Forging a path to Midwest Metalworks

BY BRITTNEE WILSON

"If I don't do this before I'm 40, I don't think I ever will."

Those words were spoken by Derrek Leapaldt as he stood at a crossroads in his life.

Owning his own business was always the end goal. Along the way, Leapaldt believed each job, opportunity and unexpected turn in life was better preparing him for a day he would finally take that leap of faith.

Eight years ago, he had a business plan and drawings for a welding and fabrication shop he hoped to build in his hometown of Leeds. Then life took an unexpected turn, and those plans were put on hold.

Today, Leapaldt stands inside that newly built shop, talking about Midwest Metalworks and the winding path that finally brought him there.

Finding his way

Growing up on a cattle farm, Leapaldt learned the value of hard work at a young age. He knew he wanted a career where he could build, create and solve problems. He just hadn't figured out exactly where that path would lead.

In school, he enjoyed vocational agriculture and shop classes, where he was introduced to different trades and discovered he enjoyed working with his hands. In the summer, he worked for a local electrician, gaining experience in another skilled trade and even considered a degree in electrical technology. But as he explored his options, one trade continued to stand out. He felt a strong calling toward welding.

"I struck my first arc in junior high shop

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Midwest Metalworks specializes in fabricating custom build-to-size liquid transfer tanks for ag service trucks as well as custom welding, metal fabrication, metal décor and emergency repairs.

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Midwest Metalworks' plasma table can accommodate up to a 10-by-5-foot sheet of metal for custom design pieces and projects.

class and have had a passion for the trade ever since," Leapaldt says.

After graduating from the welding program at North Dakota State College of Science in 2008, Leapaldt worked as a line welder in Fargo. Just as his welding career was taking off, the industry was hit by massive layoffs driven by the recession.

"There wasn't a welding job to be found anywhere in Fargo," Leapaldt says.

With welding opportunities scarce, Leapaldt returned home and went back to electrical work. The detour, however, would give him another valuable piece of experience, learning the business side of the industry while working closely with the owner.

He was hours away from earning his journeyman status when welding called his name once again.

"Fargo was hiring again and I thought I'd give it another shot," he says.

Over the next three years, Leapaldt worked and lived in Fargo. As his career took shape, he slowly realized rural life was calling him home.

"My wife, Steph, and I knew we wanted to raise our children in a small town," Derrek says.

The couple moved to Leeds in 2014 and Derrek took a line welding job at a farm machinery manufacturer at a nearby town.

As he worked the line, Derrek began looking for a new challenge. He wanted to create something of his own. With that mindset, he began fabricating fuel tanks for ag service trucks as a side project in one stall of his garage. As word spread about his work, locals encouraged him to consider starting a business of his own.

At the same time, Derrek was watching several custom welding shops in the rural area close as their owners reached retirement. For a farming community like Leeds, the loss of those services meant farmers were traveling farther for repairs and fabrication work.

The need was clear and Derrek knew he had the skills

and experience to help fill it.

He put together a business plan, hired a contractor and was on the verge of opening his own shop when another opportunity came along as a management position.

"I couldn't turn it down. And ultimately, it better prepared me for owning my own business," he says.

The opportunity delayed Derrek's plans, but did not change them. He continued gaining experience, learning what it took to manage people, projects and the day-to-day operations of a business.

After nearly 20 years in the industry, he felt the time was finally right to take the leap and build a business of his own.

Powering a dream

Derrek bought an empty lot southeast of Leeds and was ready to turn his plans into reality. But before construction could begin, he needed to figure out how to bring power to his new business.

He contacted Northern Plains Electric Cooperative (NPEC) to bring three-phase power to the property.

"Northern Plains was super easy to work with. I met with staking engineer Kevin Larson, he mapped it out and gave me a ballpark quote of what it would cost," Derrek says.

"And Kevin was the one who encouraged me to contact the office to explore the different loan opportunities that Northern Plains provides," he says.

Through NPEC's economic development revolving loan program, Derrek received a low-interest loan for a new business.

"It was a painless process. Northern Plains is a good local company just willing to help other local businesses," he says.

The shop quickly came together and in the fall of 2025, Midwest Metalworks LLC was open for business, specializing in custom build-to-size liquid transfer tanks, custom welding, metal fabrication, metal décor and emergency repairs.

Minutes matter

For Derrek, the value of Midwest Metalworks goes beyond welding and fabrication. It is about saving customers time. And in agriculture, time can mean everything.

"Before, if a farmer would break down, they would have to travel around 60 miles round to trip to get something fixed," he says.

Midwest Metalworks now fills that gap, bringing those services closer to home. The shop is equipped with five welders for a variety of metals, a plasma table and a press brake. The equipment allows Derrek to get customers up and running quickly, solve a problem or take a project from an idea to a complete design and build.

