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Ashley Kittle, MA '10, Prairie on Farms program manager for the UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center, loads the planter in preparation for the initial planting that will transform Iowa farmland into the Irvine Prairie.



A gift to UNI is restoring Iowa's landscape

On a sunny Friday in May, **Cathy Irvine** stood under a tree in the farm field across the road from her house with her dog, Maddie. She greeted more than 50 guests who arrived in the field north of Dysart. The mix of guests included Cathy's friends and relatives, University of Northern Iowa students, faculty and staff, and students from Union High School's National FFA Organization and science and ecology classes.

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The 77-acre stretch of land where the group gathered was about to undergo a transformation, and those in attendance were there to start that process. The Tallgrass Prairie Center at UNI was to begin restoring the land to prairie—Iowa's native ecosystem—and establish the Irvine Prairie.

Irvine and her late husband, David, shared a passion for conservation. It was this passion that drove Cathy to approach the Tallgrass Prairie Center about the possibility of giving the land to the organization to return it to its natural state.

Irvine's generosity and a collaboration between the

Tallgrass Prairie Center and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation are making this vision for a new public learning space possible.

A conservation easement, retained by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, prohibits development on the land and guarantees the Irvine Prairie will remain a conservation resource in perpetuity. Ownership of the land belongs to the UNI Properties Corporation, which will contract with the UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center to install and maintain the prairie.

"This is a long-term, collaborative process," said **Laura Jackson**, director of the Tallgrass Prairie

Center. "The Tallgrass Prairie Center is the steward of this land. Cathy's gift provides an opportunity for students from UNI and area schools to form their own questions and make discoveries here. We are thankful for her vision to create a place where students can experience how Iowa used to be 150 years ago."

The process of planting the farmland into native prairie will take four to five years. In 2018, 8.5 acres were planted into prairie. This year an additional 18.5 acres will be planted.

Only two percent of original North American tallgrass prairie ecosystem remains.



Prairie land offers native species an environment to flourish.



UNI President **Mark Nook** takes part in the first planting of the Irvine Prairie following the dedication.



Cathy Irvine



“We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.”

*From Willa Cather’s
“O Pioneers!”*

“ The Irvine Prairie project is exciting for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation because we get to continue our long partnership while helping to protect and restore an important piece of Iowa.”

— JOE MCGOVERN

In Iowa, less than one-tenth of a percent remains. Prairie vegetation plays an important role in the ecosystem. One of its main functions happens below the soil, where the prairie plants' roots grow deep.

Many of the problems plaguing Iowa, such as tainted agricultural runoff and flooding, could be mitigated with more prairie vegetation, Jackson said.

That's because the prairie roots act like a sponge, soaking up water—whether it contains agricultural chemicals or not. This keeps water from soaking through the ground until it hits farmers' tile drainage systems, where it runs unimpeded into the river, Jackson said.

Prairie roots can play this role all year. Corn and soybeans, which are only planted in the summer, cannot.

“It's a real challenge to have a healthy ecosystem, clean water

and not having flooding when we have a landscape with plants whose roots are only active for a few months out of the year,” Jackson said. “It's not the farmers' fault, they're doing everything they can. Without those roots in the ground, there's only so much you can do.”

The Irvines had the vision to establish a place of research and study for students and scientists—an understanding that continuous learning happens as we examine the earth and the roots long-gone.

The landscape in Iowa looks very different today from what the first settlers experienced when it joined the union in 1846. With better understanding and knowledge, the Tallgrass Prairie Center is restoring stretches of land like the Irvine Prairie to its natural state to benefit our society and environment. This transformation is a powerful tool for a sustainable future. **UNI**

The Irvine Prairie is open during daylight hours for recreation and nature appreciation. Take only photos, leave only footprints. If you are interested in learning more about the Tallgrass Prairie Center or becoming a friend of the Tallgrass Prairie Center, visit tallgrassprairiecenter.org.



Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) president **Joe McGovern**, speaks to the crowd gathered at the dedication of the UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center's Irvine Prairie about the partnership between the INHF, the Tallgrass Prairie Center, the UNI Properties Corporation and Cathy Irvine that brought about the creation of the Irvine Prairie.



Justin Meissen (right), research and restoration program manager for the UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center, talks to students from Union High School about the process of returning land to its native tallgrass prairie ecosystem. More than 70 species of native species were included in the mix planted at the Irvine Prairie.