing work for a good cause."

For all the bustle of bake sales, raffles and garage sale treasure hunts, the heart of the Villa Partners' work has always been simple: neighbors caring for neighbors. Their efforts – quiet, steady and deeply rooted in service – continue to shape daily life at Schowalter Villa in ways that cannot be measured only in dollars raised or items sold. Every treat baked, every item sold, every donation collected represents a community choosing to show up for its seniors with generosity and love.

*Editor's note: Villa Partners' garage sales are held nearly monthly, usually on the second Saturday of the month. Follow Bluestem Communities on Facebook to see information and specific dates for upcoming garage sales.*

*To be added to the garage sale email list for future sales, contact SheriE@bluestem.org.*



*Villa Partners garage sale volunteers work regularly to sort and price items and host garage sales.*



*Main Street Gifts at Schowalter Villa's Mullet Place is staffed by Villa Partners volunteers for residents, families and the community.*



## Why water?

*by Holly Hajjaj, Director of Bluestem Wellness Center – Hesston & Bluestem Employee Wellness*

We all know that staying active is one of the most important things we can do to support our health, independence and quality of life. The question for many of us though is how best? What kind of exercise can one do that is not only motivating and enjoyable but also infinitely do-able on a regular basis?

While traditional land-based, weight-bearing exercise has clear benefits and should always be part of everyone's daily activity, water-based exercise offers a wide range of unique advantages that make it especially well-suited for improving anyone's health and fitness at any level of ability.

Both those struggling with physical issues like mobility, balance and chronic pain, as well as those simply desiring to increase their fitness level through whole body-based movement, can find alternative and additional solutions in the water. You'll move, stretch and strengthen muscles you never knew you had, simply because of the resistance provided in every direction, combined with an increased range of mobility. All of this with a little extra buoyancy to boot!

Bluestem Wellness Centers in Hesston and North Newton offer a variety of organized water activities. There are also

open swimming times available for those who'd prefer to use the pool solo, and a hot tub for increased soothing and relaxation. Whether it's water walking/jogging, an aqua-aerobics class, playing water volleyball, going lap swimming, or taking a relaxing dip, simply allowing your body to move in water can be a powerfully effective tool for recovery, strength and endurance.

There's something universal and timeless about our connection to the water. From the first joyful splash of childhood to the gentle rhythm of a swim in our later years, the water has a way of welcoming us back - refreshing the body and calming the mind. It's a space where age melts away and vitality flows more freely.

In a senior living community, a pool is more than just a recreational amenity—it's a powerful wellness resource, empowering residents to stay active, confident and engaged, while supporting lifelong health in a safe, and enjoyable way.

See the water-based exercise classes Bluestem Wellness Centers offers at both the Hesston and North Newton locations, as well as the open-swim schedules at [bluestemwellness.com](http://bluestemwellness.com).

# Oh, to belong!

by Marla Schmidt, Bluestem PACE Director of Social Work

Anyone who has studied psychology can probably recite Abraham Maslow's famously theorized five categories of basic needs that motivate human behavior. This pyramid theory states that after the needs of survival, safety and security are met, the very next layer of human need is to belong, including seeking connection, acceptance and love. Maslow theorized that these basic needs, once met, provide the basis for individuals to lean into a greater development of self-esteem and self-respect and can pave the way to self-actualization.

Over more than 25 years of working in the field of social work, I have witnessed, in real and tangible ways, the universal human quest to belong. I have had the privilege of working with youth struggling with mental health issues, newly resettled refugees from around the world, elementary-age children and their families, and, now, adults age 55 and better through my work at Bluestem PACE. While the avenues to obtain belonging and acceptance vary from one person to the next, the basic need to belong is universal.

I have no doubt that you have experienced this need yourself. Maybe you were a child who hoped to not be chosen last for the kickball team or had wondered if you'd receive a party invitation. As an adult I have moved to new communities and wondered, "Who will be my friend?" As a parent I have wondered, "Will my children be accepted for who they are?" At PACE I hear 80-year-olds wonder whether they will make friends when they join the program. The desire to belong and the fear of not belonging is not confined to any one age group or demographic.

These fears about not belonging are real. Do you ever avoid social settings, like I sometimes do, to avoid the fears of sitting alone? Some individuals who again and again experience a sense of disconnect and routinely lack a sense of belonging find it easier to withdraw from the world. It may be easier to do that than feel the pain of being left out or the loneliness of standing near the punch bowl and having no one talk to you for the evening.

