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NEBRASKA

March 2025

Magazine



MURALS WITH A MISSION

Landscaping to
Save Energy

Why Every Home Needs
A Fire Safety Plan

Balancing Caregiving
Between Generations



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Published monthly by the Nebraska Rural Electric Association, 1244 K Street, Box 82048, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501, (402) 475-4988.

Advertising in the *Nebraska Magazine* does not imply endorsement for products by the Nebraska Rural Electric Association. Correspondence should be sent to Wayne Price, Editor, *Nebraska Magazine*, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.

The *Nebraska Magazine* is printed by the Aradius Group, 4700 F Street, Omaha, NE 68117. Form 3579 should be sent to *Nebraska Magazine*, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.

Periodicals postage paid at Lincoln, Neb. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Nebraska Magazine*, 1244 K Street, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.

Publication numbers are USPS 071-630 and ISSN 0193-4937.

Subscriber Services: Cost of subscription for consumers of participating member-systems is \$2.14 per year (17.8 cents per month), plus periodicals postage paid from equity accruing to the consumer. For nonmembers, a subscription is \$10 per year or \$20 for three years, plus local and state tax. Single copy, \$2.50.

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Gabe Perez of Pender, Nebraska, transforms buildings into vibrant works of art through his large-scale murals. Freelance writer LaRayne Topp shares the story of how Perez creates imaginative scenes that blend history, emotion, and creativity across Northeast Nebraska.



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Family caregivers must balance the daily demands of their own lives with the needs of the person they care for. Freelance writer Pamela A. Keene explains how these needs may include assistance with daily living activities such as meal preparation, laundry and household chores, personal care and nursing tasks, coordinating services and support, transportation, shopping, and serving as an advocate or guardian.

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Colorful planters add to the beautification of the Beemer Main Street along with its latest addition, a Gabe Perez mural. See the related article on Page 6. Photograph by LaRayne Topp



Wayne Price

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Seal and Insulate Your Home Like a Pro

If your home feels drafty or your curtains sway with every gust of wind, it's time to take action. A few strategic upgrades can transform your home into a snug, energy-efficient retreat. Let's walk through how to identify leaks, seal them up, and boost your insulation for maximum comfort and energy savings.

To fix a problem, you first have to find it. On a cold day, do a thorough walkthrough of your home. Feel for drafts in common trouble spots like:

- Around doors and windows, where gaps often form.
- Electrical outlets and spots where cables or pipes enter your walls.
- Dryer vents, gas lines, and other wall openings.
- Recessed lights, especially those in ceilings that separate living spaces from unconditioned attics.

Drafts aren't always obvious, so take your time. A little extra detective work now can save you big on energy bills later.

Once you've located the drafts, it's time to seal them up. Depending on the size and location of the gaps, here are your best options:

- **Caulk:** Great for small cracks and gaps. Check the label to ensure it's suitable for indoor or outdoor use and whether it's paintable.
- **Spray Foam:** Perfect for larger openings, but use cautiously—it expands significantly and could damage fragile materials.
- **Weather Stripping:** Ideal for sealing around doors and windows where frequent opening and closing occur.

Sealing drafts is one of the simplest and most cost-effective ways to improve comfort and reduce energy waste.

Once you've sealed the leaks, focus on beefing up your home's insulation. Think of insulation as your home's armor against extreme temperatures. Here are the main types:

- **Fiberglass:** Affordable and widely available in batt or blown-in form.
- **Cellulose:** Eco-friendly, made from recycled materials.
- **Rigid Foam Board:** Dense and effective for tight spaces.
- **Spray Foam:** Excellent for sealing and insulating hard-to-reach areas.
- **Radiant Barrier:** Reflects heat, perfect for hot climates.

When buying insulation, pay attention to its R-value, which measures its ability to resist heat transfer. For attics, aim for R-30 to R-60. For floors, R-13 to R-30 is typically recommended.

Sealing and insulating your home doesn't just save energy—it improves comfort, lowers utility bills, and reduces your carbon footprint. Whether you're tackling a few quick fixes or planning a larger upgrade, each step brings you closer to a more efficient, cozy home.



Barb Fowler

Barb Fowler is the General Manager of Polk County Rural Public Power District headquartered in Stromsburg, Neb.

Why Local Control Matters in Public Power

Do you ever feel that your representatives in Washington—or even in Lincoln—don't understand your perspective or know how to best protect your interests? One of the core principles of public power is local control and accountability. Public Power District directors are deeply connected to the community, responsive to local needs, and accountable to the voters within their service areas. As customer-owners themselves, these directors are directly impacted by the decisions made by the board.

But what exactly does the Board of Directors do?

The Board of Directors for your local public power district is a collaborative team made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The board, as a collective body of elected officials, makes decisions for the district, and no single director acts independently on behalf of the district. Instead, they work together to set the district's vision, mission, and strategic direction.

Directors are held to a standard of conduct which entails three main duties.

Duty of Obedience requires Directors to follow all statutory laws and district bylaws, and mandate necessary records and record-keeping, internal procedures, policies, and compliance programs. It also places the ultimate fiduciary responsibility on the Board of Directors to ensure that proper safeguards, guidelines, and practices are in place to protect all district's interests.

Duty of Loyalty requires directors to act in good faith, always prioritizing the best interests of the district—not their personal interests or those of any other organization. They must avoid actions driven by expedience, greed, or self-interest. Directors must report any conflict of interests that may arise during their term.

