



AVENUE SCHOLARS

ORIGIN STORY

The First 15 Years
2008-2023



Introduction

The 15th anniversary of the Avenue Scholars program is a meaningful occasion that marks a journey of intention, dedication, transformation and empowerment.

Over the past 15 years, Avenue Scholars has been a beacon of hope for thousands of students facing adversity, particularly the challenges of poverty. Our commitment to dismantling the barriers that hinder education, training, career exploration and career selection has paved the way for young people to unlock their full potential. The primary goal of our program is clear: to equip students with the experiences and tools they need to actively choose high-impact career paths, right here in the heart of Omaha, while offering them unparalleled support and guidance.

Our achievements have been made possible through what we affectionately call the “Avenue Scholars secret sauce”—a unique combination of program features, a guiding philosophy and effective strategies that consistently yield historic results for both our students and the community we serve.

Throughout our journey, which has included many bends in the road, a theme has emerged: Avenue Scholars has the privilege of working with the best of the best students. Those who have successfully navigated adversity, maintained unwavering hope and diligently pursued their full potential have become extraordinary professionals. This is why we proudly refer to our students as “Scholars.” It’s not just a matter of terminology—it’s a powerful message of hope and aspiration. We firmly believe that, regardless of their circumstances, every student possesses incredible potential to achieve greatness. The difference makers at Avenue Scholars are having trusting relationships, consistent support, tuition grants and, when needed, access to financial resources.

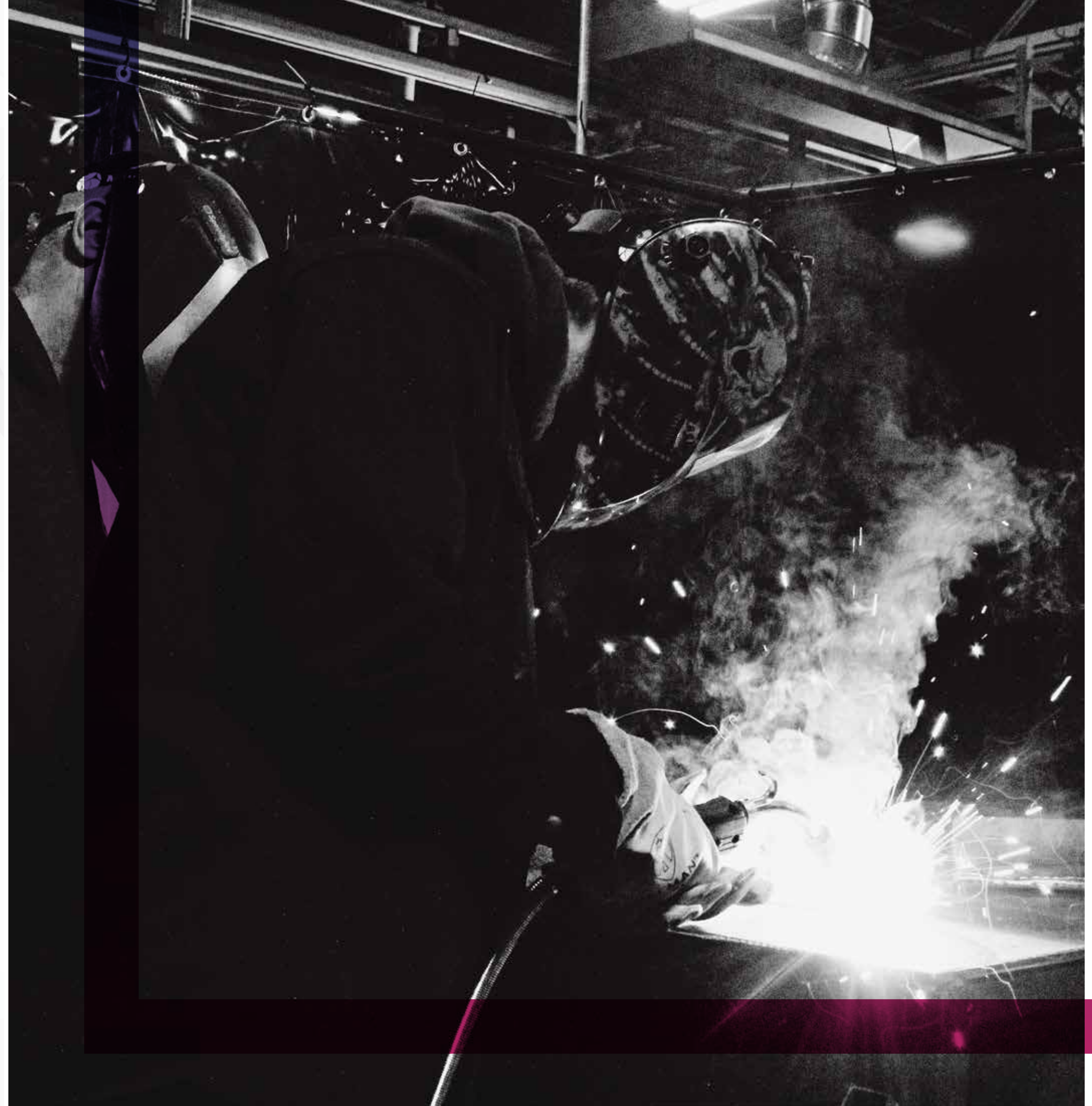
I am proud to share with you the origin story of Avenue Scholars: immerse yourself in the stories of progress and transformation, stories woven together by our dedicated staff, supported by our generous donors, and in partnership with students, educators and businesses.

This is the Avenue Scholars journey.