But there is a remedy to this sense of feeling left out. That remedy is someone reaching across the divide, extending welcome and acceptance. I have found acceptance in simple gestures like: a note from a coworker thanking me



for providing a listening ear; a hug from a family member; a text from a friend saying she was sending me warm thoughts and prayers; a note from a supervisor saying "I am grateful you are on our team"; an invite to dinner; someone actively seeking to understand my thoughts on a topic; seeing a sign in the airport saying "welcome" in 15 different languages; and a neighbor bringing me a plate of cookies to welcome me to the neighborhood. My hope and prayer for you is that you have individuals in your circle of connection who help you experience belonging.

May we each also find ways to help others experience connection. Even small acts of kindness can have a profound impact on someone's sense of belonging. May we each see those individuals around us who are in the margins longing to belong. May our hearts notice those in our midst seeking connection. And may our hands and feet carry out loving actions so those around us know that they truly are accepted, welcomed and loved.

Oh, to belong...let us make that a reality for each person we meet!



# Tending the heart: The inner work of aging

*Living and Aging Well is a Bluestem Communities series intended to offer resources and information for residents and families navigating opportunities and the progression of care at Bluestem. The following information was taken from a November 2025 event prepared and presented by Jill Schmidt Weaver, Chaplain for Independent Living at Schowalter Villa, and Dawn Yoder Harms, Chaplain at Kidron Bethel Village.*

Growing older means tending to a checklist of practical details, from downsizing a home to getting finances and legal matters in order. But beyond the paperwork and plans lies quieter, equally important work: how are we doing emotionally or spiritually, and how do we meet this season of life with openness rather than fear?

It's not a secret that aging brings with it profound change. Some of it makes us laugh. Some of it brings tears. There are changes we have chosen, such as retirement or relocation, and others that arrive without invitation.

Change can be disorienting, and even the welcome changes can leave us feeling unsettled. We may feel uncertain or afraid about where we are, where we are headed or how we'll find our way forward. It is important to name this experience and to know that it is not unique to later life. Feeling lost in times of transition is part of being human and probably something most of us have encountered and navigated during other times in life.

In this space, there are navigational tools that can help us find our way.

1. **Honesty about what life is.** Life is different now. Maybe only slightly or maybe drastically, but it is different and it can be helpful to name losses you've experienced in the midst of change.
2. **Compassion for one's self.** It's okay to admit that loss is painful and change can be difficult. Feeling sad or anxious isn't bad, even when you may not understand the reasons behind the feelings. Give yourself permission and space to experience whatever feelings come.
3. **Curiosity and willingness to listen deep within one's**

**self.** With each change or feeling, consider what it is you might be invited to release. What remains steady within you even when everything around you seems to be changing? How are you being invited to grow during times of unknowing?

4. **Connect with others who have passed this way before or who are on the same path right now.** Human connection and sharing of experiences can be helpful in finding your way.
5. **Trust yourself.** Believe that you will make it through whatever is before you. You've successfully navigated difficult moments before, and you can do it again. Recall the things that were helpful to you in the past – spiritual practices, mindfulness or physical movement – and lean on those things again.

Aging invites us into both visible and invisible work. While we tend to the practical tasks that demand our attention, we are also called to care for our inner lives. This work does not ask us to have everything figured out, only to stay present to where we are and open to what is unfolding.

*Bluestem Communities offers a variety of resources and opportunities to connect with and support one another during this season of life.*

*If you are a resident or participant, for specific resources on your campus, reach out to the following contacts:*

**BLUESTEM PACE MCPHERSON AND HUTCHINSON**  
Social workers, Marla Schmidt and Jason Herndon

**THE CEDARS**  
Chaplain Chris Whitacre

**KIDRON BETHEL VILLAGE**  
Chaplain Dawn Yoder Harms, Chaplain Karen Andres

**SCHOWALTER VILLA**  
Chaplain Anita Kehr, Chaplain Jill Schmidt Weaver

# Kidron Bethel Village set to mark 100 years

This May, Kidron Bethel Village will observe a century of connection, care and continuity in the senior care and living industry, marking a milestone that honors its rich heritage while looking toward a vibrant future for generations of residents and staff to come.