As the shop gains momentum, Derrek hopes to eventually hire employees. But for now, success is measured in customer satisfaction, giving local



*Owner of Midwest Metalworks, Derrek Leapaldt, gets help from his children, **Jaxton** and **Jolie**, on a large project cut from his plasma table.*

customers a place to turn and providing a service that is once again available close to home.

For Derrek, the journey to Midwest Metalworks was not a straight path. It took years of experience, a few unexpected turns and the courage to finally take the leap. After years of preparing for the opportunity, he is finally where he wanted to be, putting his skills to work for his community. ■

Co-op helps economic growth

Northern Plains Electric Cooperative (NPEC) is helping economic development efforts in the area by administering a revolving loan fund made possible with funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Loans with only 2% interest and minimal administrative fees are available to businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government and tribal entities through the revolving loan fund. Eligible applicants can receive a loan amount minimum of $10,000 and a maximum amount is dependent on funds available. The money was provided by a grant from USDA and there is no risk to the cooperative.

The objectives of the revolving loan fund include:

- Help create jobs that will help rural areas.
- Provide financing alternatives for businesses or community facility with an economically or socially desirable purpose.
- Leverage owner equity and other financing sources.
- Promote development of rural communities.

For more information on the revolving loan program, visit nplains.com/economic-development or contact Business Manager Cheryl Belle at 800-882-2500. ■



*Hal Parker American Legion Post member **Alex Balazs** helps put up the display of American flags and veteran street signs as part of a project to honor the veterans in their community.*

Where names tell stories

BY BRITTNEE WILSON

Street signs usually tell us where we're going. In Cando, some tell the stories of those who came before us.

For the members of Hal Parker American Legion Post No. 79, honoring veterans is part of the American Legion's longstanding commitment to patriotism, service and community. In Cando, that commitment has taken a permanent place on the city's street corners.

The idea was simple: Honor local veterans and make sure their service remains visible for generations to come through street signs bearing their names.

The Hal Parker Post No. 79 has been part of the Cando community since its establishment in 1919. The Legion advocates for veterans, supports active-duty personnel, runs youth programs and works to strengthen the local community.

With 105 members, the Legion took its tribute idea to the Cando city council for approval. From there, members approached Northern Plains Electric Cooperative, which provides electricity to Cando, for permission to attach the signs to its poles.

With an American flag paired with each pole, the Legion can attach up to eight veteran signs on a single pole. Each sign displays the veteran's name, rank and branch of service. The colors correspond with the branch: green for Army, white for Navy, blue for

Air Force and red for Marines.

The signs honor veterans who have served and either currently live, previously lived or have another connection to Cando. Anyone can request a sign through the Legion. If approved, the Legion asks for a $50 donation to cover the sign, mountings and hardware.

"If someone cannot cover the expense, the Legion will donate it," says Legion Commander and Post Adjutant Troy Reemtsma.

Legion members and other community volunteers donate their time to order and install the signs, with requests often coming through word of mouth or after people see the signs around town.

"It is amazing how many people in Cando or relatives of people in Cando have served. For a small town, the number is just incredible" says Alex Balazs, an active Legion member.

Today, the signs are scattered throughout Cando, each one carrying a name that connects a street corner to a person, a family and a story. To date, the Legion has placed over 250 veteran signs and more than 100 American flags.

"Our goal was to get as many flags and signs up as we could by the 250th anniversary this summer," Balazs says.

Legion members and other community volunteers donate their time to order and install the signs.

Although all branches of service are represented throughout the town, Cando has a particularly strong connection to the Army National Guard. The National Guard has been part of the community since 1922. In 1990, the 132nd Quartermaster Company was mobilized for Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. A total of 165 soldiers were deployed, representing 11% of Cando's population at the time.

Placed from the heart

For many families, the signs are more than a tribute. They are personal reminders of someone they love. Families can request a sign be placed near a family home or another location that holds a special meaning to them.

Balazs has seen that pride firsthand.

"I think this really means a lot to them. We have had people come out when we are literally bolting their sign to a post and they take a picture of the sign and we know they are sending it to someone. They are really proud of it," he says.

Both Balazs, who served in the Air Force, Navy and Army, and Reemtsma, who served in the Air Force, would like to see the flags fly year-round. However, because of North Dakota's harsh winters, the flags are removed after Sept. 11 and put back up before Memorial Day, while the street signs remain in place year-round.

The community's response has been overwhelmingly supportive. But perhaps the most meaningful part of the project is how the names have become part of the residents' daily lives. As people turn onto a street corner, they may see the name of a veteran they remember or perhaps a name that sparks a question. That question could lead them to a family member, opening the door to a story that might otherwise have gone untold.