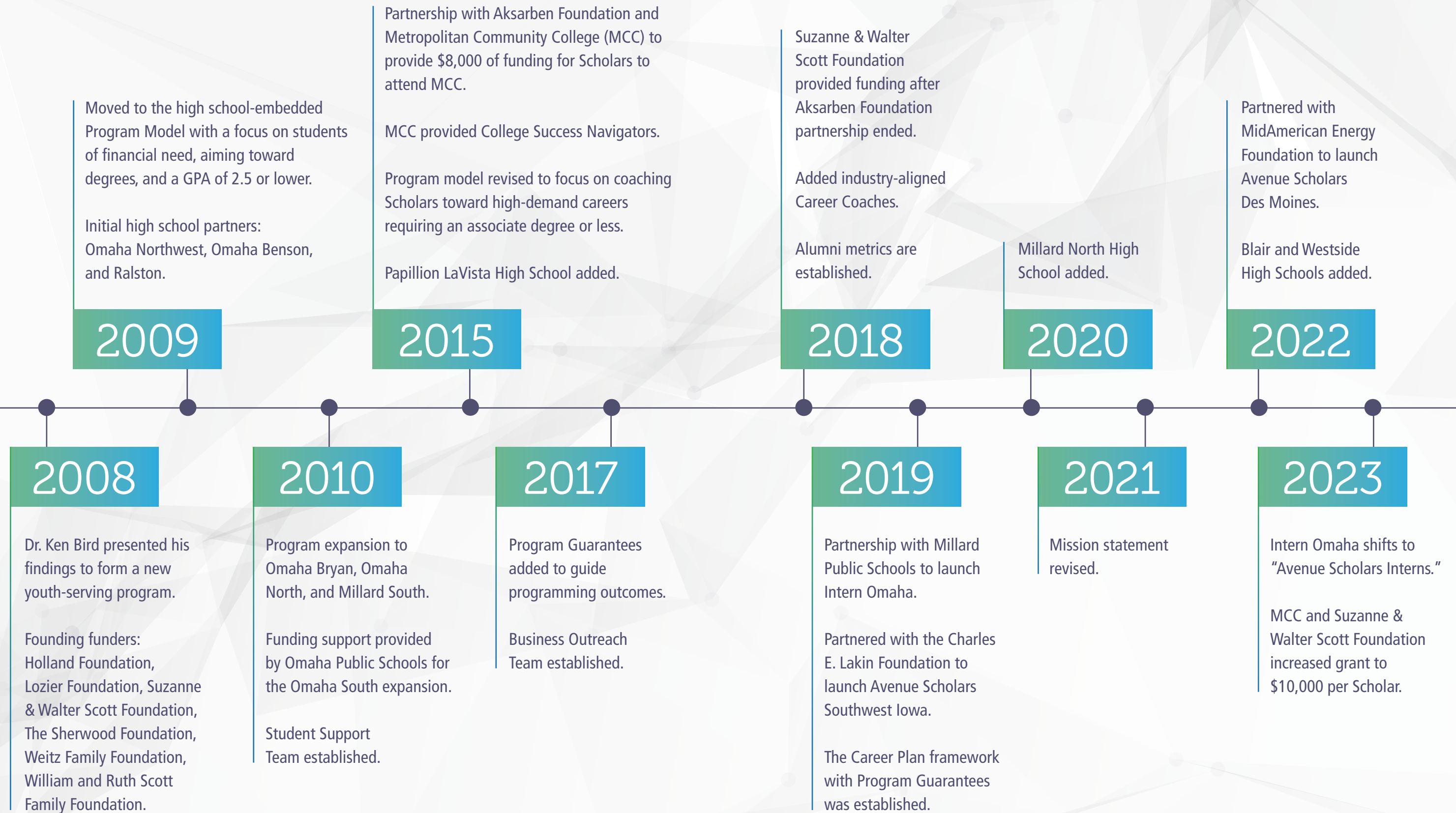
Ken Bird, Ed.D.
PRESIDENT/CEO

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Timeline





"People matter. It matters that everybody can succeed to whatever their potential is."

SUSIE BUFFETT

On the Avenue to Success

Avenue Scholars is celebrating 15 years in 2023 as a bridge program supporting young people in financial need to find successful life-career pathways.

Thousands have come through its ranks since 2008 to find steady employment for themselves and an improved quality of life for their families. The program has evolved from an academic to a career-based model that grants students scholarships to two-year colleges or training in preparation for getting them started on career paths in high-demand fields. Along the way, the program has expanded into additional schools and communities, in the Omaha area and Iowa, and established partnerships with a growing roster of businesses. Students pursue career explorations, participate in Boot Camps and work paid internships. Some go directly from interning to becoming full-

time staff with the same employer; others try out several fields before finding their passion. Navigating students through high school and a certificate program or an associate degree, right on through into the workforce, are professional educators, coaches and advisors. This proactive and intensive support prepares young people for sustained success in their chosen avenues.

The program emerged as a response to the challenges faced by students living in poverty or dealing with other difficult circumstances. In Nebraska, the gaps that impact certain segments of the population in employment,

income, educational attainment and quality of life were brought into sharp relief by a 2008 Omaha World-Herald investigative series. The series detailed how generational poverty puts young people at risk for dropping out of school, lacking life and social skills, working entry-level jobs that don't pay a living wage, and intersecting with the criminal justice system. Without help or intervention to break that cycle, it repeats.

The scale and scope of the problem in Omaha—mirroring many communities nationwide—moved some into action, notably the late Omaha CEO of the Kiewit Corporation, Walter Scott Jr., along with Susie Buffett, Barbara and Wally Weitz, and other philanthropists. But the newspaper's findings were not revelations to these civic leaders.

"All of us in our own ways had been very aware, very troubled and very anxious to figure out a way to do something about the circumstances described in that series," said Wally Weitz, CFA, Co-chairman of the Board of Weitz Investments. "We had been doing work along those lines for decades."

This cohort of well-positioned citizens turned to a trusted education leader, Dr. Ken Bird, Westside Community Schools Superintendent, to design a program that gave young people the tools and means to move themselves and their families out of poverty.

"That became a rallying point for some of the philanthropists in Omaha to say 'we've got to do something,'" said Bird, President/CEO of Avenue

Scholars. "At the same time in Omaha, a program called Building Bright Futures was trying to do some significant K-12 education reform in the community, build early childhood infrastructure and provide health care for kids. But nobody was really walking alongside individuals adversely affected by poverty, crime and unemployment to guide them into avenues of success. Among the philanthropists who came together to take action, there was a lot of passion around making whatever program we did touch the individual lives of people struggling to escape those negative social determinants. The goal was to remove barriers so that each participant could move forward in life to reach their potential rather than be trapped in a perpetual cycle."

For philanthropist Susie Buffett, President of The Sherwood Foundation and Chair of the Avenue Scholars Board of Directors, the program makes sense because it empowers individuals with hope, training and work, thereby strengthening families and the community in the process.

"People matter," Buffett said. "It matters that everybody can succeed to whatever their potential is. I think the kids who have the most challenges matter as much as everybody else. And I think they have potential. So if we can be doing something that helps them have a better life, which is going to help their kids have a better life, and makes a difference long-term, how could we not do it? In a city like Omaha, in terms of the size that we are and the philanthropy that we have, we can get things done. We should be able to do something about this. We won't be able to fix 100% of everything. But we've got a strong community and a strong philanthropic community that work together."



The Avenue Scholars Name

The Avenue Scholars name represents the idea of students exploring educational and career paths, pursuing aspirations and moving toward a destination.

The name "Avenue Scholars" hits all the right notes and is important to the organization.

"The name was determined by focus groups of youth and stakeholders many years ago," Bird said. "Students told us that they didn't consider themselves scholars because no one ever called them by that name. That was an incredibly powerful finding. When you think of the word 'scholars' it has value, and our program ensures that our students are known for their academic pursuits as scholars and their extraordinary potential as professionals. Our name 'Avenue Scholars' conveys that our students are on a pathway that's going to lead them to success, and we want to provide as many pathways as possible that are tailored to students' needs."

"In our mission statement, we refer to our work as 'bridging the gap,'" said Lindsay Decker, Senior Director of Communications and Development for Avenue Scholars. "If you think of a bridge, it is directional, just like an avenue. A bridge is a stable force that gives you a safe place to cross. We think of ourselves as a force of stability for students and the community and a resource for providing direction and career clarity."