What is known today as Kidron Bethel Village began in 1926 as the Bethel Home for the Aged, an auxiliary ministry of the Bethel Deaconess Hospital. The need for such a community had been evident for nearly two decades. Since the hospital's opening, requests had steadily grown for both temporary and long-term care for older adults, prompting the creation of a dedicated home to meet this

emerging need.

By the early 1950's, state regulations for nursing homes became more stringent. Bethel Home for the Aged worked continuously to remain in compliance with evolving standards and licensure requirements, adapting its facilities and practices to ensure resident safety and well-being.

As the senior care landscape continued to evolve, a new era of vision took shape in 1977. That year, a group of innovative leaders and committed collaborators led by John Esau, who today is an independent living resident at Kidron Bethel Village, proposed exploring "a new type of retirement community". Their work led to pursuing a loan from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to develop low-income rental housing in North Newton. The name Kidron, Inc., was chosen for the initiative, and marked a significant shift toward a more comprehensive continuum of care.

The subsidized housing apartments of Kidron, Inc., consisting of six four-plexes and 55 apartments in a central building, were completed in 1982, by which time the Board of Directors of Kidron, Inc., and the administration of Bethel Home for the Aged were having discussions regarding bringing the operations of both missions under the same organization. Kidron Bethel Retirement Services became active to plan for further levels of retirement care on January 1, 1984, and at the same time, Bethel Home for the Aged officially separated from Bethel Deaconess Hospital to come under the new organization of senior care in the area.

"It was exciting and a privilege to be involved with Bethel Home for the Aged and the establishment of the new organizations, Kidron, Inc., and Kidron Bethel Retirement



1926

Bethel Home for the Aged opens.

1985

First independent living homes constructed.

1996

400 Building ground-floor apartments constructed.

2000

Construction of the Maintenance Building.

1982

Kidron Inc. subsidized housing apartments completed construction.

1991

Bethel Health Care Center opens and Bethel Home of the Aged residents move in.

1999

12 townhome duplexes added.

2004

Suderman Assisted Living Center completed.

Services,” said Marvin Ewert at the time. Ewert served as President of Bethel Home for the Aged beginning in 1957, then transferred to President of Kidron, Inc., and Kidron Bethel Retirement Services until 1987. “The development of Kidron Bethel Village is the fulfillment of a vision for creative and meaningful retirement living, providing security, services and life-enriching social and recreational activities.”

The first two independent living duplex units were constructed in 1985. By 1989, plans were in place for more homes, including eight duplex townhomes and the 36-unit apartment building of Village Heights, and a long-term care unit. Bethel Health Care Center opened September 12, 1991, and 59 residents from Bethel Home for the Aged moved in a single day to the new community, ending the 65-year chapter at the original location and beginning a new one at Kidron Bethel Village.

Further highlights of Kidron Bethel Village history:

For more than six months, independent living residents Linda Koppes and Vern Bowers have been researching and compiling the 100-year history of Kidron Bethel Village.

“I was interested in when things were built and how it happened,” said Bowers. “I encouraged a couple of people to put together a presentation for Town Hall meetings and they weren’t interested in doing that, so I did! I knew Linda was a person who knows how to get things and find things, so really, she’s done all of the work.”

Koppes, who worked for 10 years at the Harvey County Historical Society, is interested in recording and preserving history and jumped into the project whole heartedly.

“There were a lot of interesting events, probably tense

discussions and forward-thinking ideas that are part of the history of Kidron Bethel Village and I think that is worth recording and sharing,” said Koppes. “It’s important to remember where we came from.”

*Editor’s note: Bowers presented the first 60 years of Bethel Home for the Aged/Kidron Bethel Village in November 2025. The last 40 years will be presented at Town Hall on Tuesday, April 14, at 3 p.m., in Kidron Hall. A come-and-go celebration and display of the 100-year history is being planned for summer 2026. Further information will be communicated as it becomes available.*



**2006**  
.....  
First independent living homes in the Campus Woods Estate neighborhood are constructed.

**2012**  
.....  
Schowalter Villa and Kidron Bethel Village affiliate to create Bluestem Communities.

**2013**  
.....  
18 acres purchased for the Campus Woods neighborhood.

**2015**  
.....  
Peace Garden is constructed and dedicated.

**2021**  
.....  
Groundbreaking for the Live Forward capital project.

**2023**  
.....  
Dedication of the Live Forward capital project.

**2023**  
.....  
The Local Table restaurant opens.

# Rothrock concludes service to Bluestem Communities and The Cedars

LaMonte Rothrock, who most recently served Bluestem Communities as Director of Transitions and Stakeholder Relations through the affiliation with The Cedars life plan campus, announced his retirement in February.

