

## Agency for Change Podcast: Brenda Mainwaring, President and CEO, Iowa West Foundation

**Brenda Mainwaring:** Let's celebrate our Midwestern roots and let's come together to succeed.

**Announcer:**

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

**Lyn Wineman:**

New libraries, supplies for rescue squads and volunteer fire departments, improvements to parks and trails and funding for museums, theaters, and arts endeavors of all kinds. And that barely scratches the surface of the millions of dollars the Iowa West Foundation provides to nonprofits and government entities across an 18-county area that encompasses southwest Iowa and eastern Nebraska. Few organizations wear the changemaker moniker as well as this foundation, and today I'm excited to speak with a woman who is at the helm of the organization. Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov and this is the Agency for Change podcast. Today, we're talking with Brenda Mainwaring, president and CEO of Iowa West Foundation, an organization helping make southwest Iowa a community where families choose to live and businesses choose to locate because of its quality of life and standard of living. Brenda, welcome to the podcast.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Thank you. I am thrilled to be here, Lyn.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I am really looking forward to this conversation because I know you do so many interesting things. Brenda, can we start by having you help our listeners understand what the Iowa West Foundation does and how it helps the community?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Absolutely. The Iowa West Foundation was created fundamentally to serve the interest of Council Bluffs, Pottawattamie County and southwest Iowa. Those interests change over the years. We've been in existence for 25 years almost, but that project list that you gave in your intro is really sort of a good indication of how we see change over the course of a couple of decades. However, we have always had the same four primary areas of focus.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

So first, there is education. We work very closely with schools in Pottawattamie County and in Council Bluffs to support scholarships. We have, for going on 15 years, supported preschool for four-year-olds so that all four-year-olds in the county have the opportunity to attend preschool. We've seen some very measurable results when we make sure that every four-year-old gets to go to preschool. We have programs for children's mental health in the school to make sure that they are getting the attention that they need. Obviously, as we come out of COVID, we understand that that's going to be an increasing need and we're looking at how we can expand that program.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

And then, we've spent a lot of time working with the city of Council Bluffs on Wi-Fi access. We'll talk about this later, but I came here fairly, within the last 18 months, from Houston, and when I left Houston, a friend of mine at the University of Houston said, "Oh, I've heard of Council Bluffs. They have that fabulous Wi-Fi network that they have."

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

So I know that that has been something that's put Council Bluffs on the radar, as well. So that's area one. Area two is helping families. That's kind of what people think traditionally of when you think about a foundation. It's the YMCA, it's Central Latino, which is serving Hispanic families. It's family activities so that all families can enjoy the zoo and the Joslyn and Lauritzen Gardens and the American Midwest Ballet. It's of course homeless shelters and food pantries and housing rehabilitation, and all those kinds of things that we think about as being indicative of a healthy, thriving community.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Number three is economic development. That's an area where we want to make sure that, we said, businesses choose to locate. So sometimes that means we need to help the community, the county and Council Bluffs, and the rest of Southwest Iowa build up their base a little bit. We have a workforce development program with Council Bluffs Chamber, which clearly right now is of critical importance in the world that we live in, and we have done some entrepreneurial education and financial support so that those very small businesses that have a great idea, but maybe don't necessarily have the acumen or the finances to get up off the ground, we can help them with that. And then we also started a program called Kitchen Council, which is specifically at developing local food startups, and Omaha, Council Bluffs, we're a foodie town. We're in the center of agriculture, so it's something that has really started to grow a lot.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

And then lastly, and probably most visibly, is what we refer to as placemaking. There is a long, long list of projects. The very first project that Iowa West Foundation assisted with was the Council Bluffs Library, which is a wonderful building that replaced the hundred-year-old Carnegie Library. Ironically, that hundred-year-old Carnegie was my first experience with the Iowa West Foundation on the other side of the table, when I was working at Union Pacific to get the Union Pacific Railroad Museum based in Council Bluffs, and I was very involved with that.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

