Zeeland Hall in Zeeland, N.D., was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places. University of North Dakota head football coach Bubba Schweigert returned to his hometown of Zeeland, N.D., on June 25 to speak at the celebration of Zeeland Hall being named to the National Register of Historic Places.

Bubba Schweigert speaks in Zeeland Hall

By Katie Pinke
Agweek Publisher

The Zeeland Hall was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places. To commemorate the milestone, University of North Dakota head football coach Bubba Schweigert returned to his hometown to be the keynote speaker at the celebration on Sunday, June 25.

Zeeland N.D., population 85, sits near the North Dakota/South Dakota border and is one of three-and-a-half towns in my home county of 2,600 people. Ashley, Wishek, Zeeland and half of Lehr are in McIntosh County (the other half of Lehr is in Logan County).

My husband, daughters, in-laws and a friend visiting from Montana all loaded up late Sunday morning to drive to Zeeland to hear Bubba speak and enjoy a homemade knoephla, sausage and sauerkraut meal, a German Russian delicacy.

The Zeeland Hall, built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1936, was a federal project but the community had to raise matching funds. Imagine the hard work and determination it took to persevere through a community project of this magnitude during the height of the worst economic depression in modern history.

At the celebration, Dr. Tom Isern, history professor at North Dakota State University, shared about the building’s history. His remarks reminded me of the importance of community, specifically the people. “Small towns have inertia with infrastructure and the rest is the human factor,” he said. Isern encouraged everyone gathered in Zeeland Hall to maintain the building and use it to unite and grow the community. “Do fun stuff in this building and brag about it to get the attention of travelers,” he added.

When Bubba took the stage, he shared about his late grandfather John Schweigert who served as foreman of the WPA project in 1935-36. “I miss my grandpa, but I miss him more today,” Bubba said. “This is our Madison Square Garden. It’s special because our grandparents and fathers built it.”

He also shared about tripping on the stairs during school Christmas programs, dances, 25 cent movies with 15 cent sodas and 10 cent candy bars, basketball games, proms, graduations, wedding receptions, anniversaries, family reunions and riding his banana seat bike back and forth outside.

“I used to wonder why my aunts would want to come back here for family reunions. Now I get it,” Bubba said.

The remarks made that day made me think about Wishek and whether our city council, on which I serve, is growing our community for the next generation. The comments and event encouraged me as a rural and community advocate.

Bubba demonstrates humility, which was evident in his demeanor that day and has been throughout his lifetime. He deflects any attention and grounds himself on the experiences and memories in and around Zeeland Hall and the people who make it special, including his mother, aunts, brothers, wife and sons who sat in the crowd.

The values and experiences we share in our community matter. Maintenance matters too in order to keep infrastructure strong. Most of all, it’s people who make up the best parts of our life. I’m proud to be a part of a rural area rooted in history with people who demonstrate hard work, determination and humility. Whether it’s in the Zeeland Hall, on the sidelines of a Division I college football game or persevering through a new community initiative, we can grow from our experiences and examples.

Editor’s note: Pinke is the publisher and general manager of Agweek. She can be reached at kpinke@agweek.com, or connect with her on Twitter @kpinke.