For a short time, the program was originally organized under the name Bright Futures Foundation. To avoid confusion with Building Bright Futures and to better capture program aims, the name Avenue Scholars was adopted and now seems so fitting that it's hard to imagine it was called anything else.



A Charge for Change

Everyone who became part of the Avenue Scholars origin story agrees that the driving forces behind a desire to change the trajectory of young people were Susie Buffett, Barbara Weitz and Walter Scott. Buffett and Weitz have a passion for underserved and underrepresented students, and Scott had a passion for workforce development and supporting and retaining Nebraska students in Nebraska. This combination is the heart of Avenue Scholars.

The genesis for the program started when Scott invited Bird to lunch at his Kiewit office, where Burlington Capital Founder Michael Yanney joined them. Bird, still the Westside Schools Superintendent at the time, had no inkling why he had been invited there.

"After lunch, Walter said, 'We've seen a scholarship program called Kalamazoo Promise in Michigan created through philanthropists and the corporate community that awards its high school graduating seniors a scholarship to a four- or two-year public institution. I want to talk to you about setting that up in Omaha. You think about it, look it over, let us know, and let's come back together in a month to discuss it.'" Bird was eyeing retirement but wanted to stay involved in education. The assignment intrigued him enough that he took time off from

his Westside duties to see if the Michigan program might be a good fit for Omaha.

"I knew a little bit about the Kalamazoo Promise initiative, and then I had a chance to go there and talk to the people running the program," said Bird. "They were at the end of their first year. It was a very interesting concept. It awarded scholarships virtually, which I wasn't enamored with. I was interested in something more hands-on and proactively involved in the lives of young people. I reported back to Walter, 'It's not for me, but I'd be happy to help you find somebody or help you get it set up.' I started to leave and he said, 'When are you going to bring us your project?'"

Scott invited Bird to explore different ideas on how to help kids in the community, and it was decided that they would get back together once Bird had a plan he could get behind.

Without even knowing the details yet, such a commitment meant getting other philanthropists on board. "They all came to the table to hear the concept of helping kids facing barriers finish high school, get them a four-year or two-year degree, although the real focus was on four-year, and keep them in our community where they can be

productive workers and citizens and plant roots in Omaha," said Bird. The stakeholders bought into this as a companion program to Building Bright Futures that would focus on a broader age group. The philanthropists made financial commitments to provide resources for Bird to investigate programs around the country.

Bird set about doing due diligence. He traveled from coast to coast to observe and assess programs trying to move youth forward. The Gates Foundation funded a college access program in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Gary Gitnick and his wife, Cherna Gitnick, founded the Fulfillment Fund serving the greater Los Angeles area. The Marquez family established a college access program in Denver. Bird leveraged his contacts in the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor looking at federally funded programs. He visited the Kellogg Foundation in Michigan.

"I talked to a lot of folks and collected a lot of information. My main findings were that there was a lot going on in high schools, but no consistency. Everyone was trying to figure out how to get young people better access and prepare for primarily four-year institutions. There was little or no alignment with jobs. There were Department of Labor activities and workforce programs, but they weren't talking to the education community."

Bird also noted a lack of continuity, as one program would take students through high school, but once in college, the students needed to engage with another program. As part of the survey he developed, Bird connected with the Horatio Alger Association, an organization Walter Scott deeply believed in, and its then-emerging scholarship program, and he liked what he saw.

"They were picking kids up after high school," said Bird. "I knew from my education background that these transition or break points from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college, are where you have the most trauma and loss of kids."

Being a steward of young people over a continuum of time is what Bird had in mind. He wasn't alone. "There's nobody to catch kids coming out of high school," said Ed May, Avenue Scholars Iowa board member. "Who's helping with the safety nets and the lifeboats for those kids? Then that transition from whatever training you get to a job? You're on your own 99 percent of the time."

May knew it anecdotally. Bird knew it from experience. "If you're in poverty, the failure rate is



much higher along all of the break points if you don't have the social structure and social capital to support you," Bird said.

"A very consistent part of student failure is not having a significant other consistently in the life of the student, and mentoring programs are episodic. You see kids periodically, and the average mentor might stay 18 months with a student. You need to have consistency. Kids need to have someone they can trust and know they will be there. Having that significant person in the life of somebody that lives in stressed economic conditions becomes really critical."

Though early childhood education and development was a priority for many stakeholders, they also recognized the need to "engage with high school-age kids, making sure they are prepared and getting them on the right track," said Wally Weitz. He and his wife, Barbara, served on the Avenue Scholars board and now their daughter, Dr. Katie Weitz, who directs the Weitz Family Foundation, is a member of the board.

Armed with data and insights, Bird brought his report back to Scott and other funders for review.

"Everything we found lacking in other programs were things we tried to resolve or address through the model we came up with for Avenue Scholars," he said. "Dialogue happened over the next few months. We talked about how there's a lot of scholarships available to kids in the community but that a lot of them go unapplied for or unrewarded.

"I had a firm belief from my education experience that scholarships only provide access, and access doesn't guarantee success."

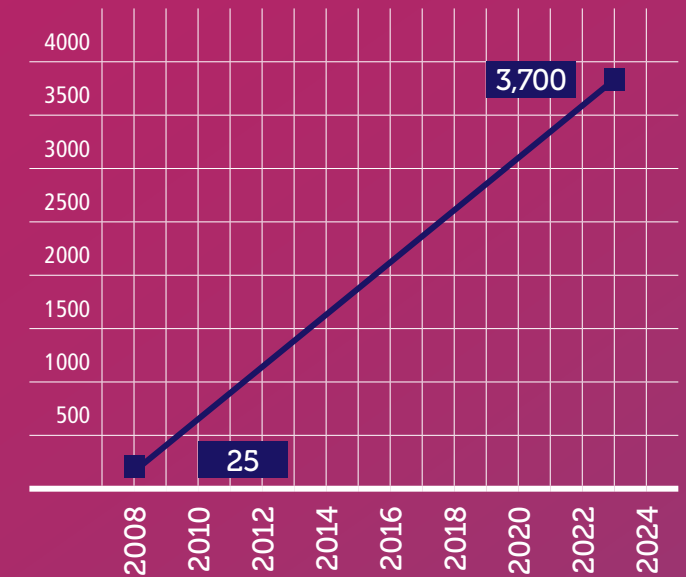
"From this work, the idea was born to identify kids in need in the community and help them get access to the four-year or the two-year institutions and support them to be successful."

Big things sometimes start small. In the case of Avenue Scholars, a pilot cohort of 25 students in 2008 has grown to a program that by 2023 has served 3,700 students. Avenue Scholars currently operates in 11 Omaha-area high schools across six districts and with Metropolitan Community College (MCC) and other postsecondary partners. About 500 students are active at the high school level yearly—an average of about 50 students per high school. There are an additional 300 students active in the postsecondary level of the program. More than 250 students join the program each year. In Iowa, Avenue Scholars has programs in Southwest Iowa and Des Moines.

"We started working directly with kids—including students who had dropped out of high school—who had significant barriers including financial, housing, food and transportation insecurities, and education gaps, among other challenges," Bird said. "Our original program concept focused on helping Avenue Scholars graduate high school and go on to the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) for a four-year degree. We provided them with housing and whatever they needed in order to make them successful."