Duty of Care requires that directors perform their roles with a high degree of diligence, care, and skill, similar to what an ordinary, prudent person would exercise under similar circumstances and in a similar position.

While the district employs a range of staff, the Board's management responsibility is limited to overseeing the General Manager, to whom they delegate authority for the day-to-day operations. This includes setting expectations, managing operations, and ensuring safe working conditions for employees.

A new director brings valuable insights but also faces a steep learning curve in governance responsibilities such as strategic planning, policy development, risk management, and financial oversight. For those unfamiliar with the electric industry, grasping the terminology and concepts can be challenging.

Effective communication with policymakers and the public is crucial. A director must also embrace and support the values of the Public Power model, understanding its importance to the local community.

And let's not forget, serving as a director is a significant commitment—many directors juggle this role alongside full-time jobs and family responsibilities. It is no easy feat, but your local community leaders on your local Public Power District Board remain dedicated to the principle of Nebraska Public Power for Nebraskans.



Murals with a Mission

The Art and Imagination of Gabe Perez

A dollop of ice cream, maybe raspberry, melts down from the side of a building onto the pavement below while a gigantic hummingbird samples nectar from the petals of an overgrown purple zinnia nearby. A towering softball player in a red shirt and headband winds up her pitch, while life-sized players walk below. A colorful, configuration of a cornet band from 1904 appears ready to play, lined up at a grassy area near Main Street.

All are within the imagination and skills of Gabe Perez of Pender, Nebraska, with as many talents as titles: muralist, graphic designer, and illustrator, to name a few. A Wayne State graduate with double majors in studio arts and graphic design, Perez experimented with various art styles—sculpture, pottery, painting, drawing and illustrating—until he based his majors and eventually a new business on what he enjoyed the most. Two minors—web design and social media marketing—are also useful as Perez lets folks know just what he can do.

He began to show them by designing and painting

several murals for the interior walls of a Fremont business; he branched out from there. Today his creations grace the interiors and exteriors of buildings throughout Northeast Nebraska, places such as West Point, Wayne, Wisner, Pender and Beemer.

In all, during the last four years he's completed 30-plus large murals in ten to fifteen towns, with outdoor work completed during the summer months.

Before he begins, Perez meets with business owners and townspeople, depending on if it's a mural for a particular business or if it will represent an entire community, to uncover what elements they might have in mind. From this range of ideas, he fashions several rough sketches, each expressing differing emotions, but typically including the history of a place.

For example, a mural which graces the wall of the Wisner fire department has an emotional feel to it, Perez says, as it was designed to memorialize several department volunteers.



by LaRayne Topp



Top left: Beemer's mural, along its Main Street, tells the history of the town.

Top right: Gabe Perez completes a mural at Wayne, Nebraska, in time for the annual Chicken Show with a parade down Main Street.

Left: Athletic scenes cover the sides of the baseball stadium at Pender, Nebraska, artist Gabe Perez's hometown.



At Two Blooms and a Bud in Wisner, Nebraska, owner Wendy Wemhoff was going for a Tuscan look for her flower and gift shop, she says: rustic yet elegant, classical but ornate. As a result, curlicues of blooming vines drape down from the roof of her building. Along one long side, a row of painted windows offer a panorama of the outdoors, each with a painted window box trailing more blooms. Overhead, words read, "If in doubt add flowers."

"My vision turned out beautifully," she says. "Gabe

brought it to life. I hope Wisner and the surrounding communities enjoy the mural." She also hopes that it brightens their day.

When Perez takes the small chosen sketch and transmits it to such a large area as the side of a building, he draws a "doodle grid" or lines on the wall, as close to the original rendering as possible. He then overlays one image on top of another, utilizing a paint sprayer for

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large areas, plus a plethora of cans of spray paint in various hues. He can paint wide lines or zero in on features as thin as a pencil line. The methods are his own, ones which he's developed, he says, with "a lot of trial and error."

He particularly enjoys seeing the reaction of those who see his work for the first time. There are lots of comments of "I love it," and sometimes viewers are overwhelmed, crying at what they see, Perez says.

One time, however, someone called a local police department, thinking Perez was intent on vandalism. Perez had to call the building's owner to talk to the policeman and let the force know he was legitimate.

Perez's favorite artwork is displayed at the sports complex in the town of Pender, Nebraska, also the location of his studio. On one side of the football field's bleachers, a giant pitcher winds up for a throw, the Pender water tower looming in the background. On another side, a baseball has just been released by a looming pitcher. Between the two pitchers are life-sized players entering a make-believe doorway under a sign for Heyne Memorial Field.

He also was able to utilize his creativity while designing an imaginative mural at West Point. The building's owner left the design entirely to Perez, such that he added creative three-dimensional features such as honeycombs and ice cream melting from giant cones down onto the pavement below. In the process, he was able to utilize a number of new techniques. It was the first time, for example, that Perez used only spray paint instead of a brush.

In Beemer, Perez worked with members of the town's Community Club to design a mural to cover the length of a building, from the street front to the alley. The purpose of the Community Club is community betterment, and Club member Dana Steffensmeier feels Perez's mural fits the bill.

