

## Benefactors initiate new mentoring program

Intrigued by the success of the Avenue Scholars Foundation's mission to "ensure careers for students of hope and need," Omahans Rick and Pam Witt are teaming up with ASF leaders to launch a personal finance-focused mentorship program in 2017.

The Witts have agreed to financially support three Avenue Scholars from the junior class at Omaha Northwest High School and to mentor those students — focusing on providing an understanding of economics, personal finance, job-seeking skills, and life skills.

Laura Miller, Executive Director of High School Programs, and Jamar Dorsley, Director of High School Programs, — in collaboration with Northwest Talent Advisor Taleyia Broadway — will select the students and develop a mentorship program, which will include setting up meetings with Rick and Pam throughout the school year.

One year ago, Rick Witt retired from Mutual of Omaha, where he worked for 42 years, the last 16 as the Chief Investment Officer. Pam Witt, a "Mom" and a volunteer in the Millard schools, has work experience as an engineer at a local television station for nine years and also as a job Recruiter. Having served as Emeritus Chairs of the Parent and Family Leadership Council at Creighton University, and with a number of not-for-profit local organizations, Rick and Pam have been looking for more ways to give back to their community.

"We have always believed in the importance of education; we recognize the challenges societies face in education, and we have been thinking of what we could do to help others meet those challenges," Rick said.

After being introduced to Avenue



Rick and Pam Witt are working with Avenue Scholars Foundation to launch a personal finance-focused mentorship program at the high school level.

Scholars Foundation CEO Ken Bird and his wife, Annie, and learning more about the ASF mission, the Witts expressed their interest in becoming the benefactors of a mentoring program to support young men and women. The idea is that once this new mentoring component is developed at Northwest, it could become a model for implementing similar programs in all eight of the ASF high schools — possibly supported by other benefactors in a stratum similar to the Witts.

"We will work hard to make this successful at this school," Rick said. "Then, we will keep our eyes open for people like us who might be in a similar situation financially and are also looking for something like this to be involved with."

Pam added, "We knew we could write a check, but we also wondered whether we could mentor some kids."

Rick and Pam have been impressed with the Avenue Scholars Foundation's ability to deliver on its goals of guiding students into the work force.

"Donors want to understand the de-

liverables and results," Rick said. "They want to see the benefits of the dollars that they are trying to impact with. This program has the deliverables right here; you start with these young people as juniors in high school, mentor them and advocate for them. Then, four or five years later, you're placing them into a job that's almost middle income. Wow! Donors see that and say, 'this is a program I want to support.'"

Dorsley is equally excited to help establish this new program.

"Kids need the exposure of working with adults — adults who care and are willing to share," he said. "Those relationships really matter. We like the idea of starting small and intimate, with three students."

Dorsley believes Northwest is a good location for initiating the program.

"They have a new principal who has changed the culture; it's going in the right direction. We have kids there who believe in the program and their advisor," he says. "This could be the little extra nudge they need to keep everything going in the right direction."

## Papillion senior shadows State Farm agent

Avenue Scholars Foundation has inspired Kobien Byers, a Papillion-LaVista senior, to pursue a career in business administration.

“Since joining Avenue Scholars, I have discovered a career I want to pursue in business,” Byers said. “They have shown and taught me many transferrable job skills.”

Talent Advisor Ashley Knott, Career Talent Advisor Brad Ekwerekwu, Counselor Kelly Bernadt, Career Talent Advisor Marissa Marx and others have helped guide and motivate Byers throughout the process.

“Before Avenue Scholars I didn’t know what I wanted to do for a career,” he said. “They gave me a vision.”

Another source of inspiration was a job shadowing experience with Anthony Anderson, a State Farm Insurance agent, who told Byers about his experience navigating the path to a business career.

“It was very inspiring,” Byers said. “One thing he talked about was thinking about the products



‘LIKE A GOOD NEIGHBOR.’ State Farm agent Anthony Anderson poses with Kobien Byers, a Papillion LaVista High School senior, during a job shadowing experience this fall.

a business sells and services a business provides. He talked about determining what people want and need to best provide those services.”

After he earns an Associate’s degree at Metropolitan Community College, Byers plans to attend the University of Nebraska-Omaha where he hopes to obtain a Master’s degree in Business Administration.

Eventually, he

would like to start “several” of his own businesses. Knott believes Byers has found his path to success.

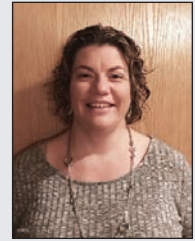
“I think what stands out is his newfound belief in himself and his hope for the future,” Knott said. “I have watched Kobien go from a student who was living in the day-to-day with no real identifiable goals

for the future a year and a half ago to a student who is confident, hopeful, driven and inspired by the future. Another

factor is the standard of excellence he sets for himself—he no longer settles for submitting mediocre work in his classes, and I’m certain the pride he currently takes in his work will only continue as he works towards pursuing his career goals. Finally, Kobien’s natural strengths that he’s uncovered over the past two years, especially his writing, speaking, interpersonal and leadership skills, are certain to propel him towards his goals of finding success in the business world.”



## NEW STAFF



**Jenn Francis**  
Office & Staff  
Assistant  
ASF

**Duties:** Data entry and assist all staff with their needs

**Education:** Certificate of Bookkeeping, MCC

**Work Experience**  
Accounting Clerk, Budweiser of Omaha; Infant Teacher; Cook; Child Care

**On Working with ASF:**  
I heard nothing but great things about the staff and program at Avenue Scholars. I wanted to be a part of a rewarding team and use my skills to help others.