Cohort Growth: Pilot to Present (2008 to 2023)

250+
students join
Avenue Scholars
each year



Avenue Scholars: High School Participation

11

Omaha-area
high schools

6

Omaha-area
districts

In Iowa,
Avenue
Scholars has
programs in
Southwest
Iowa and Des
Moines

500

high school students
active yearly

50

students per
high school

Avenue Scholars: Postsecondary Participation

Metropolitan
Community College +
other postsecondary
partners

300

postsecondary students
active yearly

An Evolution: Building a Program of Care and Support Through Continuous Wrap-Around Services



A consensus emerged to create a program that provides continuity and consistency while guiding a young person on avenues of exploration that lead to a career. To provide that cohesive, ongoing support, the decision was made to develop a curriculum and hire Career Coaches to teach the program in schools. That meant more funding for staff was needed.

"The first thing was to find the kids in high schools who had the potential to do well but didn't have the support for it," said Buffett. "We went through counselors, teachers and principals to identify the kids who could graduate with a little more support.

Having a support person in place at each school serving Avenue Scholars students became a key program fixture.

"A real differentiating component of Avenue Scholars," Bird said, "is that we are embedded in the curriculum of the 11 schools we serve in the Omaha area." Due to the credibility he brought from his years of service in education and the philanthropic weight behind the program, Bird said, "the schools welcomed us into their buildings and academic schedules."

"Think about that offer," said Dr. Mark Adler, former Ralston Public Schools Superintendent. "We want to help your kids. We're going to do certain things for them, and we're going to give you a staff member to do it. That's over the top. You have to say yes to that. We don't have a lot of people knock on our door and say 'we want to work with your at-risk kids, and we also want to support them with resources.' It's beyond mentoring.

"Here in Ralston, we are grateful for the opportunity Avenue Scholars offers our kids. It's changed a lot of lives in our high school. It's reinforced the work we do and the importance of partnerships in support of our kids. We have young people, and every district does, that have been through this program who get a job they love and make a wage or salary where maybe for the first time in their family's history they're able to pay their bills and have hope. We're all in to keep doing whatever we can do to keep this rolling."

Bird said having staff embedded in the schools and, by extension, students' lives, is the foundation upon which the program stands. "It was very unique, and I think still is, to have our Career Coaches in buildings teaching an Avenue Scholars class and having that elective credit built right into the school academic schedule. Our Career Coaches are the ones that make it work with our kids.

"We know that the absolute strongest part of our program is the relationship created by having a trusted advocate that a young person can go to for anything."

"We've dealt with everything you can imagine in the lives of kids. Our Career Coaches are there for them. Students have a consistent personal champion."

There is shared ownership in the program. "It's not 'that program' or 'their program,'" Adler said, "it's a part of who we are, it's our program in partnership with Avenue Scholars. That for me is priority number one—that we're in this together. So if there's a problem, we have to help solve it. We consider the Avenue Scholars Coach as one of our people. We include them in everything we do. We have a Career Coach, yes, but we have 80 staff at the school, and I want all 80 to be Career Coaches for those kids to make sure they don't fall through the cracks."

Over time, Adler has seen the Avenue Scholars imprint grow. "The growth for me has been in the prominence of the program in our building. I mean, people know what it means to be an Avenue Scholar. They know what the program is." When a student commits to Avenue Scholars, they're promised opportunities that are made good. In return, the students are expected to fulfill their side of the contract by showing up and applying themselves.

"There's an old saying that goes, 'A kid doesn't care what you know until they know that you care,'" Adler said. "And this program is built around care, empathy and accountability. Because the Avenue Scholars people love our kids, they're not going to let them just do whatever they want. They're going to hold them accountable to showing up and taking care of their responsibilities. I think that's a good combination."



"I didn't think school could teach me anything else that life experiences hadn't already. But with my Coaches' care I was able to change my perspective, and I got to where I absolutely saw it as an opportunity. My attitude slowly started to change from that closed mindset to a growth mindset."

CLAIRE CLEVELAND

Becoming an Avenue Scholar

Students are identified as an Avenue Scholars candidate through recommendations from school personnel and other sources. To participate in Avenue Scholars, a student must be eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches or a Federal Pell Grant, attend a partner high school and indicate interest in a high-demand career field supported by the program. Upon meeting these criteria, students are selected for the program through a process that includes submitting application materials, conversations with Avenue Scholars staff and recommendations from school personnel and other sources. Students selected for the program are introduced to it as sophomores through various orientation and onboarding activities before fully engaging in the curriculum their junior year.

Claire Cleveland was a Millard South sophomore when she was selected in 2016. After graduating high school in 2018, she earned her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate and associate degree at MCC before attaining a bachelor's degree in human services and psychology at UNO.

A human resources internship at Signature Performance turned Cleveland onto HR as a career pathway. Until Avenue Scholars came into her life, college was a remote possibility. "Due to life circumstances, I probably wouldn't have been able to go to college on my own because of my grades at

the time or the financial cost," she said. "My mom got in a really severe car accident my freshman year of high school, and she was paralyzed on the left side of her body. Home health care kind of fell on my shoulders." Cleveland points to herself as a perfect example of how the program engages young people who need to recommit to school success.

"Avenue Scholars is not looking for students who are involved in all the extracurricular activities and have a 4.0 GPA," Cleveland said. "They're looking for individuals with potential who they know are capable of doing great things but maybe haven't had a fair opportunity or chance. Maybe they just need a little more care poured into them."

She acknowledges she was a hard case by the time Avenue Scholars intersected with her. "I'd seen how life can be unfair, and I felt a little bit hopeless. I was hard-headed. I didn't think school could teach me anything else that life experiences hadn't already. But with my Coaches' care I was able to change my perspective, and I got to where I absolutely saw it as an opportunity. My attitude slowly started to change from that closed mindset to a growth mindset. Just because I've had traumatic life experiences doesn't mean that has to be the end all, be all. It's certainly not what my parents wanted for me either. That made me try a lot harder."

Proactive Staff and Immersive Experiences

Bird said the program's constant presence in the life of each Avenue Scholar sets it apart from other programs. "Being embedded in those high schools is critical," he said, "because the kids have access to Avenue Scholars 24/7. It's not a before and after school program. We like to think of our program as proactively involved, and sometimes this means we need to be intrusive. We are guiding kids from being dependent on their parents or guardians to being independent, and that transition is hard."

Avenue Scholars staff member Terrence Gillian began as a Talent Advisor working with postsecondary students before transitioning to a Career Coach embedded at Omaha Benson High School. "You have to be where the students are," he said. "I know their class and study hall schedules. I have their phone numbers and email addresses. I know where they live. I have all those contact points to be able to discuss with them whatever needs discussing or even to make wellness checks. When you take those extra steps as a Coach, they understand that you care."

On the postsecondary side, he said, "You're working with students out of the high school environment. It's real life now. They have jobs and adult situations they're working through including personal, work and economic challenges. You're there to walk them through that process."

