



HOLDREGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUNDATION

Giving Back to Education

HHS Alumni Recognition Feature!

Dear HHS Alumni and HPS Foundation Supporters,

Holdrege High School is fortunate to have many very successful graduates. We are excited to continue sharing the stories of some of those HHS Alums thanks to the journalistic talents of Kristine (Long) Jacobson, Class of 1990.

Several classes will be having reunions during Swedish Days. We hope that you will be able to join us at the HPS Foundation 6th Annual Golf Tournament on Saturday, June 20th. Pre-registration is required. The entry brochure is accessible at holdregedusters.org.

We also welcome your suggestions and comments and encourage you to join the Duster Alumni Association (*see form below*).

Sincerely,
*Teresa Kroll, Chairman
 HPS Foundation Committee*



Todd Nelson - Class of 1980

Support of family and community helps 1980 Grad succeed in the film industry.

By Kristine Jacobson

"You can take the guy out of Nebraska, but can't take the Nebraska out of the guy." Those are the words of 1980 Holdrege graduate Todd Nelson who moved to the west coast after graduating from college to pursue a career in the film industry.

Nelson has appeared in a movie, worked behind the scenes on famous shows like "Golden Girls," produced award-winning documentaries, started his own film production company and worked as a special projects executive for Disney. He is well-known for starting The Nebraska Coast Connection, which is



Todd Nelson

a social and networking group of Nebraska natives in the entertainment industry in California.

"Funny that I came all the way out here to the coast and still had to bring some hometown Nebraska with me," Nelson said. He started the group 23 years ago and is proud that it "continues to give back to people starting out in the entertainment business and provides us all out here a regular dose of fellow Nebraskans." They call it their "Home Sweet Home in Hollywood."

Early Years

Nelson's Hollywood career started with a supporting cast of family and friends in Holdrege. "Everyone in my family was completely supportive of this kid who always wanted to 'put on a show,' and no way would I be doing

what I do today without their constant encouragement," Nelson said.

His parents, Bill and Patty Nelson, owned Patty's Hallmark in downtown Holdrege. Prior to that, his father was vice president at First Security Bank, and his mother was a surgical nurse.

Nelson recalls his father helping him make a short animated film with army men and a toy fire truck when he was only 3 or 4 years old. "I was hooked and often made movies with his 8mm film camera, or put on backyard carnivals or puppet shows," Nelson said. "My family got used to me charging admission for shows in the basement at every opportunity."

When Nelson was 12, he cast his entire extended family in his version of "Superman." His dad played the leading actor, and his mom helped with costume design, including sewing blue tights and a cape with a big 'S' emblem. "My dad was a great sport to do this, but we had to shoot his scenes coming out of the phone booth early in the morning so no one would see him in such a get-up," Nelson recalled.

In addition to his family, Nelson said his small-town upbringing and community support helped him succeed. "Growing up in a small town gave me a sense that I could handle anything," he said. "In those days, us kids just rode our bikes all over town, played (or in my case, put on plays), showed up for dinner when it got dark, and our parents trusted us to make good decisions and to look after each other. Starting life that way is very freeing and builds both confidence and character.

"I'm very grateful that I can find a way to make a good living doing basically what I discovered I love to do most - make-believe -- as a kid in Holdrege."

High School Years

In high school, Nelson continued to refine his passion and enjoyed being drum major of the band (which won a gold medal in an international competition in

Hawaii), editor of the yearbook and school newspaper, president of the Thespians theater club, acting in the fall play, and participating in district and state speech and drama competitions and other local plays.

For two summers in high school, he and fellow Thespians created a traveling lunch theater for elementary school kids called The Peanut Butter Theater. "We produced the shows, built the sets and costumes, did our own advertising, even made sack lunches for the children," Nelson said. "There's nothing like the mesmerizing attention of kids experiencing the magic of live theatre for the first time."

Then, he and his cousin, Craig Halvorson, performed in magic shows around the Midwest with their act called, The Magiceeters. The show earned a spot on NTV for a few years. "We had live doves, elaborate illusions that we built ourselves (Sawing-in Half, Metamorphosis), and white disco suits like from Saturday Night Fever," Nelson said. "I definitely honed my skills in producing and directing and performing in those hundreds of live performances and dozens of TV shows, and that gave me a huge head start at UNL and later in Hollywood."

Role Models

Nelson said HHS journalism teacher Shirley Sandfort and band teacher Randy Nelson inspired him during his high school days, and he is grateful to community member Ellen Misko for her encouragement in his film career. "She was one of the leading reasons Holdrege had first class entertainment like the Community Concerts, theatre, and arts events," he said.

He often visited her house down the street after school for lessons on poetry, drama, writing, and a "view of the wider world." "She cast me in my first play when I was five, and we often performed together in Prairie Players productions, even after I moved away," Nelson said. "She was a class act, and a great support to a kid with bigger aspirations than a small town offered."