But as you look around the community, you see all sorts of other examples of that placemaking category. You see the art collection, which is remarkable in the region, the Mid-America center, more recently the Field House, which is a basketball/volleyball tournament or center that brings in teams from across the region, soccer complex, of course the riverfronts. I could go on and on, but I'll stop there and let you ask me-

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's a lot. That's quite a lot and quite diverse, and I think, too, Brenda, I think sometimes people don't realize the strategic effort it takes to build and maintain a really great, thriving community. That doesn't often happen by chance. It happens because passionate, smart people bring their time and their resources together, and I feel that happening with your organization. And you mentioned UP, which maybe for those of us who are not in the area, Union Pacific Railroad. I understand you worked at Union Pacific for nearly 24 years before you accepted this role at Iowa West Foundation. What made you decide to hang up your UP hat, so to speak, after so many years with them?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Well, I will acknowledge that was a very difficult decision. I had many wonderful colleagues. I had some tremendous professional opportunities while I was there at Union Pacific, but beginning in 2013, I was running the Southern half of Union Pacific's System for Public Affairs and I was based in Houston. My husband and I, we missed Iowa. We missed Council Bluffs and we wanted... so in February of 2020, the last month of normal, right? February of 2020 I was contacted about the opportunity at Iowa West Foundation. And I had never said yes to a headhunter before, but Iowa West Foundation was a special opportunity at the right time.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I love that. I love that. So, how did your career with UP help prepare you for Iowa West Foundation?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Well, at Union Pacific, I did a lot of... wide variety of things, very wide range, but the through line was always community. Here at home, early in my career I worked to create the Union Pacific Museum, as I mentioned, and also Kenefick Park, which is of course a locomotive park at Lauritzen Gardens. Did those working with the local community.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Then, I broadened out to be a public affairs director at Iowa Nebraska, where I was directly focused on all of the communities that Union Pacific runs through in those two states. Again, really focused on getting to engage with communities. And then, as I said, in 2013, I went south to Houston to run 11 states as the vice president of public affairs.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

All of those roles required me to really understand the communities' needs and their interests, and whether it was solving a problem or creating a new amenity or supporting economic development, all of those aspects of what I did with Union Pacific really translated just perfectly to this role at Iowa West.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I like that. So you mentioned, then, you currently live in Council Bluffs. You had come back. I understand it's maybe your third time coming back. What has kept you coming back to Council Bluffs and what kind of perspective did this boomeranging lend to you on the community?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

I think boomeranging is a new thing, right?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Boomeranging back to your hometown. But it happened three times. I came back for a year between my bachelor and master's degree, and honestly, I did not see anything for me here. I left again, I went back to University of Iowa, and then after that, I went to Washington, D.C. and Minneapolis, Austin, met my husband, and then we came back in 1996 kind of reluctantly, I'll be honest. But things have changed. Things have really changed here and the projects funded by Iowa West I mentioned had a major role in that transformation of the community.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

There's always been this sense of community in Council Bluffs, but what was new back then was a really growing sense of pride. So in 2013, we left again, this time also reluctantly so, but we knew even then that we would be back in Council Bluffs. I think it's a lot easier to see change in a community when you aren't living in it every, single day. Sometimes that boomerang can see what's right in a community instead of just focusing on what's wrong. Houston is the fourth-largest city in the country, and boy, it has a lot to offer, major sports teams and fabulous restaurants and near to a beach, but we choose to live here in Council Bluffs, and Council Bluffs and Omaha also have a tremendous amount to offer, and not so many headaches.