*The tributes to Cando's veterans wouldn't be possible without the dedicated Legion members and community volunteers who make it happen. Pictured volunteers **Ted Asp** in the foreground as **Alex Balazs** gets hoisted to place American flags on the poles.*

"We hope people see them and just ask a question, ask a family member and hopefully learn from what came before them," Balazs says.

More than a sign

The Legion's goal was to honor veterans and get the community involved. What members didn't expect was how much they would learn about the people around them in the process.

"I serve on another volunteer board and never really spoke to a certain individual until after their family member's sign was put up and now, we talk all the time. I guess it broke the ice," Balazs says.

The project has created connections that may not have happened otherwise, giving residents another reason to learn about veterans who have shaped their community.

Street signs are meant to help people find their way. In Cando, these signs do something more. They invite residents to pause, remember and ask questions about the people whose names have become part of the community's landscape.

And for the members of Hal Parker Post No. 79, there is no final sign on the horizon.

"We are always looking forward to more names and more stories," Reemtsma says. ■

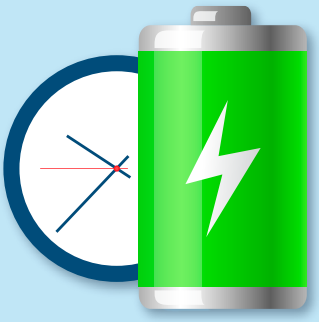
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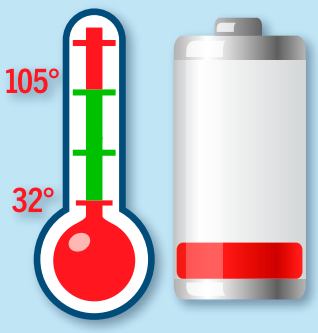
Lithium-ion batteries power many portable consumer electronics and electric vehicles. In normal applications, the Li-ion batteries are safe, but if **damaged** or **overheated**, they can **cause fires**. Focus on the everyday charging habits that can help reduce the risk of Li-ion battery fires and keep homes safe.



Only use manufacturer-provided or authorized batteries and charging equipment. All equipment should be certified by a nationally recognized testing laboratory.



Remove the battery or charging device from power once charging is complete to avoid overheating



Keep batteries and charge them at room temperature. Issues can occur below 32° F or above 105° F



Keep batteries and devices from heat sources or anything that can catch fire



Do not store batteries in vehicles or direct sunlight



All maintenance on batteries or e-mobility devices should be completed by a qualified professional

Discontinue using devices or **batteries** that have an unusual odor, change in color, too much heat, change in shape, are leaking, smoking or not keeping a charge.

ESFi.org

Small change, profound change

At its September meeting, the Northern Plains Electric Cooperative (NPEC) Operation Round Up board of directors approved grants totaling $7,350 to help support worthy causes.

These charitable grants are made possible through the generosity of NPEC members who voluntarily elect to have their electric bills rounded up to the next dollar.

Since the program's beginning in October 1998, grants totaling $1,028,287 have been awarded to 1,365 local charitable causes.

Grants approved in September include:

- Leeds Park Board, pool renovation
- Jamestown Frontier Village, family recreation build
- Father's Farm, Wolford, animal care assistance
- Eleven backpack programs: Leeds Public School, Hungry Free Food Pantry in New Rockford, Carrington Daily Bread, Griggs County Central, Kidder County Food Pantry, Rugby schools, Mt. Pleasant School in Rolla, Community Action in Jamestown, Cando Area Food Pantry, Fessenden-Bowdon School and Devils Lake schools

If you would like additional information about this worthy program, please contact NPEC by calling 800-882-2500 or you may obtain guidelines or download applications at nplains.com. The board will meet again in December to review applications. The application deadline is Nov. 20. ■





Need help with heating costs? LIHEAP can help.

Staying warm shouldn't mean choosing between heat and other essentials. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) helps eligible North Dakota households manage the cost of heating during our long winters.

The program partially pays the cost of natural gas, electricity, propane, fuel oil, coal, wood or other fuel sources.

LIHEAP also provides support with:

- Weatherization services, such as insulation and weatherstripping
- Furnace and chimney cleaning
- Furnace repair and replacement
- Emergency heating assistance
- Help with the cost of a cooling device or repair



How to apply for LIHEAP

Applications are accepted year-round. For LIHEAP services, you can apply online by visiting hhs.nd.gov/applyforhelp/liheap or call your local county social services office.

For help applying, questions about eligibility or your existing case, contact the customer support center by calling 866-614-6005 or emailing at applyforhelp@nd.gov. ■

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