College Years

Nelson attended college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, majoring in theatre and broadcast journalism. While at UNL, he performed in stage productions and began producing shows for NETV. He earned money to pay for college with a job as a TV news reporter for KETV's Lincoln bureau.

During his junior year in college, Nelson earned a spot in the movie "Terms of Endearment," which was being filmed in Lincoln at the time.

"I heard Director James Brooks was looking for 'Norman Rockwell' types, so I had a friend take some photos of me that matched a Rockwell painting exactly," Nelson said. "I got the part!" Although his lines didn't make it into the final movie, he can be seen eating behind John Lithgow and Debra Winger during a scene filmed at Kay's Restaurant in Lincoln.

Hollywood

Nelson graduated from UNL in 1984 and drove to Hollywood the day after his final exam to start an Academy of Television Arts & Sciences internship with the soap opera "Days of Our Lives."

"That gave me a great foot-in-the door that led to my next several jobs in TV and film at all the networks and most of the big studios," he said. He worked as an assistant on "The Golden Girls" in its first season, and then worked for the show's

director Paul Bogart for several more years. He enjoyed working with one of the show's stars, Betty White.

Todd's other work includes five years as a special projects executive at Disney, producer of promos for Fox Television and producer at CBS television.

A documentary he created in 2000, "Surviving Friendly Fire: The Making of a Street Kids Theater Project," has been honored in more than 50 festivals around the world.

He also created a documentary in the mid-1980s called "Haiti's Helping Hands," about a Holdrege medical missionary team. His mother served on the Haitian medical missions with Dr. Stuart Embury for about 15 years. Nelson traveled with the group one summer to make the film, which helped raise money for further missions and to fund a school and a wing to the hospital in Haiti. Nelson founded the Nebraska Coast Connection in 1992. The group meets monthly for Hollywood Salons, which are gatherings that often feature guest speakers or educational topics.

Nelson said it was difficult to move to the coast and not know anyone. "I just decided that was not going to happen to anyone else," he said. "I wanted to give them friends they can count on to give them real advice." Several Holdrege natives participate in the group, including 1991 graduate Ryan Quincy, who grew up in the same house that Nelson did on Hancock Street in Holdrege.

"It's really kind of remarkable that a small town like Holdrege has so many successes in the entertainment industry," he said. At one time there were six or more Holdrege natives in the NCC. According to the group's website, the Nebraska Coast Connection is "people connecting and working and dreaming together. Pioneering a new way—a Nebraska style—of making Hollywood a little more neighborly. A little more kind. A little more like home."

Recent famous members include "Nebraska" director Alexander Payne and Kearney native Jon Bokenkamp, a writer-producer-director for the new NBC series, "The Blacklist."

In a January 2014 issue of "The Reader," Bokenkamp said Nelson's "love for Nebraska runs deep, and he's found a way to channel that love into a really positive networking group with the Nebraska Coast Connection. NCC is a warm, energetic, and creative environment. Todd just wants to see people succeed."

Payne said in the same article, "I enjoy the group.

We have a shared sensibility, a shared sense of humor, shared childhood references. And Todd is a forceful personality. He's the most benevolent, charismatic cult leader one could imagine."



Alexander Payne & Todd Nelson at Nebraska Screening Paramount

In 1998, Nelson began working for CBS Television, a job he still holds today. Later, he started his own company, Braska Films, which produces promos for CBS Studios International. Braska Films employs two full-time employees besides Nelson and hires more employees seasonally, usually from Nebraska. "Why would I ever need to look outside that group (the Nebraska Coast Connection)," Nelson said. "I know how hard-working and reliable Nebraskans are."

Over the years, Nelson has brought in 10 Nebraskans to either work for Braska Films or CBS, including Kearney's Bokencamp.

Nelson married yoga/meditation instructor Marion Tango in 2005, and their son, Jack, was born in 2006. They now live in Pasadena. His future plans include hopefully directing and producing two feature films, which are both in the script-writing stage. He is working with Alexander Payne on one of the movies.



Nelson said the support of family and community has helped him succeed in the film industry. "You know everyone in a small town, and everyone knows you," Nelson said. "I always felt supported in exploring, being curious, and following my dreams that I attribute to the adventurous pioneering people who were our ancestors - coming from far-off lands to begin again. And, to create a better world than the one left behind.

"I had to leave to do what I do now in Hollywood, but there's nothing like a small-town childhood," Nelson said. "Holdrege is a great place to be from."

To read more about the NCC, visit the web site at nebraskacoast.com.

About Us

The mission of the HPS Foundation is to support and enhance the educational efforts of students and teachers of Holdrege Public Schools by providing funding for innovative and challenging programs, learning experiences, and activities.

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