**Lyn Wineman:**

So, Brenda, it sounds like a lot of work went into the city of Council Bluffs itself. Can you tell me more about that?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Yes, absolutely. A lot projects I mentioned were projects that benefited Council Bluffs, and I have to note that the city itself, the mayor, the councils over the course of the last couple of decades, they have been the originators of a lot of those ideas. They have certainly consistently been partners to Iowa West Foundation. Without that collaboration, all of these projects, whether it's the Mid America Center or the riverfront, the improvements on Broadway, everything that we have done in the city of Council Bluffs has been supported, driven by our partners within the city. We do a lot of work in Pottawattamie County and throughout southwest Iowa, but our focus has always been in the city of Council Bluffs where we can really support the interests and the needs of the community and the people in the city that serve that community.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah, yeah. I think in a community like Council Bluffs, things can just be easier than they are in a very large metropolitan mega center like Houston, right? And I love what you said, that at one time in your life, you didn't see anything for you in the community. But I think through the work of a lot of organizations, but in particular the Iowa West Foundation, the community has been able to add amenities and services and things that drive people back, bring people back.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

But I want to say, too, it's not the amenities and the services that are attractive. It's the way you feel about those amenities and those-

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

They create that sense of community that people say, "This is a great place to be. You should want to be here because we are a wonderful community with a lot of exciting things to do," and connecting with people as you're out on the bike trails or on the riverfront, or going to a restaurant, seeing your friends and neighbors out and about, that's what makes the difference.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Brenda, that is a really great distinction. I am glad you brought that up. I also understand that you studied anthropology at the University of Iowa. When did your interest in that field start and how do you put that knowledge to work for the Iowa West Foundation?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

You know, I don't think there are very many high school students who say, "I'm going to be an anthropologist."

**Lyn Wineman:**

I think that's true.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

I was not one of them either, I'll be honest. I guess I really have to credit my advisor at the University of Iowa who put me in my first anthropology course probably as a matter of desperation on her part. For me, anthropology is really a way to understand why people think and act the way that they do. Psychology looks at the individual. Sociology looks at the group, but anthropology really starts looking at the practices and the systems that unite us as communities. I keep coming back to that word, right? That community.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

That's exactly the focus that I want for Iowa West Foundation. What can we do to help unite our community, which I'm defining very broadly here? But how do we unite for success?

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's great. That's great. I always am fascinated by how people's paths lead them to where they are and prepare them for what they're doing. And I think that is just fascinating, Brenda. So, the Iowa West Foundation is unique in that some of its funding comes from an unexpected source. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Absolutely. We are funded through gambling revenue and gaming.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh my. I didn't realize.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Iowa is the only state in the nation that authorized gaming on the condition that it directly serve the needs of the local community. So there are 16 organizations that have the same role as Iowa West. They all look different. Iowa West holds the gaming license for Ameristar, Harrah's casinos here in Council Bluffs. Iowa statute requires that each of them pay at least 3% of their adjusted gross revenue to their nonprofit license holder every year. And so we get those funds and we push them all back out, the entire annual amount, to the community each year.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. Fantastic. So as a foundation that serves the community, I imagine you did see the effects of the pandemic firsthand. I mean, my goodness, you started right before the pandemic, I believe, so how did Iowa West Foundation respond to the pandemic and how was it able to help those in need?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

I think every foundation, every nonprofit, every person, let's be real, we changed how we operated during the pandemic. For Iowa West, we set aside our usual application process and our timelines so that we could make funds available immediately to any organization that was serving people in need. And all of those organizations didn't know what they were going to need. It was really instantaneously understanding that things had changed. Let me give you an example that has really resonated with us. The pantry system in Council Bluffs was basically church-based. Most of the volunteers in those pantries were elderly.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Right.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

To come to the pantry to distribute food at exactly the time when the community needed it most. So the way that the pantry system had built up over decades worked fine until there was a crisis, and then it didn't work. So we, Iowa West Foundation, spent one and a half million that was specifically for pandemic relief. We partnered with other donors who added another million to that for southwest Iowa needs, and then that pantry that I mentioned, we worked with Together, Inc., which is an Omaha-based organization, that created what's referred to as a choice pantry. It's almost like going in and shopping. So they launched that, and it has really exposed another challenge with church-based pantries, which is if you don't have a connection, either a neighborhood connection or you're a church member, you don't feel comfortable going to that pantry.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Right.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