"With any student, the most important thing is relationship building. You have to have trust. Once you know what's going on in a person's life and some of the challenges they've gone through, then you can connect with them. You set a foundation and then you work step by step through those challenges."

As a High School Career Coach, he said, "I see them every day. They know where I am, they know where to find me because I am in the building. That's the biggest difference."

"The Avenue Scholars organization and all of its participants are a family," said Jack Koraleski, who advises Bird and is a Former Union Pacific President/CEO and Board Chairman. "I've been with them when some bad things have happened to kids, and everybody's heartbroken. Even the tone in the office is subdued. Ken's visibly upset. I commented to him that it really is like family, and he agrees that it is."

"If you're selected to be in our program you go to your Avenue Scholars class just like you go to an English or math or social studies class," Bird said. "It sits on your schedule, it's built into your day. You're held accountable to attend it just like you are any other class or activity. This is a big commitment. You're part of a cohort that meets on a regular basis. The teacher, who we call a Career Coach, is a paid staff member of Avenue Scholars and the student's go-to person for anything they need."

Cleveland said once she realized the care and resources devoted to her and other students was genuine and consistent, she understood she had a support network to help her achieve beyond what she thought possible.

"It can seem like it's a bunch of adults who think they know what's best for you and want to tell you what to do. But that's not the angle they're coming from."

"They see the potential in you. They know you're capable of building the life you want. They're simply there to be the guide on the side to make sure you have the tools and resources to accomplish what you want to."

"You may not even know what that is at first. The program will help you find your passion and goal. The more that you say yes, the more likely you're going to get there. That's why I want students to lean into Avenue Scholars and what it has to offer."

By the time Avenue Scholars reach graduation, they've explored, even sampled, possible careers and therefore have a head start on their peers in determining next steps, with support in place to pursue their dreams.

"We've developed a two-year high school curriculum around building employment skills, doing job searches, understanding and refining your career choice," Bird said. "We offer opportunities and immersive experiences. It also gives a bridge to the postsecondary experience. You spend part of your senior year taking classes at the community college. We try to get students into dual-credit courses. There's also a very strong, robust internship and job placement component. We expect all our students to have real-world work experience. We can teach job skills in the classroom, role play, have simulations, but it's never like the real thing of having to show up. That's the only way you learn what working a job is."

Immersive experiences don't end there. "We give kids very in-depth exposure in a paid Boot Camp experience during the summer to learn about careers from industry experts." All in all, Bird said, "It's a very unique, value-add model designed to take these kids to the next level. We also embed financial literacy, life skills and social skills."



Partnerships

Many top Omaha employers partner with the program: Avenue Scholars has intersected with 1,762 unique employers since 2014.

"It's gratifying to see people want to connect with youth, make programs better and get students excited about industries," said Decker. "Avenue Scholars was starting to launch its Boot Camp program, which is a career exploration program. At the time there were a lot of businesses not yet back to work at the office. But we were still trying to get students involved in hands-on activities that gave them a feel for what a particular career or job was like, so they could make a more informed decision. We were looking for a lead partner to host an IT Boot Camp, and Werner agreed to do it."

Werner Enterprises is a major business partner that signed on to teach Boot Camps even when the COVID-19 pandemic still raged.

Daragh Mahon, Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer at Werner, said company CEO Derek J. Leathers was originally contacted by Bird about participating. Leathers then enlisted Mahon, who connected with Decker. But Mahon said it took little convincing because he saw the value add.

"Part of it was the opportunity to be very open with kids about, hey, you don't have to go to a four-year college to get a good job and to be successful. What you do have to be is invested, you have to work hard, and you have to be interested in what you're doing. I'm a perfect example of that. I don't have a college degree. In my life, I have gotten plenty of education, most of it on the job. So we felt like this was a perfect opportunity to support these kids and see what we could do to help them."

Mahon had no trouble finding IT team members to teach various topics. His colleagues have held two IT Boot Camps, each four weeks long, for students in collaboration with MCC. "What we want to do in the Boot Camps is give them a flavor for what an IT career is like, try to get them excited about it, and help them see if that's an area they want to move forward in."

The IT Boot Camps covered, among other things, data streaming, programming, cybersecurity and desktop support. "We have students write code at a certain point," Mahon said. "They are highly teachable because they already have a foundation in technology. They've grown up with it as digital natives."

"The rewarding part is to see my team get so engaged and driven by sharing their expertise and experience with the Avenue Scholars students."

We've all had great careers in IT, and we want We've

"We've all had great careers in IT, and we want students to believe that's possible for them, too." In 2023, Werner conducted an Auto Diesel Boot Camp in partnership with Iowa Western Community College (IWCC).

"Where I think Werner really shines is taking subject matter experts in certain areas and being able to ignite or amplify the curriculum by showing students what it actually looks like on the job," said Decker.

"The partnerships and relationships are what make Avenue Scholars special," according to MCC President Randy Schmailzl. "We've got partnerships with businesses, the community, donors and high schools to give students the extra help that's needed in steering them in a direction of their choice. I think anybody that has been part of Avenue Scholars will tell you that's the difference-maker in this program. It customizes whatever the student needs to help them get to where they want to go. If you don't know where you want to go, then here at MCC we can help you through a pathway where you need to go. Many young people nowadays don't have the network, the relationships or the support system. They go about it on their own, and it's just not enough to get them where they need to go. This provides them that extra layer of support,

a safety net, a safe harbor or whatever you want to call it, that doesn't allow them to fall apart or fall by the wayside. It keeps them going through the hard times."

MCC is a longstanding partner with Avenue Scholars and the landing spot for the majority of program participants upon high school graduation.

Cleveland, who keeps in close contact with Avenue Scholars, said, "I had great support when I was in the program, but now there's even more support provided to each student to make it an even more individualized experience, which I think is the goal in leading people into the workforce and establishing a successful career."

Gillian confirmed that the program adapts to whatever students present. "In what we do, one size doesn't fit all," he said. "So you can't expect every student to come into the program at a certain level. As a Coach I have to meet each student where they are at. Some students may need help applying for their first driver's license or opening their first bank account. Because they don't have family to support them in that way, we have to help them with that. Other students come in with those things lined up, but they need help getting to that next level in their life or education or career. You start where you meet them and then you take steps from there."

Growth opportunities abound. "We put them in situations where they learn things, they learn about themselves personally, and what they need to achieve their goals," Gillian said. "They get the education they need. Then they go on to MCC and move past what they even thought possible with guidance."

"Avenue Scholars is wrap-around support. We're here to help them out with anything."

Emergency funds are available to assist with everything from car repairs to medical bills to rent to child care. "Yes, we are career-based," Gillian said, "but I personally believe it's more than that. A person needs to believe in themselves and understand what their gifts and talents are. They need to feel valued and to know that someone has their back when things get tough."

The program's embrace of students is well appreciated. "The way they wrap their arms around kids and families, it's hard to parallel that," said Adler.