The prominent wall along Beemer's Main Street was

the perfect place to realize the goal of looking backward and forward at the settlement of the town. The mural incorporates scenes from Beemer's past as a railroad town, bordered by cowboys and farmers, while moving forward to include its first settlers, school and churches, along with scenes of agriculture, and ending with a look at today, incorporating a soaring eagle and American flag.

Perez worked with committee members as they brought in black and white photographs to incorporate into the design. He gave them a sketch beforehand, but when it went up on the building he included color.

"He did an amazing job of making it look real," Steffensmeier says, even contacting her to see if the purple of the Beemer Bobcats was "purple enough."

Beemerites loved the results, she says. "It's engaging to look at," and also to watch the work in progress. Many from the area came by to watch Perez at work, including Steffensmeier's two young sons. Perez gave the boys tips on how to create wide and narrow designs using only a can of spray paint.

No matter if Perez has fashioned a mural for an individual's home, a business, or a community, at the

bottom corner he adds his signature and place to be reached—GabePerez@GabePerezArt--along with the year the artwork has been completed.

Perez can also be reached at (402) 922-2076 or gabeperezdoesart@gmail.com.

In his free time, or on days when it's 100 degrees outside and too hot to work, Perez works on the Tri-City Comicon. Co-partnering with Wes Tjaden, the two stage the annual comic book and pop culture convention, held in the Grand Island, Hastings and Kearney area, and featuring comics, trading cards, toys, collectibles and original artwork. Perez and Tjaden prepare for it throughout the year, lining up artists, collectors and vendors.

One can only imagine the touches of whimsy Perez will bring to that.



Three sides of Wisner's Two Blooms and a Bud flower and gift shop are covered with the artistry of Gabe Perez.

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Caught in the Middle

Balancing caregiving between generations

Chances are you know someone who consistently provides care for a family member. Perhaps that is you? Either way, you are not alone.

If you're a caregiver, it's also very possible you are a member of the "Sandwich Generation" — people who balance their time between caring for a spouse or child, as well as for a parent.

Statistics tell the tale. By 2034 — less than a decade from now — the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the number of adults aged 65 and older will surpass the population of children. In its 12th Annual Workplace Benefits Study in 2023, Guardian Mutual Insurance Company reports that 53 million U.S. adults care for a spouse, elderly parent or relative or a child with a disability. That's up from 43.5 million in 2015. (Source: The Guardian)

As people live longer and the population ages, the number of adults in the Sandwich Generation has also risen significantly. A Pew Research Center study in late 2021 found that adults in their 40s and 50s are most likely to have a child younger than 18 still living at home, as well as a parent aged 65 or older.

"Being a caregiver — whether for a child with disabilities or an older adult — may present challenges in adapting or finding resources," says Greg Link, director of Supportive and Caregiver Services with the U.S. Administration on Aging. "When you are both caring for an older adult family member with medical or health issues and a child with disabilities, the dynamic shifts, and often the caregiving responsibility falls to one family member, often women."

Every situation is different just as every family is different, but having open and candid discussions, particularly long before they are necessary, will help manage expectations, help define responsibilities within the family, and give maximum consideration to the person who needs the care.

A family-focused approach can be particularly effective when having internal conversations and with medical team members. Link says this might not always be

possible, but the earlier such conversations begin, it is likely the outcomes can be better for all people involved.

The biggest challenge is lack of preparedness when a family seems to be caught unaware, most often when one family member may notice a decline in the parent but is hesitant to bring it into the open.

Link says that it is important for each family member to realize that the process will take compromise and negotiation to have a truly workable situation. Those solutions will vary, particularly with the need to care for a parent or older family member.

"For instance, a possible division of shared responsibilities in caring for a parent, would be for one sibling to take the lead in the health care/medical considerations and another to be the main contact for financial issues," he says. "Of course, just because one or two family members agree to step up, the rest of the family can certainly stay involved."

The primary caregiver may need a designated backup who can occasionally take the loved one to an appointment or help prepare meals if the loved one is receiving care at home. Relieving the caregiver for several hours or an overnight stay can allow them personal time with their own family and a chance to attend to their own health and energy.

Regular check-ins with the caregiver — and of course with the loved one — through visits and/or phone calls can help relieve a caregiver's feelings of isolation or loneliness, as well as the handling the day-to-day challenges of ongoing care.

Who Cares for the Caregiver?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on average, family caregivers spend more than 57 hours each week caring for someone who is disabled or living with limitations. That is more than eight hours a day. All on top of work and other responsibilities, so it is easy to see why many caregivers can feel overwhelmed.

"Caregivers often forget about themselves and their



own needs, especially if they don't have a supportive and engaged network — including family — who check in with the caregiver regularly and can be available to help," Link says. "More often than not, when the caregiver is doing a good job, people don't volunteer to help."

"In reality, it's usually up to the caregiver to ask for help and support to be able to maintain their own balance between caregiving duties, work and life demands. And this can be difficult. Just by the nature of a caregiver personality, sometimes it's just easier to stay steadfast and handle everything, but this can lead to burnout, exhaustion or worse."

Link encourages families to help each other. He says to be specific and start with simple tasks, such as preparing a meal and sharing it with the family, the person receiving care and the caregiver. It will encourage conversation and quality time.

"The important thing for caregivers is knowing when to ask for help, and to be specific. As the caregiver,

identify a need for yourself," Link says. "As the caregiver, do you need some regular time each week to attend to personal matters? Or perhaps having a weekend away to refresh and recharge? It's much easier to enlist help when the need is specific."

