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Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council

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– SOME QUOTES

NEBRASKA AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL
MARCH 23, 2001
JOHN C. OWENS
NU VICE PRESIDENT AND HARLAN VICE CHANCELLOR, IANR

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful-citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

That quote by the late anthropologist Margaret Mead seems especially-fitting to me tonight as I look out at all of you. People who are committed to leadership in agriculture and in Nebraska. People with vision and creativity who give of your time and talents to preserve, to strengthen, and to move forward those things in which you believe. People determined to succeed.

I think that determination is a critical part of leadership.

Thomas Edison once said that, *"Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up,"* which always seems to me to be a good reminder FOR ME to push on, whenever I think my cause is just, is right, and is needed. Of course, it also was Edison who had the vision, the patience, and the long-term view when pursuing his creative activities and when finding something that did not work to say, "I

have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Long-term view is important. Perhaps we all should keep a running-tally and, when we are discouraged that our leadership efforts are not going as quickly or as smoothly as we might like, or obstacles are in our way and progress seems more dream than reality – something sure to occur at times, at least in my own experience! – then we can check our tally and say to ourselves, "well, that's number 1,043 that just won't work. I still have a ways to go to catch up with Edison!"

I want you to know just how pleased my wife Virginia and I are to be with you here tonight. I am looking forward to getting to know you and to visiting with you now, and in the days ahead. As the new guy on the block in the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I welcome every opportunity to meet and talk with Nebraska's residents. All of you, by your presence here tonight, have made clear your commitment to leadership in agriculture and in Nebraska. And I hope you will share with me your insights into the most significant concerns and challenges facing agriculture and Nebraska today and in the future. I also hope you will tell me how you think the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, as well as the entire University, can and should help meet your concerns.

I want to commend the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council for sponsoring the Nebraska LEAD program. I want to quote your mission statement – "to prepare and motivate men and women in agriculture for more effective leadership." Thank you for the vision that prompted you to come together for such a purpose. You have identified a need and you have filled it.

Let me also recognize here Dr. Allen Blezek, long-time director of the Nebraska LEAD Program. Thank you, Allen, for your leadership and your dedication in building our program. I understand, Allen, that a few years ago you were recognized by your peers across the country as the "Dean of Agricultural Leadership Programs." It's always a special honor, I think, to be recognized by one's peers.

I also want to commend and congratulate the 30 members of Nebraska LEAD 19 for completing your two-year program. I know you have put a great deal of time and commitment into your participation. I know it has taken you across Nebraska, to Kansas City, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and abroad, to Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. You have had the opportunity to explore your own place – and Nebraska's place as well – in the global community, to experience a

diversity of cultures and opinions, to gain skills in building alliances and coalitions, and to examine what you think and what you believe. Thank you for making all of that a high priority. Thank you, also, for your interest in providing leadership in agriculture, in your home communities, and in Nebraska. I am sure that in that time and through that experience you have developed some strong ideas and solid opinions about what we need to do in Nebraska, and in agriculture, and in our rural areas. I certainly want to hear those ideas from you as we get to know each other.

Because I am new on the job and because I am seeking to learn as much as I can as quickly as possible, I am trying to do a great deal of listening when I have opportunities to visit with people. In the Institute we think of ourselves as partners with Nebraska. We believe in our land-grant university mission to take the resources of this great university to the state. I want to know how you – each of you, everyone in this room – think we can best partner with our great state and its citizens. I want to know what your hopes are for Nebraska, and for the communities, the families, and the individuals who make Nebraska what it is.

Because I'm asking you to tell me what you think and believe, I think it's only fair to tell you a bit about what I think and believe, also, particularly

as it applies to the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the work we do in our priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people, and communities.

I've been asked many times since my arrival what my goals are for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. What is it that I plan to do?

Well, I've already told you my short-term plans, because I think they're the basis of any building and strengthening activities that, working together, we might do. Those short-term plans are to listen, to seek out information and ideas, and to assimilate that as quickly as good practice allows.