Through the Gallup CliftonStrengths assessment provided by Avenue Scholars, Cleveland discovered her life's mission. "My number one strength is empathy, putting myself in other people's shoes, being sensitive to what they're feeling. I think that comes from my own life experiences and the fact I had someone be there for me." It's why she studied to be a CNA and then followed her natural human relations bent to train as an HR professional.

"The use of Avenue Scholars Coaches to navigate students through high school and college led MCC to start its own Navigator program," Schmailzl said. Borrowing a best practice from a partner is an example of the synergy between the program and college. "Inspired by the Avenue Scholars model," he said, "we trained Navigators to support first-generation college students and have since enlarged that to include almost all of our students. Navigators help students build confidence and independence in moving through their college experience into the workforce."

Progression Through Continuous Quality Improvement

In the 15 years since the first student cohort, Avenue Scholars has evolved through trial and error. What sets the Avenue Scholars program apart is twofold: the integration of support services for students across time, education and community, and the measurement of success as a meaningful job in a career pathway that has opportunity for growth and advancement.

Traditional program models still measure success as completion of a four-year degree. Even Avenue Scholars used that as its standard at the start of the program.

At the 10-year anniversary mark, members of the Board of Directors were asked to name the aspect of the organization that made them most proud. Board members agreed that the program's ability to evolve over time to better serve students and the community was the unique difference maker. Avenue Scholars' commitment to continuous quality improvement is a hallmark of the program.

"The real synergy lies in the program working collaboratively with partners to not just get a student a degree or certificate but a job in the career of their choice," Bird said. "It has resulted in a more holistic and connected approach to supporting and guiding a student through their high school, internship, college or training, and career journey through a single, seamless program, and greatly benefits Omaha by building the workforce. It was certainly a first for the Omaha area, and I would argue still is. We're not seeing programs around the country do this. They're still fragmented and run by different agencies or nonprofits. There isn't integration across the support programs."

Avenue Scholars services are continuous and ongoing, and it doesn't stop when a student leaves high school or when a student earns an associate degree or certification. Avenue Scholars continues to support scholars into the workforce. "You just don't see that in other programs," Bird said. "I think that's part of the secret sauce of what we do and how we do it."

Koraleski and others close to the program believe Avenue Scholars gained momentum and additional support when the program transitioned to a career-based bridge program. "We spent a lot of time having spirited debates over what the focus of Avenue Scholars should be," he said. "The program was well on its way already, but it was trying to be all things to all people."

Once the new focus emerged, to prioritize the best type of training for a student to prepare for their chosen field, the program secured even more support from its early donors and partners, added staff, and found new donors and partners to support new career pathways. "We were not interested in trying to change the education system," Bird said, "we were just trying to create a best practices program. That excited the philanthropists and it continues to. Most of our original donors are still supporting us."

Buffett cannot imagine reducing or halting support for what she sees making a difference. "I believe we're making a real difference in people's lives," she said. "That's why I'm doing it. These kids need the support, and they're succeeding with that support."

Cleveland is sure she would be less accomplished and her potential unfulfilled were it not for the program's influence. "Without Avenue Scholars, I think I would have been just kind of drifting through life for a long time. I know I wouldn't have gone to college. That wasn't in my mind, it wasn't in my goals. I probably would have kept working an entry-level hospitality industry job, which is fine for some people. But the program showed me I was capable of so much more and it helped me stop being stuck in life to go after something much bigger and more rewarding."

"Without Avenue Scholars, I think I would have been just kind of drifting through life for a long time. I know I wouldn't have gone to college. That wasn't in my mind, it wasn't in my goals. I probably would have kept working an entry-level hospitality industry job, which is fine for some people. But the program showed me I was capable of so much more and it helped me stop being stuck in life to go after something much bigger and more rewarding."

CLAIRE CLEVELAND



Rethinking How to Measure Success

One of the pivotal points in the history of Avenue Scholars was the shift from viewing the pinnacle of success as earning a degree to a young person choosing a career path, getting them training and education to grow in that career path and establishing a good quality of life.

"Avenue Scholars' evolution away from four-year degrees to focus on career success and quality of life didn't come easy; it came over time," Bird conceded. "Midpoint in our history, I vividly remember sitting with Walter Scott at our annual celebration luncheon. We had 265 kids at the community college on an academic path to complete an associate degree, most of them in general studies. Walter boasted with pride, 'Look at what we're doing!' We were literally high-fiving, saying, 'Isn't this great!' and then I burst that balloon by sharing, 'My fear, Walter, is they're going to be serving me at a fast-food restaurant. We're investing a significant amount in them to get an associate degree that doesn't have a career designation. So what are we really doing?'"

"It was one of those a-ha moments. That's when the light bulb went off, and I said we've got to connect with our business community and figure out what are good career pathways for these kids. Walter looked at me and said, 'Well, go fix it.'"

Bird said the program has thrived by being open to new realities, including rethinking how success is measured. "The prevailing thought when we began Avenue Scholars was that everyone needs a four-year degree, and if you don't have one, that's not success. Over time, we went from focusing on a four-year to a two-year degree. Then our program journey led us to understand something very important: our measurement of success is a job with a career and good quality of life. That's quite an evolution, both for the program and for me as a lifelong educator. For a long time, I measured success in terms of grade point average, courses completed and degrees earned. But we keep learning, too."

The more research and experience Bird and the Avenue Scholars team accumulated, the more they began to advocate a new framework. "Two of the lessons learned early on in Avenue Scholars included moving cautiously and being flexible," he said. "In talking to program directors and staff around the country, I found there was a huge level of frustration. They developed a program model and were making that model work, but they were rigid. Those boards and leaders had the attitude, 'we have the answers.'"

"Well, one thing I learned real quickly with the population we're trying to serve is that as smart as we think we are, we don't have all the answers. The message that we tried to convey to our board, and which has served us very well, is that we're a work in progress. Fifteen years into this, we're still a work in progress. We need to have our fingers on the pulse of the community, and we must respond to

the needs of the students we bring on as Avenue Scholars. And the only way we can do that is with flexibility. I didn't want the board to believe they were buying into a model of success we had defined in some monolithic way. Being adaptable has served us very well. It's made us a stronger and better program."

"Through meetings and discussions," Koraleski said, "we realized maybe we can't be everything to everybody. But we agreed there are certainly opportunities in the medical profession, information technology, automotive world, all the skilled trades, where our attention could not only be well focused but actually extend the program to making sure when you graduate you have a job. And we'll be with you as you go into that job."

Avenue Scholars was re-conceived as that bridge carrying students across milestone markers from education to employment.

"It grew beyond high school to adding Career Coaches, working with MCC and the Suzanne & Walter Scott Foundation to get the students scholarships and partnering with businesses to provide Avenue Scholars internships, which turns into full-time jobs for a lot of them," said Buffett. "It's evolved into something that gets students through high school seeing lots of options for potential careers. Internships also help students figure out what they don't want to do. At the end of our time with them, it matters that they get a



job and not just get through high school and college. All that came out of conversations happening in board meetings.”