"For instance, ask other family members to help with meal preparation once a week. From giving the caregiver time out of the kitchen, it provides an opportunity for other family members to visit with their loved one and the caregiver while being involved in helping."

Respite takes many forms — taking a break for a few hours, a few days or several weeks, bringing in a professional or trained aid to assist with care, asking a family member to prepare a meal and stay to enjoy it and move more — and the options for how to spend this time are diverse.

The National Respite Network, archrespite.org, can

Continued on Page 15

Shaping the Future of Nebraska's Public Power System

by James Dukesherer, NREA Director of Government Relations

The Legislature is back in full swing, and the senators have introduced more than 700 bills to be considered for adoption this year. Among these proposed bills are two in which the Nebraska Rural Electric Association brought forth for adoption. The first, LB 105, was introduced by Senator Jana Hughes of Seward. The bill would alter the process used for determining public power board member voting district outlines. The second bill, LB 91, was introduced by Senator Barry DeKay of Niobrara. This bill proposes a simple fix to the statutes dealing with the transfer of ownership of an electric utility between a municipal system to a power district.

Nebraska is the only all-public-power state. This means that when it comes to our electric utilities, all of us are represented by a publicly elected or appointed board of directors. There are no majority shareholders representing investor-owned utilities in our state, only you, the public.

The process for selecting our public power board members is outlined in Nebraska law. The statutes stipulate that board members can be selected in a couple of different ways. Some rural power districts have board members that run to hold district-wide seats, some break the districts up into multiple seats with substantially equal population in each district, some power districts assign board seats by regional lines, and there are some that utilize a combination of these options when designing board member voting districts.

Current law stipulates that when designing these boundary lines public power districts can either follow county or voting precinct lines, or they can divide precincts, but there must be substantially similar populations in each district. Unfortunately, the boundaries of rural power districts often do not follow county and precinct lines. Including entire precincts or counties into a board member voting district results in individuals who are not served by a particular power district being able to vote for and serve on that power district board. The second method mentioned above authorizes public power districts to divide voting precincts. Under this method, however, a power district must ensure that substantially equal population resides in each district. In rural Nebraska, this can mean that each voting district's population can deviate by only a few dozen people. This can be nearly impossible

to design when a town (for example) is served by the rural power district, and the rest of the rural district has very little population. The results are odd-shaped districts which make little practical sense.

LB 105 would allow public power districts to split voting precincts when determining the boundaries of board member seats without regard to population. The Power Review Board (our state regulator on these matters) would maintain the final authority to approve the boundary lines and is tasked with ensuring the boundaries do not prejudice the interests of electric consumers.

Individuals that are serving on, and voting for board seats of public power districts, should be customers of the power district they wish to represent and voting district boundaries should be drawn in a practical way that can be easily understood by voters. LB 105 would improve the election process and ensure that public power board member districts are defined in a way that ensures a fair and just representation on the board of directors.

The second bill in which the NREA is seeking adoption is LB 91. This bill is a technical bill which proposes a simple two-word fix to the statutes. If adopted, the proposed bill would eliminate some potential risk to power districts in the process of transferring ownership of the utility between a municipal system to a power district. The measure would allow any city or village that previously transferred ownership of an electric distribution system to a public power district to return the system back to the city or village, if requested, at a fair and reasonable sum. This bill reflects the existing process used in this scenario and eliminates a conflict which currently exists in the statutes. As I draft this article, LB 91 has already passed the second round of the legislative process without a dissenting vote, and we will continue to work on the bill until it receives a final vote by the Legislature and is signed by the governor.

As the NREA looks for a path to pass LB 91 and LB 105, we appreciate the grassroots support of the rural electric consumers our members serve. In addition, as the session continues, we look forward to representing you on the many other bills that impact Nebraska's electric industry. Thank you for your support of your rural power districts and our state's all public-power system.

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connect caregivers to organizations in every state that provide access to respite services. This may include temporarily hiring and paying for a professional caregiver or finding home-care options. It offers specific steps to identifying the type of respite that is best for the primary caregiver.

A number of local, regional and national organizations offer information and support for caregivers, as well as providing help for the person being cared for. Area Agencies on Aging, local departments of human or social services, area Easter Seals organizations and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are ideal places to start.

Sources for Support and Assistance

The Eldercare Locator is one of the best places to learn about resources for older adults and their family caregivers. A public service of the Administration for Community Living, it connects people via ZIP Code search to aging and disability resource center, state units on aging and local area agencies on aging.

“The Eldercare Locator is comprehensive, and it provides broad-based resources to assist caregivers, family members and care receivers,” Link says. Funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging, part of the Administration for Community Living, it maintains a current database of eldercare facilities and resources across the country that provides information for older adults and caregivers. Website links assist with information about long-term care planning, options for long-term care and contact information for home- and community-based services available through the Older Americans Act.

Information is available to help older adults and their caregivers evaluate mobility needs, identify transportation options in their area and create a customized plan for the care receiver. Resources for long-distance caregivers, making transitions from hospitals back to home, housing options for older adults and home modifications that can allow older adults to continue to live safely in their own homes.

“The information goes into a number of issues, from how to prevent falls at home to ways to avoid financial scams,” Link says.

