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MIDLANDS VOICES

Nebraska has lots to offer; no joke

BY SUE BURZYNSKI BULLARD

The writer is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Nebraska is sometimes a lot like Rodney Dangerfield: It gets no respect. It's a bum rap typically applied to the Midwest in general. And there it was from the first day I told family and friends I was moving to Nebraska.

"Why Nebraska," they asked.

The original short answer is to teach at a world-class university. But the longer I live here, the longer the answer gets.

MainStreet.com, for example, just named Nebraska the happiest state in the country, putting a label on the residents' feeling of well-being.

Nebraska's unemployment rate dipped to 4.2 percent in February, the only state to see a drop and far short of the 8.1 percent national average. By contrast, my native state, Michigan, topped the nation at 12 percent.

Last month, Lincoln was ranked No. 5 in Forbes magazine's list of best metro areas for business and careers. Last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named Lincoln the nation's healthiest city. And important in today's economy: Lincoln's cost of living is 18.75 percent lower than the national average, according to Sperling's Best Places.

For newcomers like me, those demographics rank about equally with the cultural frosting on the Nebraska cake. Nothing in my home state matches those 500,000 sandhill cranes as they convene their regular meetings on the Platte River. After all, the crane migration is listed in the book "1,000 Places to See in the U.S. and Canada Before You Die."

Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo with its Desert Dome and rain forest is as close as you can get to big carnivorous wild animals and survive. The Kool-Aid Museum in Hastings? A first-class

trip down memory lane.

I have now taken the official State Capitol tour three times with relatives visiting Lincoln. OK, it's not a biggie. But my guests were awestruck by the magnificent murals, the ceiling mosaics and the hand-carved East Chamber door with its depiction of Native American life. Yet a number of the longtime residents I've met have not yet taken the tour.

I once thought Michigan State University fans were dedicated. But Husker Nation is the gold standard for team spirit and support, including the play-by-play broadcasts over the PA systems in Lincoln grocery stores.

Back to the podunk factor. Lincoln took a hit in the movie "Yes Man" as federal agents hassle Jim Carrey's character for saying he is in Lincoln on a holiday. After all, the plot line goes, why would anyone actually vacation in Lincoln?

"The stereotypical view of the Midwest is that it's nothing but cornfields and outhouses," said Jeff Maul, executive director of the Lincoln Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We don't have oceans and some of the other things you find on the coasts, but what we do have is affordability and some wonderful attractions."

Those surveys by MainStreet.com and others underscore Maul's point: Nebraska is a happening place, despite the stereotype. And as it turns out, the natives can take a joke. Moviegoers here in Lincoln coughed up their biggest laugh for the "Yes Man" line that poked the state capital as being, well, less than cosmopolitan.

They laugh because they know it's a bum rap.

You actually can find the "good life" here, just like the sign on Interstate 80 proclaims.