



ANDREA MYERS PHOTOS, FOR THE STAR-HERALD

A crane mural underneath the Oshkosh water tower is sure to be a popular spot for tourists.

Creating a COLORFUL community

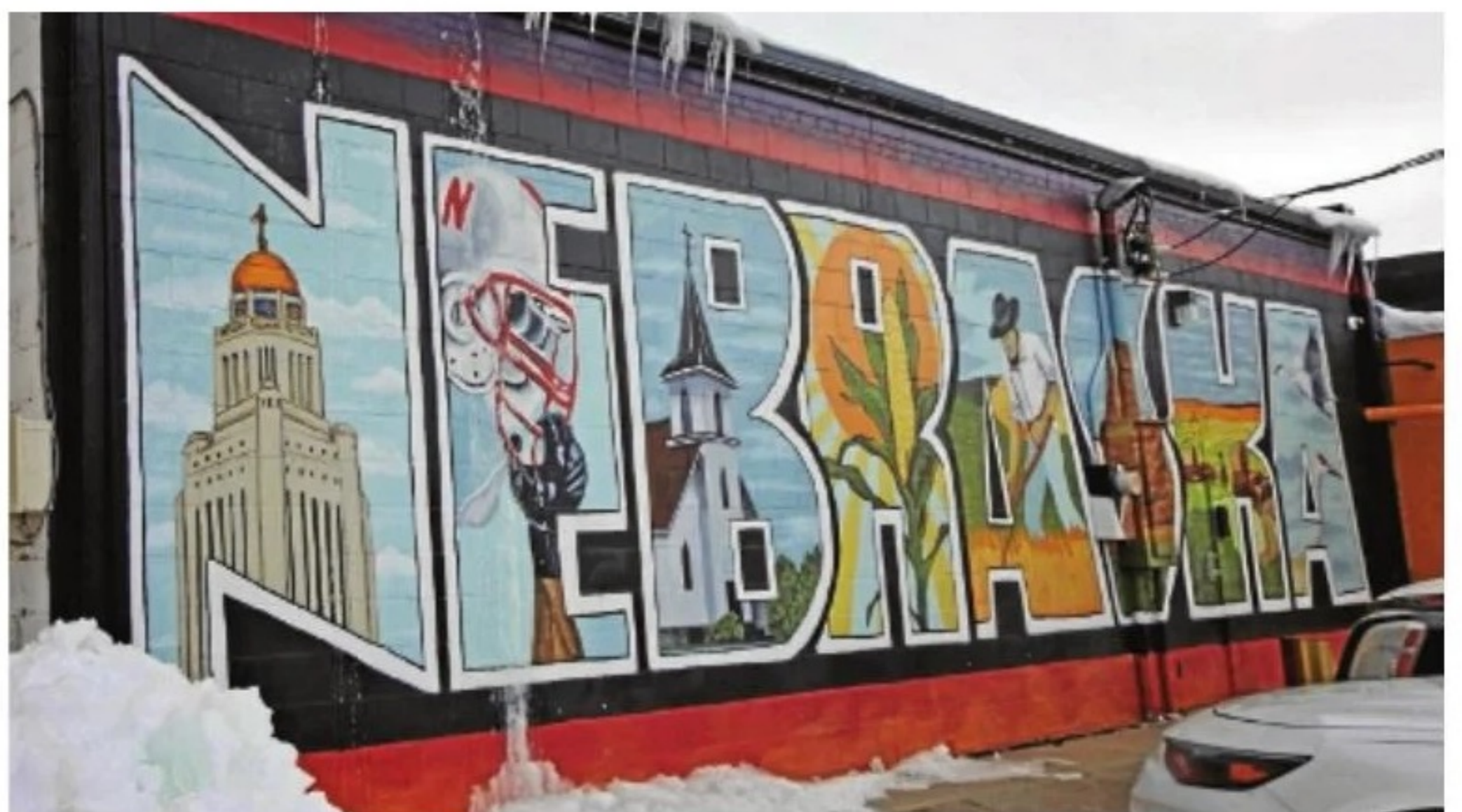
Muralist changes the look of an entire town

ANDREA MYERS
For the Star-Herald

As you drive through the small “blink and you’ll miss it” town of Oshkosh, you’ll notice that the world looks more vibrant, the streets more inviting, almost as if you’re on the movie set of a small town.

A painting that looks like an old-school postcard with the word “Nebraska” in bold letters, painted with small details of Nebraska history covers the entire back of the bank. A 12-foot sand-hill crane rests underneath the water tower. The park overlooks a bold painting of a windmill overlooking a map of the town. The newspaper building is covered in black and white newsprint. The logos on restaurants and businesses look like they are new, yet somehow have been there forever.

Credited with this colorful transformation is Lauren Olson. Olson, who was raised in Oshkosh and has lived in the community for most of her life, is an artist, a



A Nebraska mural painted by Lauren Olson and her students on the back of Nebraska State Bank highlights familiar scenes for the state’s residents.

teacher, a former Herbie Husker mascot, and has made an indelible mark throughout this small western Nebraska town with her murals.

“I painted my first mural in the gym when I was a junior,” she said.

After graduating in 1995, she left for UNL to pursue a degree in architecture and pivoted to graduate with a degree in art education. She developed a passion for public art because of an Art in Community class. She completed her student teaching in Oshkosh.

After months of trying to get a job in Colorado, she started substituting as a classroom teacher. The administration was impressed and hired her as a full-time K-12 art teacher in 2013.

“I have some awesome kids. It’s crazy that my first year kindergartners are now sophomores,” she said.

You can tell Olson is a passionate teacher based on the art supplies and finished projects



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A mural in Oshkosh was commissioned and painted by Lauren Olsen and a local Girl Scout troop.

Murals

From H1

behind her during a Zoom interview. Her schedule is packed with classes of every age and she has to develop lesson plans that engage not only students taking elective art in high school to art lessons appropriate for

5-year-old kindergartners.

"I'll focus on the practical parts of art as well," she said. "Woodwork and leatherwork are things a lot of kids in this community will do throughout their lives. Taping designs will come in handy because every one of them will paint a wall someday and need that skill."

Olson is not confined to

one medium. Her students learn every art discipline. They recently started working with clay which "the little ones really love." The photos of her work on her website, www.laurenolson-art.com, show her talent in sculpture.

In 2013, she was asked if she'd help the local Girl Scouts get their painting

badges. Instead of a simple day of painting their own pictures, she helped them create a community art project on the west edge of the park. Ten years later, it's still a vibrant piece.

She and her students have spread their talents on the walls of the school and throughout the community. The newest Oshkosh mural

sits directly under the water tower and features a sandhill crane painted by Olson and one of her gifted elementary school students. As tourists come through town during the annual crane migration, it's sure to be a well photographed spot.

Oshkosh isn't the only community that benefits from Olson's talents. Most of her commissions are funded by grants initiated by businesses, tourism offices or nonprofits that want to feature her artwork. Chappell, Lisco and Big Springs are all towns that have benefited from her talents. She loves spending her summers painting various commissions and hopes to spend this summer out in eastern Nebraska. Her dream is to go to small towns along the Lincoln Highway, also known as Highway 30, and paint murals.



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