The website offers an educational guide to benefits for seniors, updated in 2022, to connect eligible low-

Signs of Caregiver Burnout

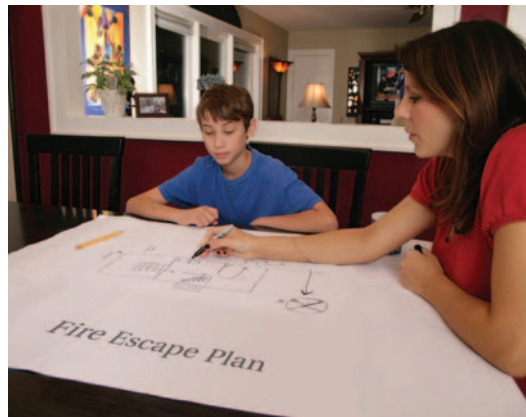
- Fatigue, loss of energy
- Difficulty with sleep, either sleeping too much or not enough
- Excessive worry
- Feeling sad, isolated or depressed
- Losing interest in formerly enjoyable activities
- Missing personal medical appointments
- Gaining or losing weight
- Skipping meals or neglecting personal self care
- Being quick to anger
- Having frequent headaches, other pain or health problems.

income older adults with public and private programs that can assist in paying for healthcare, prescriptions, food and utilities.

“Don’t overlook groups like the Alzheimer’s Association, the Parkinson Foundation, various organizations that provide information about cancer, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association and similar groups that provide resources and support for patients and caregivers,” Link says. “The number of resources for caregivers and those receiving care are numerous.

“The reality is that caregiving will touch many of us in some way, and its best to be prepared, do some initial research about the availability of resources, and talk – at least in general terms – about how your family can be ready to provide the utmost care and support for your loved ones.”

Home fires are more dangerous than ever. Modern homes, filled with synthetic materials and open floor plans, burn faster and produce toxic smoke more quickly than older constructions. In fact, once a smoke alarm sounds, you could have less than two minutes to escape. That's why having a well-practiced fire escape plan isn't just important—it's a necessity.



two escape routes in case one is blocked.

Establish a Safe Meeting Place – Pick a landmark a safe distance from your home, such as a neighbor's house or a mailbox.

Test Your Smoke Alarms – Ensure all alarms work properly and are loud enough to wake everyone.

Practice, Practice, Practice – Conduct fire drills twice a year, including at night when everyone is asleep.

Why Every Second Counts

Fires can spread rapidly, filling rooms with thick, poisonous smoke within moments. If your family doesn't know how to react immediately, precious time can be lost—time that could mean the difference between life and death. Many fire-related fatalities occur not because of burns, but due to smoke inhalation and disorientation in a chaotic environment.

Creating Your Fire Escape Plan

Draw a Map – Sketch a floor plan of your home, marking all doors and windows.

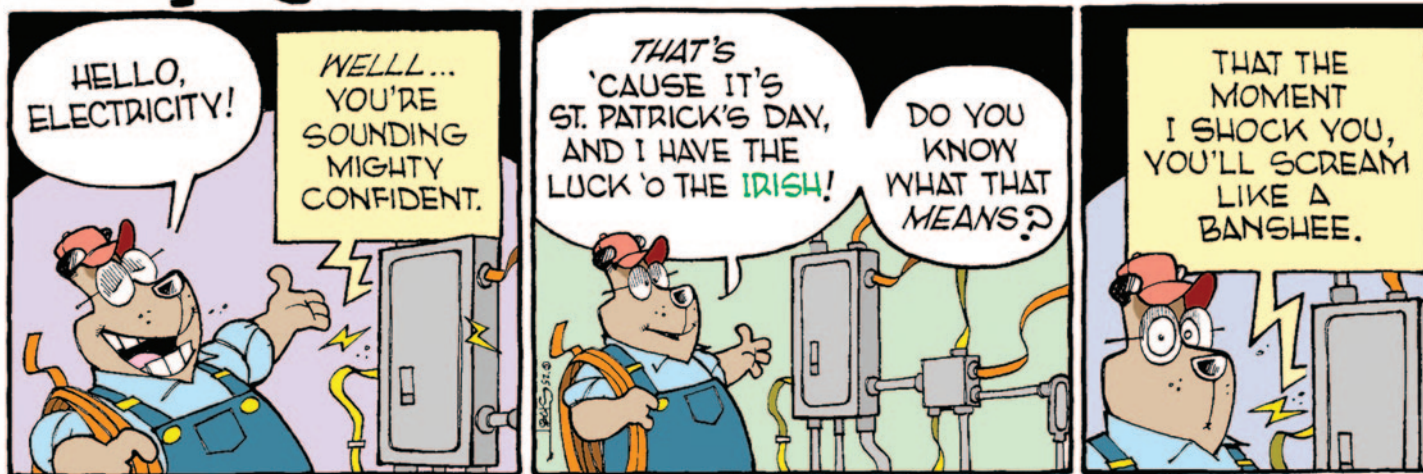
Identify Two Ways Out – Ensure each room has at least

Teach Fire Safety Early

Children and older family members may need extra assistance during an emergency. Teach kids never to hide from fire and to crawl low under smoke. If someone has mobility issues, assign a helper to assist them in an emergency.

A home fire escape plan is a small effort that can save lives. Fires happen unexpectedly, but with preparation, your family can act swiftly and safely. Take the time today to create and practice your escape plan—because when seconds count, being ready can make all the difference.