So now we have a program that's available to the county as a whole. Silver lining. There's always a silver lining to everything to help us understand.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I like that. There's so much dignity involved, I think also, in a choice pantry as well, and being able to go in and essentially shop for your family and get the things that you feel like you need that your family likes in particular, as well. Brenda, is there a particular grant or initiative you're most proud of during your time at the foundation?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

My entire time at the foundation so far has been defined by COVID, but we are just moving into the next phase and we have some exciting things to think about, but in terms of the projects that I can be most proud of, we are working with the county to try to make sure that all communities who have access to COVID recovery funds are able to apply for them. So, communities large and small have access to those federal programs, but the small rural communities really don't have any capacity. Whether it's having people to just think through what might be eligible or to file an application, they just don't have that.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

And so working with Pottawattamie County and then a couple partners, Golden Hills, RC&D and Advance Southwest Iowa, we developed a program where we went out and asked every single community in Pottawattamie County, "What is it that you need in order to be a thriving community? Develop a list." We engaged a consultant who has a lot of experience in federal and state programs to say which of these might qualify, and then with county, we're going to prioritize those and make sure that the federal and state dollars that are intended to help communities will benefit southwest Iowa.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah. Wow. What a really smart initiative, because it is difficult sometimes to access the money, and I think a lot of us, businesses, nonprofits, during COVID, we hear of these funds being approved and then start searching for, "How do I qualify? How do I apply?" And then finding the time and the resources to make it all happen is a real thing. What a really smart thing to do.

**Lyn Wineman:**

We talked about this at the top of the show, but I'll repeat it for our listeners. On your website, it says that the Iowa West Foundation's vision is a community where families choose to live and businesses choose to locate because of its quality of life and standard of living. What does that realization of the vision look like for you and how will you know if your work is done or can it ever even be done?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

A quality of life and business attraction is something that obviously goes on forever. How do we know what it looks like when we've been successful? That's a question that we have to revisit regularly. I think foundations often can get caught up in the doing and focused on, "We're doing good," and they forget to raise their head to look around to see how well we're actually serving our community. Of course we have metrics. We establish metrics as part of any grant to say if we're going to fund you, you need to demonstrate your success using these measures, and we agree on what those metrics might be. But of course, those never tell the whole story.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

We know we are successful when a community that we serve can see that we have made a difference, and the only way we know if they see that we make a difference is if we ask them. We have just undertaken and we're just wrapping up what we refer to as Imagine Hours. Now, previously those have been listening sessions, but listening sessions sound very dull and dry, and so we wanted to expand that a little bit more and make it more accessible to everybody. Not just the social clubs, not just the chamber, not just the groups that are easy to convene, but to the public in general.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

So we had seven sessions open to everyone, did a lot of social media posting, a lot of tell your friends kind of posting, and including offering a Spanish language session so we can really understand what our...

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's great.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

...Hispanic population wants. When they walk in the door, we hand them a postcard that says what do you love about your community? And it's been remarkable how successfully that has started every one of those sessions off on the wrong foot. We have a conversation about, "Look, we know some of you here are because of potholes."

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yes.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

We want you to think about beyond potholes, what is it that the community needs to be even greater than it is? So when we start by saying what do you love about your community, it puts them in the right mindset. And then what would you do to make the place even better? And then some wild ideas. We're going to share all of that session input from the community with four focus groups of local residents who have a particular expertise in what I described earlier as our focus group: education, healthy families, economic development of placemaking. That group of individuals will help take a very long list of wonderful and crazy ideas and then they have...

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

... something to say, "Yeah, we see some consistency here. This seems to be what a lot of people want and need." And based on their knowledge in that field, they'll be able to say, "We already do that, but you can help us with this," and then that work will inform our board of directors as they engage on strategic visioning later this year. So when do we know if we're successful, or do we ever finish? We will continue to review our vision and our mission every few years so that we can continue to grow with the community and meet its needs. And we'll keep asking them if we're doing it right.