**Adam Vander Tuig**  
Talent Advisor  
Omaha Benson

**Duties:** Working with high school juniors and seniors as a teacher, mentor and advocate to help them achieve their career goals

**Education:** Bachelor’s Degree, Nebraska Wesleyan University; University of Cambridge (England); Master’s Degree, Harvard University

**Work Experience:**  
English teacher, Grand Island Senior High School and Omaha Westside High School

**On Working with ASF:**  
I like that the TA’s (Talent Advisors) are equal parts teacher, guide, and mentor. I’m eager to celebrate the successes of our scholars.





**LUNCH FUN AT UNO.** Above, Avenue Scholars (from left) Ismael Pascual, Abraham Mora-Becerra and Alaina Cardenas are all smiles during their lunch with UNO staff member James Freeman. Left, Career Talent Advisor Michael Hughes enjoys a light moment with Avenue Scholar Abril Tapia and UNO staff members.

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President/CEO
- JEF JOHNSTON**  
Chief Operating Officer
- DOUG PIERSON**  
Chief Administrative Officer
- MIKE ALVANO**  
Chief Financial Officer
- LAURA MILLER**  
Executive Director of High School Programs
- TERRY FISCHER**  
Executive Director of Career Programs
- BEVERLY HASS**  
Executive Assistant to CEO & Events Coordinator
- JENNIFER BISIGNANO**  
Data Director
- KRIS VALENTIN**  
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Accounting Manager
- KELLY BERNADT**  
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- KRISTIN WALSH**  
Student Support Coordinator
- JENN FRANCIS**  
Office & Data Assistant

**Career Talent Advisors**

- BRADLEY EKWEREKWU**  
Director of Career Programs;
- Catie Dagle, Terrence Gillian, Michael Hughes, Marissa Marx, Brittani Tanhucuo, Monica Wells

**High School Talent Advisors**

- JAMAR DORSEY**  
Director of High School Programs;
- Taleya Broadway, Juan Cangas, Kayla Gillian, Daniel Jaimes, Ashley Knott, Beth Leach, Courtland Olson, Adam Vander Tuig

**ROD HOWE**

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*"Our mission is to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships."*

## Program eases Scholars' transition to UNO

Over the years, Avenue Scholars Foundation's mission "to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships" has typically concluded with the student attaining a good job or transferring from Metropolitan Community College to the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

Although ASF staff members love to stay in touch with former students, that connection was mostly informal. This year, ASF has taken a step to keep the connection going on a formal basis.

"We have about 15 students who have completed their programs at MCC and then transferred to UNO," says Doug Pierson, Chief Administrative Officer. "While our program support is limited to MCC, we wanted to stay in touch with local students and offer whatever additional support that we could."

With UNO's cooperation, AFS started an Avenue Scholars at UNO program. UNO assigned one of its advisors, Janeth Cano, to work with Avenue Scholars attending UNO.

"The primary purposes of this cooperative program are to offer ASF students a go-to place and person on campus to help them navigate the academic and financial challenges of a large urban university," Pierson said. "Now, whenever our graduates need assistance while attending UNO, they know that Janeth is their go-to person."

In addition two Career Talent Advisors, Michael Hughes and Monica Wells, meet periodically with UNO/ASF students for social get-togethers and academic updates.

"Also, when ASF students graduate from UNO, they are welcomed back into the ASF family for career support services, including finding a job and on-boarding into a career," Pierson said.





(Above) Avenue Scholars get into a team-bonding activity — Bear, Hunter, Ninja — during an Orientation Day on the north campus of Metropolitan Community College. (Far Left) Career Talent Advisors Brittani Tanhueco and Monica Wells direct Scholars during a Jeopardy game activity designed to test their knowledge of the Avenue Scholars program. (Left) Students excitedly work together to be the first team to correctly answer a Jeopardy question.

## ASF/Aksarben Scholarship students beating the odds

Surviving the freshmen year in any college or university setting is challenging. By at least one measure, Avenue Scholar/Aksarben Scholarship students attending Metropolitan Community College are beating the odds.

Among the various measures that colleges use to determine how well their students are performing is the first-year persistence rate. In other words, how many first-year students make it through the first year of college in good standing and enroll for additional classes at the beginning of their second year? That's the "persistence" rate.

Metropolitan Community College compared that rate for the general population (a combination of all MCC students, not just low-income students) to the first cohort of AKSARBEN Scholarship winners (100% low-income students). These students all started classes in the fall of 2015. The results: MCC general population had a

persistence rate of 32.8%. The 2015 ASF/AKSARBEN students persistence rate was 75.8%.

"This is a remarkable achievement," says Chief Administration Officer Doug Pierson. "The key difference between the two groups is the support offered by Avenue Scholars Career Talent Advisors and MCC Success Navigators. Their support and daily monitoring of student progress has led to more than doubling the persistence rate."

ASF/Aksarben Scholarship students are committed to attending a mandatory orientation during the summer prior to start of fall quarter, to becoming active participants, and to attending weekly College Academy classes for the first three quarters at MCC.

MCC presented at a national convention for community colleges earlier this fall to show their colleagues the effectiveness of the ASF/MCC program.