Murphy



Stay safe working around overhead power lines

By Larry Oetken



Overhead power lines are a common sight in our daily lives, making them easy to overlook. However, ignoring their presence can have serious, even fatal, consequences. Understanding how to work safely around power lines is essential

for anyone undertaking outdoor projects.

Before beginning any work outdoors, take a moment to assess your surroundings. Use these safety guidelines to help prevent accidents and ensure a safe working environment:

1. Be Aware of Power Line Locations

Power lines may not always be immediately noticeable, so it is important to stay mindful of their presence—

especially when using tall tools such as ladders, pool skimmers, and pruning poles. Always lower these tools when moving them and, whenever possible, carry them horizontally to lower the risk of contact with power lines.

2. Exercise Caution on or Near Your Roof

Projects that involve rooftop work—such as installing antennas, satellite dishes, or cleaning gutters—require special attention. Never attempt these tasks during windy or inclement weather, as unstable conditions increase the risk of accidents.

3. Maintain a Safe Distance from Power Lines

When working near power lines attached to your home, always maintain a minimum distance of 10 feet from both yourself and any equipment. This precaution reduces the risk of accidental contact with live wires, which can result in serious injury or electrocution.

Larry Oetken is the Director of Job Training & Safety for the Nebraska Rural Electric Association.



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EXTENSIVE OUTDOOR/INDOOR LABS

There's a lot going on in the space around our homes. Competing factors of aesthetics, safety, energy efficiency, water conservation and increasing risk of wildfires are a lot to consider. Thoughtful planning and good design can address these factors and result in year-round energy savings.

Carefully positioned trees can save up to 25% of a typical household's energy use, according to the United States Department of Energy (DOE). When selecting the right trees and other foliage, research what is best for your local climate. Select native species naturally adapted to your location for lower maintenance.

Strategically placed deciduous trees allow for summer shade and passive solar heat gain in the winter when leaves have fallen. This can lead to energy savings in the summer and winter.

Slower-growing trees might take longer to provide maximum shading benefit, but their roots are typically deeper, and branches are stronger. These factors can make them less likely to be damaged by wind, snow or ice, and be more drought resistant.

Be sure to plant large trees far enough away from your home to prevent damage from falling branches or root damage to your home's foundation.

Keep in mind, if you have a rooftop photovoltaic solar system, even a small amount of shade can significantly reduce energy production. Consider smaller plantings closer to the home to shade walls, windows or hardscaped surfaces, such as driveways and sidewalks.

Windbreaks are another landscaping strategy that can be beneficial for energy savings in windy areas. The DOE says windbreaks reduce wind speed by as much as 30 times the windbreak's height. That, in turn, reduces wind chill near your home and can lower heating costs. The DOE recommends planting two to five times the mature tree's height away from your home.

Plant evergreen trees and shrubs for windbreaks and consider adding fences or earthen mounds to help lift the wind up and over your home. In cold climates, they offer the added benefit of acting as a snowdrift to keep snow from piling up against your home.

Keep landscaping clear of dryer vents, heat pumps and air-conditioning units to ensure access for maintenance



Keep landscaping clear of HVAC and air-conditioning units to ensure maintenance access and airflow around equipment. Photograph by Mark Gilliland, Pioneer Utility Resources

and airflow around those locations.

If you live in an area at risk of wildfire, create a defensible space around your home. Consider hardscaping with gravel, bricks, pavers or stone shaded by fire-resistant awnings or covers. Plant fire-resistant plants with proper spacing of plants and trees from your home and other structures on your property.

When landscaping, always consider safety first. Call before you dig to ensure you know where any underground power, gas, water or sewer lines are located. The national 811 Underground Service Alert program routes you directly to your local resources. Call 811 or go to call811.com before you dig.

Be mindful of overhead power lines, too. Look up and check the surroundings before setting up ladders. Be thoughtful when planting new landscaping that could encroach on power lines. Utility equipment should have at least 10 feet of clearance, when possible.

As you prepare to refresh your yard for the coming spring and summer, consider ways you can boost your energy efficiency for more comfort and savings year-round.

5 WAYS TO SAVE ENERGY AT HOME USING YOUR SMARTPHONE

Smart home technology makes it easier than ever to enhance comfort, efficiency, and savings with just a few taps on your smartphone. From adjusting your thermostat remotely to scheduling lighting and appliance use, connected apps allow you to manage your home's energy consumption effortlessly. Smart thermostats can learn your schedule for optimal temperature control, while smart air filters and water heater controllers ensure healthier air and lower utility costs. Even small changes, like turning off lights and unused electronics via smart plugs, can add up to significant savings.

1 Adjust the thermostat

You can use the connected app to adjust its settings if you have a smart thermostat. Manually raise or lower the temperature for comfort and energy savings, or input your daily schedule so the thermostat can automatically regulate your home's temperature.

2 Remember to change the filter

Tired of having to remember when it's time to replace your HVAC filter? There's an app for that. The Filtrete app allows you to set reminders for one or multiple filters around your home, so you'll never forget again. You can also step it up a notch and opt for their Smart Air Filters, which include Bluetooth-connected sensors that can monitor air flow and usage of the filter instead of just time.

3 Turn off the lights

Left the downstairs lights on after you've already ascended the stairs to the bedroom? We've all been there. If you have smart bulbs and the connected app, however, you can correct your mistake from the cozy comfort of your bed.