It needs to be very clear that I did not start my new job as University of Nebraska Vice President of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Harlan Vice Chancellor of IANR on January 2 feeling like a physician with a prescription for what the Institute, the University, and the State of Nebraska need. I've always been leery of people who do that, myself – people who arrive and begin talking about what needs to be done before they've ever done the work necessary to find out.

No, I came knowing the Institute and the University bring Nebraska

many strengths. I intend to do my best to build on those strengths, and to develop others. But I think it would be presumptuous of me, being on the job about eleven weeks now, to pretend to talk as if I have in-depth knowledge about Nebraska's needs and all the Institute can and should do to help meet those needs. You can be assured, however, that I'm doing my very best to find out. Throughout the spring and summer I will be traveling across Nebraska, listening carefully to hear what you and others have to say about Nebraska's needs that you believe the Institute can help address. I've already had the opportunity to visit Grand Island, Kearney, Columbus, Schuyler, Walthill, and Scottsbluff, [redacted], and I certainly look forward to being in those areas again. I've enjoyed meeting with Nebraska residents every place I've been. NORTH PLATTE + CURTIS – Next week!

There is one thing I should tell you about myself. If you've happened to hear me make a presentation before tonight you already may know this, and if you hear me speak another time you may very well hear it again, because it so influences how I view my work, the work of the Institute, and the work of the University as a whole. *I am a strong believer in the land-grant university mission.*

Justin Smith Morrill, the 19th century Vermont senator whose Morrill Act

of 1862 created land-grant universities, is one of my true heroes. Another is Abraham Lincoln, who signed that act into law on July 2, 1862. And incidentally, because this is a room filled with leaders, and because I've learned both the triumphs and trials of leadership throughout my career, let me share with you a quote from [redacted] Abraham Lincoln. It is a quote I remember when I need to take a long-term view, because my short-term goal is not moving as quickly – or perhaps even in the direction – that I would like.

"*I am a slow walker, but I never walk backwards,*" Lincoln said.

He also said, "*I never had a policy; I just tried to do my very best each and every day,*" and "*The Lord prefers common-looking people. That is why he made so many of them.*" President Lincoln had vision, courage, determination, and a sense of humor. How could I not admire him?!

There is a phrase in the Morrill Act that I'm particularly fond of; three words – "*the leading object,*" as in: "*the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in order to promote the liberal and practical*

education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life."

The leading object of land-grant universities, true when they were first established and just as true today, is to work with the citizens we serve, and to take the resources, the riches, and the technologies of the University to the residents of the state. That is one of the guiding principles by which I work.

I am a big believer in service because I think public service is a land-grant responsibility. I consider both the concept of service and the act of serving to be highly honorable. I believe that leaders serve, and I think that there is much, all of us working together, can do to meet the needs of agriculture, rural Nebraska, and this state. While I have not been here long, I already have met enough Nebraskans from those areas we call rural in this state to know I would never bet against their tenacity, their resiliency, and their determination. I believe it is equal to the tenacity, resiliency, and determination of those people who settled and grew Nebraska. Those early settlers came here with a dream, and they worked hard to make their dreams happen. When one thing didn't work, they tried another. I believe the survivors and the thrivers were those people who,

when something didn't work, did not spend their time doing the same unworkable thing harder and longer, nor did they bemoan that nothing else would do. They were the people who said to themselves, "well ... if that didn't work ... I wonder what might work?", and then they tried that new course of action.

I also believe, after three short months here, that people with that same ability to dream and to accomplish their goals reside in Nebraska today. I think such people are in this room tonight, and I look forward to working with you.

The American writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, also a surgeon, a teacher, and a lecturer, once said that, "*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*"

Nebraska needs leaders who can look within themselves and find what it takes to have the courage to step up to the challenges of leading; to have a vision and to share that vision, and to inspire others to work together toward a common good. Nebraska needs citizens with the ability to see the whole as well as the parts. Nebraska needs citizens with the capacity to step up with courage and with good will to do all that needs to be done.

I hope that EACH of us, working together, will prove TO BE that kind of leader.

Thank you.

Congratulations – AGAIN –

LEAD CLASS 19.