The program’s refocus on how to measure success—a job with a career and good quality of life—allows for numerous postsecondary education pathways to be valued, including on-the-job training, certificates and associate degrees. If a student chooses to attain a four-year degree, that is an option, too, but one of many prosperous paths. With this expanded definition of success, MCC is the primary landing spot for Avenue Scholars students to explore and realize career pathways.

“MCC’s role has grown to help students sort out the next steps after they get their feet on the ground and become college ready or job ready,” said Schmailzl. “This created a pipeline from the high school to MCC. It allows us to create pathways for the students to move forward. If they want to get into the trades, they can get into the trades. If they need help elevating their academics to college level in math or English, we do that. It builds the foundation for students to move forward in a positive way for the start of their career and hopefully for the rest of their life.

“The comprehensive approach,” he said, “checks all the boxes. No one’s left behind. There’s no elimination factor involved. It is, ‘we’ll meet you where you’re at and build a pathway for you to get you where you want to go.’ It’s that simple.” Schmailzl appreciates how easy Bird has made the pipeline to the college. “From a partnership level, Ken and I have yet to have an argument over something or need a memorandum of understanding or anything like that. It’s always a handshake and, ‘yeah, I think we can do that, let’s make it work.’”

Internally, the program had to work hard to transition to become the bridge from education to a career. “That’s when we started talking to the Chamber of Commerce at the state and local levels and looking at business data,” Bird said. “We started asking employers in different sectors ‘what are your needs, and how can the schools help you meet your needs?’”

For many employers that Bird reached out to, it was the first time an educator came to them asking how students and programs could help them, instead of the business helping the students and programs. In reality, he was proposing a way they could help each other. “Prior to my canvassing businesses there just wasn’t a strong relationship between the business

community and education. If I were to start all over again, the third leg of the stool, the business community, would have been brought in earlier.

“When we became career-employment-oriented, it made us more relevant to students and the community.”

Bird’s persuasive powers helped Avenue Scholars make rapid inroads within the business community and add partners who saw the program’s value.

“He brings you to the table really quickly,” Koraleski said of Bird. “You have a lot of confidence in him.” The new emphasis certainly spoke to the CEO in Koraleski. “I thought the overall architecture of bringing business, philanthropists, education professionals together and coaching and counseling these young people through college and into careers had so much potential.”

He advised Bird on where and how to make connections in the business community and was impressed by who Bird attracted to the table. “Lead teams were created to engage the business community and to get them to partner. I was amazed by Avenue Scholars when I was first introduced to the concept. It’s 10 times better now, and part of that has been trimming the focal point and vision and finding the right place where the resources deployed can be used to their highest and best use. I’m delighted with the way it’s turned out. It helps students through that transition of adolescence into young adulthood, from high school

into college. It helps ensure, as best we can, that young people have a successful transition and a good start on a career path.”

Along the way, Koraleski has watched Avenue Scholars build great relationships with businesses who now serve as training grounds and employers for students who help fill job needs while entering their career fields. “It’s really been transformational. It shows proof of concept,” he said.

May, an Avenue Scholars Iowa Board Member and formerly the head of May Broadcasting, has observed with great interest the way the program has integrated the career component. “In staying up to speed on the program’s progress, I really liked the idea of taking free and reduced lunch or low-income kids and giving them opportunities on a specific career path through internships, real-world experiences, broadening their horizons and then supporting them all the way through getting a job at the end of their community college experience,” he said. “That was very appealing because you could see it, measure it. And you give them a skill set where they can go out into the world and earn a good living and be a productive citizen. Those very tangible outcomes are really what appealed to me.”

The Avenue Scholars mission of being the bridge between education and the business community is evidenced by 433 unique businesses that employ Avenue Scholars students across the Omaha metro area. Now, with Avenue Scholars’ leadership, there is no such thing as “traditional” and “non-traditional” education paths, only a decision on what career path a student wants to explore and what education is needed to be successful. With a new frame for how to define success and extraordinary community engagement connected to extraordinary student support and achievement, the Avenue Scholars program had found its way.



A Personal Journey

Bird's leadership approach, and the paradigm shift at Avenue Scholars, came out of a profound set of personal experiences. "My personal life and work history certainly has had a strong influence on my thinking and decisions about Avenue Scholars and where it has transitioned. I grew up in a family with limited resources. My dad was a sheet metal worker and handyman, and my mother worked as a grocery store clerk. When I left high school, I went to work at Eaton Metal Products, owned by the Marshall family then, as a sheet metal worker. I became certified as a welder. I took some classes part time at Omaha University (now UNO)."

Avenue Scholars is all about pathways, and Bird is emblematic of the fact that no two pathways are alike and a successful life-career journey doesn't need to be a straight line. Everyone, in some way, needs a helping hand and ideas for new opportunities. Without the intrusive intervention of certain events in his life, Bird may never have ended up in education, much less attain postsecondary degrees and fulfill a four-decade career that saw him work 11 different jobs, culminating in a 16-year tenure as a school district superintendent.