You can turn these bulbs on and off, dim them and even change their color with just a few taps. Smart bulbs can also automatically adjust their settings based on a set schedule, which you can also program in the app.

4 Reduce the water temperature

Most water heaters are preset at 140°F, and the U.S. Department of Energy recommends lowering the temperature to 120°F. Lowering the temperature can help reduce the amount of money you spend on water heating. And this can be as simple as adjusting the temperature on your home's thermostat.

A retrofit smart controller lets you make existing devices smart without changing the wiring or updating to a newer model. This includes your water heater, but there are countless possibilities with this exciting new technology.

5 Turn off unused electronics

Smart plugs are an efficient solution for those home devices that simply plug into an outlet. Just insert a smart plug into the outlet, then the device into the plug, and you can turn your coffee maker, television and more on or off through the connected app. You can also create a set schedule for certain appliances and devices so they run on your preferred schedule.

HOMETOWN EATS

STOCKMEN'S BAR & GRILL AMHERST, NEB.

In Amherst, Nebraska, nestled on a quiet Main Street, sits Stockmen's Bar & Grill—a business that blends small-town charm with flavors inspired by Texas and Louisiana roots. Owned and operated by Wayne and Nancy Gallaway since 2019, this restaurant is more than a place to eat—it's a labor of love, a family effort, and a community treasure.

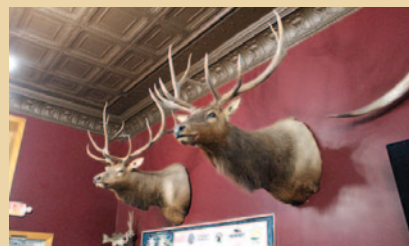
The Gallaways purchased Stockmen's from longtime owner Ron Hoos, who ran the establishment for over 40 years. Once a movie theater and later expanded into the neighboring gunshop, Stockmen's has a rich history that mirrors its transformation into a vibrant gathering spot. Nancy Gallaway made Ron a heartfelt promise when she took over: she would love and care for the business as much as he did.

Owning a restaurant was always Nancy's dream—a dream planted during her childhood in Texas, where her grandparents owned a restaurant in Lake Conroe. With degrees in food science and nursing, Nancy's career journey has taken her through restaurants, bars, and the medical field. But the call of the restaurant never left her heart.

"It's important to me to lead by example," Nancy says. "If something needs doing—cooking, bartending, cleaning, or maintenance—I do it. I wouldn't ask my employees to do anything I wouldn't do myself."

Wayne, a senior project manager at Sampson Construction, lends a hand on weekends, and the couple's four children—three in college and one in high school—pitch in whenever they can. It's a true family effort.

Stockmen's is known for its home-style cooking, where Nancy's Texas and Louisiana roots shine through. Her father's Louisiana



heritage inspires dishes that reflect a commitment to flavor and authenticity. "We don't like to cut corners," Nancy emphasizes, "and people appreciate that about us."

The daily specials, meticulously planned on Mondays, are the heart of Stockmen's menu. Wednesday evenings feature a rotating special from Rocky Mountain Oysters and Indian Tacos to Chicken Fried Steak and the ever-popular prime rib served on Friday and Saturday nights.

"A business like this takes a lot of time," Nancy notes, "but I like to reserve my days off to be with my family. It's important that we can all get together and spend time with each other."

The Gallaways' dedication has drawn visitors from across Nebraska, thanks in part to being featured on the Nebraska Passport and Beef Passport programs. Customers often comment on the restaurant's welcoming ambiance, enhanced by original tin ceilings and taxidermy mounts—elk, deer, and antelope—some of which are loaned to the restaurant by local residents.

Nancy credits much of Stockmen's success to the community's unwavering support. "It means so much to see people come from across the state," she says. "We've met so many wonderful folks who appreciate what we do here."

With ten employees, a Facebook page showcasing daily specials, and a reputation for quality and warmth, Stockmen's Bar & Grill is not just a restaurant—it's a testament to hard work, family values, and the power of good food to bring people together.



Irish Beef and Beer Pot Pie

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 cup stout beer
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 can (15 ounces) tomato puree
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 cup beef broth
- 1 bag (28 ounces) hashbrowns with peppers and onions
- 1 can (14 ounces) carrots, drained
- 1 can (14 ounces) peas, drained
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste
- 1 sheet puff pastry, thawed
- 1 egg

Heat oven to 400 F.

In large skillet or Dutch oven, brown ground beef; drain and set aside.

Over medium heat, deglaze skillet with beer and whisk in flour. After thickening, whisk in tomato puree and add Worcestershire sauce. Mix in ground beef, garlic powder and beef broth. Add hashbrowns, carrots and peas. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Simmer 20-25 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Place puff pastry sheet on cookie sheet. Beat egg and brush over pastry. Bake 10 minutes. Place hot puff pastry on top of beef mixture and serve.