**Lyn Wineman:**

That sounds great. I think that sounds like a fantastic, fantastic process. So Brenda, you've got a great planning process in place. You're doing good work. What does the future hold for Iowa West Foundation? Is there any particular goal or initiative that you are hoping to accomplish in your time at the helm?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

A couple of things. I think that when you're a place-based foundation, you really struggle with seeing and prioritizing the needs of the whole community, and so over our 22 years of existence, we've always relied on community volunteers as board members to make decisions about what we should fund, and that is highly appropriate, but we can and we will do better at making sure that we represent all of our community, all of diversity. And so that's a target area that I want to really change and want to accomplish.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

The other thing I would say is my predecessors in this role have built some remarkable things, truly remarkable things, and changed the community in very visible ways. I want to start thinking about how we can change our community at the human level. Those needs of the individual can be a lot harder to identify and addressing them, though, is something that really will make us a community where families want to live. If we don't address needs at the individual level, then they can't think about how they can use some of those remarkable new Field House and soccer complex and riverfront activities that we have available to them.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

So an area where we are already talking and hoping to begin focusing is housing. We're working very closely with the Omaha community. The Sherwood Foundation has been a leader in convening all of the interested parties. Front Porch is a spinoff from that. Meredith Dylan is a remarkable human being who is going to do amazing things for the community, and we look forward to taking some of those projects that are being implemented in Omaha and seeing how they fit for Council Bluffs and what we can do for housing.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Really smart. It feels like I've said the phrase really smart after almost all of your answers, Brenda, so I think that's a theme, here. And I'm going to ask you next one of my favorite questions that I ask on every podcast, and our listeners know that I'm inspired by motivational quotes. You've had so many good things to say today. I'm hoping you can give us a few of your own Brenda Mainwaring words of wisdom to inspire us.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

I absolutely love mentoring young professionals, particularly women who are struggling to find their professional place. I think that most of us start our careers looking for ways that we can advance, and if we're lucky and we work hard, we can reach a point in our career where we have the opportunity to sort of pause for a second, and that's when you have to make a decision as a professional individual, as a professional woman, are you going to keep climbing? Are you going to keep looking up that rock wall to find more handholds? Are you going to take that ledge and turn around and see who else you can bring up behind you?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

And so with Union Pacific and now with Iowa West, I am fortunate to have found a place where I can pause long enough to turn around and pull some people up behind me, and I think it's important. Not everybody gets to that point in their career. That is not a passion for everybody, but for those who do want to mentor, you don't always have to keep looking up. Sometimes you need to turn around and offer a hand.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That is just such a special quote. Thank you for that, Brenda. It kind of gave me chills, actually. I think that a lot of people in the world today need mentors, and I think a lot of young women don't get to see strong female mentors. And I think it's really important for us to turn around and pull some people up. That is fantastic. So for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work, how can they find out more about the Iowa West Foundation?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Well, you can find us in all the usual places. Obviously we have a website and we're on Facebook, we're on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, kind of in that order. The bulk of our information, everything you might want to know, our annual reports, our board members, our advisory committee members, all those things are listed on our website. We do post quite a lot on Facebook and LinkedIn, and then less so on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. What we're trying to do right now to help people understand who we are and what we do is have our grantees tell our story by telling their story.

Visit the Iowa West Foundation website at <https://www.iowawestfoundation.org/>.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh yeah.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

If we funded a project that has been meaningful, then we want them to talk about it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That sounds great, Brenda. And Brenda, I am going to make sure we have the web address in our show notes on the website, and that is iowawestfoundation.org. Pretty easy to figure out, right? iowawestfoundation.org. So Brenda, as we wrap up this great conversation today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

We are living through interesting and challenging times.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That is an understatement.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

I don't think you could overstate that. Iowa West's vision is to support a community where families want to live, and that vision can really only be achieved when we all work together for the common good. I would say let's celebrate our Midwestern roots and let's come together to succeed.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, that's beautiful, Brenda. Brenda, I fully believe the world needs more people like you doing smart things like you are doing at the Iowa West Foundation. Thank you for taking time to share with us today.

**Brenda Mainwaring:**

Thank you. It has been my pleasure.

**Announcer:**

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