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Once Upon a Gatekeeper: How Loren Stubbendeck became an Otoe County Fair tradition

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Once Upon a Fair serves as the theme for the 2026 Otoe County Fair, and that theme seems appropriately coined when it comes to the proven dedication and continuous support of longtime fair attendee Loren Stubbendeck.

The story of the Otoe County Fair would be hard to write without mentioning Stubbendeck, a 40-year-plus attendee.

Every year, you'll find him in the Kimmell Arena at the major animal shows, whether that's pigs, beef, sheep or goats.

His station is always the same, near the gate of the competition ring, greeting and granting access to fair exhibitors and their animals.

Stubbendeck's work as a gatekeeper doesn't go unnoticed. It's an unspoken truth that he'll be at his usual station.

"If someone is there, they know



Pictured are Loren Stubbendeck, right, and Missy Marth, Direct Support Professional at Apace in Nebraska City, enjoying the Otoe County Fair. Unfortunately, a physical ailment kept Loren from his normal gate-guarding duties this year. Photo by Kirt Manion

that it's his spot," said Missy Marth, Direct Support Professional at Apace in Nebraska City.

Marth works with Stubbendeck, a longtime client of Apace.

Formerly known as Region V services in Nebraska City, Apace is

a community-led nonprofit organization that supports those with intellectual and developmental disabilities by providing person-centered planning, job skills, training and community.

Stubbendeck is a member of

the Deaf community, communicating with ASL, American Sign Language, enhanced with his own personality to form a specific dialect known to people who communicate with him regularly.

That might sound complicated. It's not.

Being around Stubbendeck for just a few moments tells you that he is anxious to communicate, to encourage, and to be seen.

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Weather

Below are weather observations by Donald L. Sweat of Syracuse.

Tuesday, July 28: High, 90; Low, 75
Wednesday, July 29: High 87; Low, 67
Thursday, July 30: High, 81; Low, 58
Friday, July 31: High, 86; Low, 55
Saturday, Aug. 1: High, 87; Low, 55
Sunday, Aug. 2: High, 90; Low, 56
Monday, Aug. 3: High, 90; Low, 56
Rain for the Week: 1.04"

Loren

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Marth says Stubbendeck loves to be around people.

In Nebraska City, that means getting out to many sporting events in town, from American Legion baseball, to all manner of school sports.

And, there's the fair, of course.

Stubbendeck is originally from Palmyra. He's a lifetime Otoe County resident who first attended the fair with his parents at the age of 4.

In the many years of his attendance at the fair, Stubbendeck has been known to go to all the events. In fact, Marth said Stubbendeck used to stay on the fairgrounds in a borrowed camper throughout the days of the event, attending everything he could.

In recent years, Stubbendeck hasn't been staying at the fair each night. He's there each day for sure.

Marth said Stubbendeck loves

attending the fair every year and begins talking about it in April.

On Thursday, July 30, Marth and Stubbendeck honored their weekly tradition of having breakfast at Gram's Place. With the Otoe County Fair beginning on Friday, July 31, Stubbendeck was buzzing with excitement and smiling wide.

Getting to see the people of the fair is the most exciting part.

"He just loves to go. He knows everybody and everybody knows him. Loren is up for anything. He's fun and good hearted," Marsh said, adding that he gives the best bear hugs.

This year will be no different that any other. He'll attend the animal shows, make his rounds of the grounds on his motorized scooter and visit the food booth in Royal Arena for his usual order, a coke and a cheeseburger.

Then it's back to work at the gate for hours of standing and greeting exhibitors. During the pig show, Stubbendeck is in the arena with the animals. Pigs can be ornery, so he must look out for his safety. Marth said the fair workers make sure that he's safe during that time as well.

It can be exhausting for sure.

Stubbendeck would never complain about it.

In fact, work ethic is another of his many well-known traits. Stubbendeck worked during harvest time in past years and is a diligent worker on projects at Apace.

Stubbendeck's work at the fair pays off when he interacts with the fair goers and fair exhibitors.

Marth said Stubbendeck has a special relationship with veteran fair competitors Landon and Addie Ferguson.

"They've been really supportive," Marth said of the Ferguson siblings.

Marth said the Otoe County Fair itself showed support to Stubbendeck with an award honoring his dedication.

Awards aside, Stubbendeck attends the fair to be a part of the process and to encourage everyone. He succeeds.

And you don't need to give Stubbendeck a plaque, a trophy or a ribbon to let him know you appreciate that support.

Just smile and give a thumbs up.

He'll appreciate that positive energy. And so will you.



Class of 1979
Senior Picture



Many thanks to Jean (Wruble) Bradford for the information.