Rothrock served The Cedars campus for nine years in an array of roles, most recently as CEO prior to becoming part of Bluestem Communities. He planned to retire at the time of the affiliation in July 2025 before agreeing to remain with the organization to help guide The Cedars, its residents, families and constituents through the earliest parts of the affiliation process.

“Several years ago, I made a promise

to The Cedars’ board that we would turn this community into a stable, future-oriented organization,” said Rothrock. “At the time, I didn’t know what that would look like, but it was clear that to make progress and secure the future of the longest continuous retirement community, we were going to have to change not what we do, but how we do it. Working toward a successful affiliation with Bluestem Communities set us on the path to accomplish much of what we wanted to. I feel confident stepping away knowing that residents, families, staff and The Cedars in general are in a great place to move forward.”

Rothrock’s contributions to The Cedars are immeasurable and deeply appreciated. He and his outstanding

leadership have left an impact on that community, and, thereby, on the wider Bluestem Communities organization.



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# UPCOMING EVENTS

## PACE RACE

Saturday, April 4  
McPherson, Kansas

## SENIOR OLYMPICS

Friday, April 17  
Kidron Bethel Village

## SCHOWALTER VILLA CAR SHOW

Friday, May 15  
Schowalter Villa

## KIDRON BETHEL CAR SHOW

Friday, June 5  
Kidron Bethel Village



## A full-circle journey

Some of Marleigh Schmidt's childhood memories are the days and hours she spent with the grandmas and grandpas, as the children endearingly referred to them then, at the Hesston Intergenerational Child Care Center on the Schowalter Villa campus, where she attended preschool and pre-K.

"I remember every day after school going home and telling my grandma about the things I did that day with the grandmas and grandpas," said Schmidt. "We would do arts and crafts, play together or eat ice cream. Those are good memories."

The unique feature of a child care center on a life plan community campus has given 20 years of children special and memorable experiences with intergenerational relationships, and may be the spark that launched Schmidt's full-circle story with Bluestem Communities.

Fast forward from the days of childhood, Schmidt, now a student at Newton High School, found herself back at Bluestem Communities, this time as a Life Enrichment volunteer, and still finding the same delight she gained from interacting with residents more than a decade earlier.

Schmidt's return to Bluestem Communities was through her grandma, Lisa Rowley, who began working part-time in Kidron Bethel Village's Life Enrichment department in fall of 2024. Rowley saw other young people working with residents and thought it might be an opportunity for Schmidt as well. Before long, Schmidt was again doing arts and crafts, playing games and eating ice cream with residents.



*Marleigh Schmidt works in Life Enrichment and Dining Services at Kidron Bethel Village, but her journey with Bluestem Communities began as a preschooler on the Schowalter Villa campus. Provided photo.*



*Marleigh Schmidt as a preschooler at Hesston Intergenerational Child Care Center. Photo by Bluestem Communities.*

After a few months of working in Life Enrichment, an open position in Dining Services caught Schmidt's eye, and in May 2025 she began working as a server in addition to her Life Enrichment position.

"I love it here," said Schmidt. "I'm a people person – I love talking to them and hearing their stories. I also love the atmosphere of Bluestem Communities and the expectation of treating each person with respect."

As if roles in two departments weren't enough to keep a high school student busy, Schmidt soon noticed classmates from school working as CNAs at Kidron Bethel, which gave her new ideas and aspirations. She enrolled in CNA classes offered jointly between Newton High School and Hutchinson Community College. In late December 2025, she passed her state certification exam, and plans to eventually pursue a CNA role at Kidron Bethel Village as well.

Schmidt will graduate from high school in May, then plans to enroll in the two-year physical therapy program through Hutchinson Community College while also continuing to work at Kidron Bethel Village.

"It's been so amazing to see Marleigh's journey unfold over the last year at Kidron Bethel Village," said Rowley. "I don't think CNA was on her road map before working here, but being here has revealed to her so many career options and opportunities. Now she is able to come to work and directly apply the things she's learning in her classes at school. It's really helped her begin to plan a future and gain practical experience."



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The Bluestem Post is published to share information, fellowship and fun with participants, residents, staff and friends of Bluestem Communities.

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