Mardi Gras King Cake

- 1 cup lukewarm milk, about 110 degrees
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 2 Tablespoons dry yeast
- 3 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup melted butter
- 5 egg yolks, beaten
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest
- 3 teaspoons cinnamon
- Several gratings of fresh nutmeg

Icing Ingredients:

- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 1/4 cup condensed milk
- 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- purple, green and gold decorative sugars
- 1 tiny plastic baby to hide in the cake after baking

Cake: Whisk together warm milk, granulated sugar, yeast and a heaping tablespoon of the flour, mixing until both the sugar and the yeast have dissolved. Once bubbles have developed and it begins to foam, whisk in the butter, eggs, vanilla and lemon zest. Add the remaining flour, cinnamon and nutmeg and fold the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients with a large rubber spatula. After the dough comes together shape it into a large ball. Knead the dough on a floured surface for about 15 minutes. Put the dough back into the bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and set aside to let it rise for 1 1/2 hours or until the dough has doubled in volume. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Once the dough has risen, punch it down and divide the dough into three equal pieces. Roll each piece of dough between your palms into a long strip, making three ropes of equal length. Braid the ropes around one another and form the braided loaf into a circle, pinching ends together to seal. Lay the dough on a nonstick cookie sheet and let it rise until it doubles in size, about 30 minutes. Place in the oven and bake until the braid is golden brown, about 30 minutes. Remove the cake from the oven and cool for 30 minutes.

Icing: While the cake is cooling, whisk together powdered sugar, condensed milk and lemon juice in a bowl until the icing is smooth and spreadable. Once the cake has cooled, spread the icing over the top of the cake and sprinkle with purple, green, and gold decorative sugars while the icing is still wet. Tuck the tiny plastic baby into the underside of the cake.

The King Cake tradition involves eating a sweet, ring-shaped cake during the Mardi Gras season, where a small plastic baby is hidden inside; whoever finds the baby in their slice is considered the "king" or "queen" and symbolizes good luck and prosperity in the coming year. The baby representing the baby Jesus from the biblical story of the Epiphany when the Three Wise Men visited him.

Mary Bridges, Syracuse, Nebraska



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HELP STOP COPPER THEFT

Have you seen something unusual at an electrical facility?
• An open substation gate? • Hanging wires?
Contact your electric utility immediately.



**Know what's below.
Call before you dig.**

SAFETY FROM THE INSIDE: TAMPER RESISTANT RECEPTACLES (TRRs)

Each year approximately **24,000 children** were treated from shock and burns after sticking items into the slots of electrical receptacles. To prevent these types of injuries the **National Electrical Code (NEC*)** now requires **Tamper Resistant Receptacles (TRRs)** in new and renovated homes.

OUTLET COVERS are OUT

2+

Studies have shown that **children over the age of 2** can easily remove receptacle covers.



TRRs require **no additional parts**, there's no need to remember put them in.



Tamper resistant receptacle covers are **no longer approved** by independent testing laboratories.



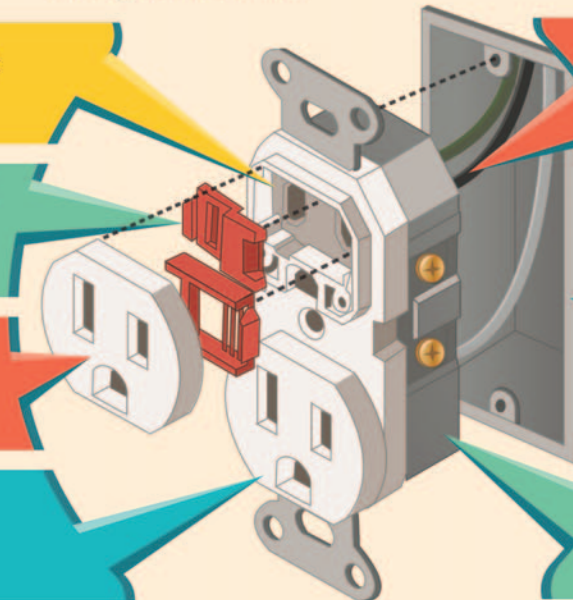
Receptacle covers carry a higher risk of **overheating** and can be a **fire hazard**.

Certified by Independent Nationally Recognized Testing Laboratories.

Built in shutters **prevent foreign objects** from being inserted into receptacle.

Permanent solution to receptacle covers.

Installing a **TRR** in your home costs only slightly more than a **traditional receptacle** does.



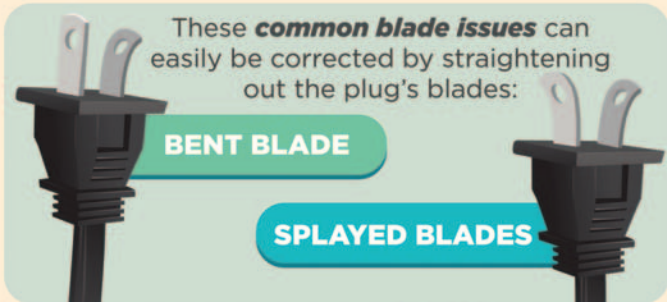
Complies with the most recent version of the **National Electrical Code (NEC*)**.

TRRs are available with **GFCI** and **AFCI** protection.

Regular receptacles can easily be replaced by TRRs by a **qualified electrician** with no additional modifications.

DOES PLUGGING INTO A TRR FEEL DIFFERENT?

The shutters in a **TRR will operate like a traditional receptacle** to open and accept a plug when equal pressure is applied on both sides. Make sure the **plug's blades are straight and are equal lengths**, so they hit the shutter simultaneously.



These **common blade issues** can easily be corrected by straightening out the plug's blades:

BENT BLADE

SPLAYED BLADES

SHARP EDGES

Replace plugs with sharp edges.



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