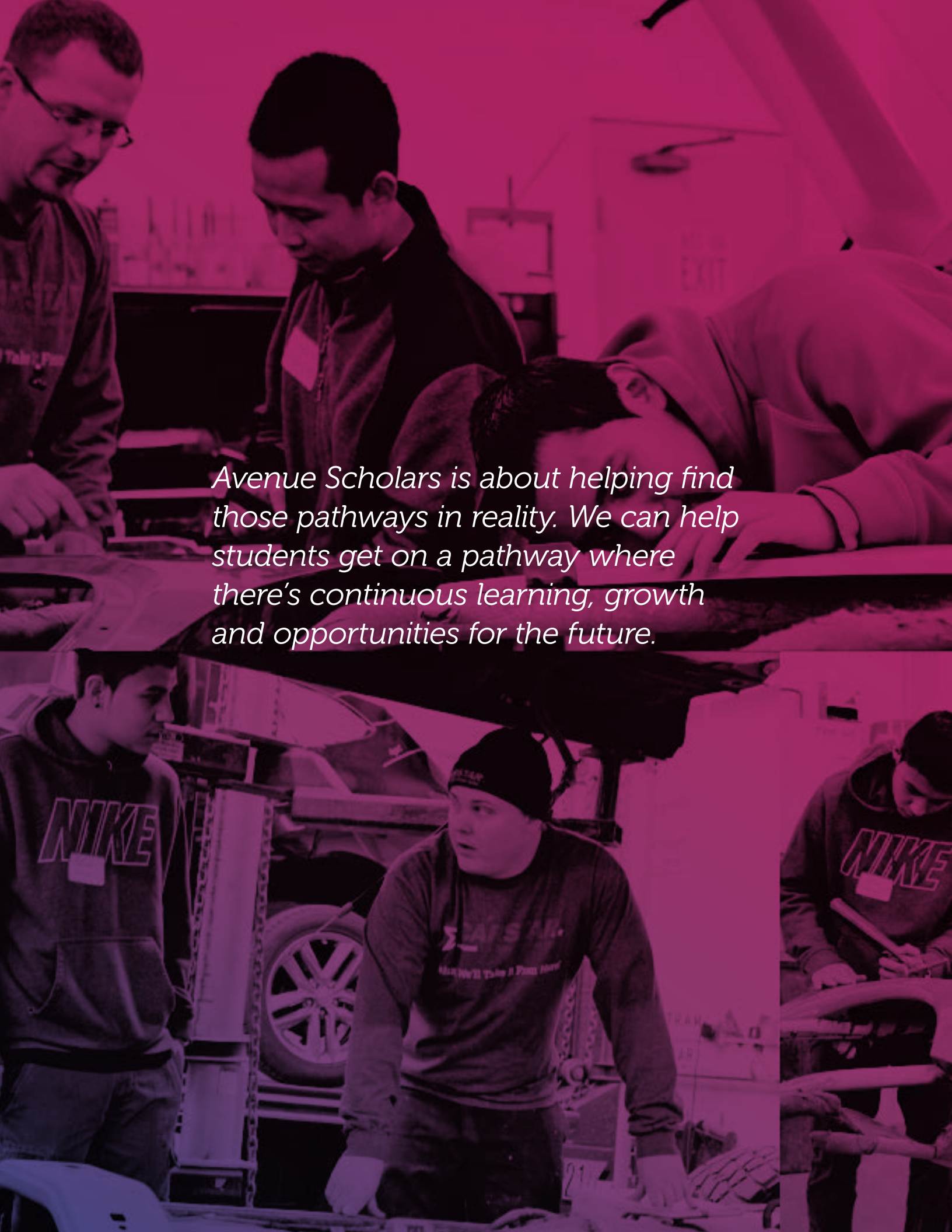
Before his career path became clear, Bird worked his manual job by day and pursued college studies at night. "I was in an industrial accident and laid up for a year. I couldn't get back on with Eaton, but they referred me to Westside Community Schools, where I became a 'bouncer' in the halls. I was that first answer to a school resource officer. It was an entry-level position to offer discipline and to do whatever needed doing. I had no interest in education, much less special education, or anything like that. I did a variety of things—drove a bus, served as a teacher's aide. Then I got interested in helping in a special education classroom. That led me to earning a degree in special education financed primarily by the school district and federal government. I ended

up getting a master's degree and going into administration. Then I went into lobbying and governmental relations and ultimately worked my way to serving as the superintendent of Westside Community Schools. All told, I worked 38 years in the Westside district. Who knew? That personal experience imprinted on me that life isn't linear."

The experience also shaped his views on education. But it wasn't until Avenue Scholars that he put those insights into practice. The way he came to look at education became the blueprint for the program's more expansive vision of preparing students for success. "We need to look at where individuals are at and what their interests, capacities and abilities are, and help them find a career path relevant to them," he said. "Education also doesn't start and stop in a sequential way. You can get through high school and maybe you're ready to go straight into work and be a sheet metal worker and learn on the job or get credentialed as a welder. Both paths can lead to a good career. In this day and age, opportunities in the trades have potential to offer a better income and lifestyle than many academic-based career paths."

Those who know Bird's personal story recognize he was "made to order" to lead Avenue Scholars. "His background as a welder and teacher is a perfect fit," Schmailzl said. "He's a person that has come through the rank and file, and these young people can all do that, too."

"Not many people start as a hall monitor and end up the superintendent of a school district, much less director of a program serving multiple school districts and partnering with colleges and employers," said May. Simply put, Bird can relate to students in need and to the helping hands it takes to move them forward.



Avenue Scholars is about helping find those pathways in reality. We can help students get on a pathway where there's continuous learning, growth and opportunities for the future.

Aligning Education and Career

Pragmatic rather than idealistic metrics now buttress the program, thanks in large part to Bird's interest in connecting students to trades, an interest shared by the Avenue Scholars Board of Directors. The business community recognizes the disconnect between skilled jobs and high school or college graduates, and employers quickly picked up on the fact that Avenue Scholars students are trained people coming out of associate or certificate programs. They recognize that the program takes young people from challenging backgrounds and helps give them direction, support, an education and a job with a skill set they'll have for the rest of their life. Avenue Scholars students are expanding Omaha's workforce in key professions.

Koraleski said the program satisfied "the real fundamental business need of why this would be important to my railroad, my bank, my whatever company by knitting it in a way that there's a real benefit and a real business reason for why you want this to be successful."

Once the decision was made to align with employers, Bird said, "We looked at job market needs and made it a practice to align student

aspirations, training and life-career goals with those needs. Avenue Scholars is about helping find those pathways in reality. We can help students get on a pathway where there's continuous learning, growth and opportunities for the future. That's what we've morphed into."

After months of reviewing data and deliberation, Avenue Scholars developed five career pathways for students to explore and achieve in: Information Technology, Trades, Health Care, Transportation, Automotive/Diesel/Transportation, and Business. Some of the pathways have connected more quickly with the students, like Health Care, and others pathways still have additional potential for growth, like IT. Nebraska is trying to increase diversity in IT while filling the gap that exists between the high number of jobs that need filling and the lack of qualified applicants.

Werner Enterprises' Mahon is all for working with Avenue Scholars to help bridge that gap. "America needs to start thinking about technology as a trade," he said. "There was a time when if I wanted to write code I had to understand ones and zeros, bits and bytes. I don't need to do that anymore. I can write

code by just learning how to open a computer, look at a screen and think logically. I don't need a college degree to do that. You need to have training, but you can get that training on the job, hands-on. It doesn't have to be very theoretical, it can be very practical, and that is what we show kids when they make their career exploration visits or take Boot Camps or work internships with us."

Avenue Scholars is always weighing where resources should be devoted and what new pathways should be added. "Now we've added Education, which represents a sixth pathway," Bird said. "Education is a real critical need in all communities. So anything we can do to help build that pipeline, we want to do our part. Now that Avenue Scholars is that bridge between education and the business community and career-focused, we're responding to the highest priority needs in our community. We're trying to

align and give our students/Scholars access to the most relevant and best pathways. That alignment is a direct result of the relationships we've established with the business community. The business community came later into what we do, but when they came they came full force. We will continue to try and find career pathways that will keep young people here and add value to the economy and to their lives."

Implicit in the education-career dynamic is addressing the brain drain that sees many young people leave the state.

"An awful lot of talent leaves Nebraska and the Midwest every year," said Mahon. "What we want is to have them stay or come back to where there is a ton of stuff going on in the technology space. Werner is known as a trucking company, but we also have a massive amount going on in terms of

technology. We look to technology to help drive and lead our business. We move goods over the road, but we have a massive tech organization to get that done on time and cost effectively. Hopefully, Avenue Scholars kids will come here as interns and end up as employees."

Mahon said companies of a certain size, regardless of industry, have a large IT division, meaning that opportunities in tech cut across every field.

"Avenue Scholars is doing two things in my mind," Koraleski said. "They're building a great organization that helps kids get a foot forward and have a leg up, and it should be our duty to help them and their kids. But they're also part of the value-add to Nebraska and to the spirit of the tech community, the automotive/diesel community, the building trades community, the medical-health care community."

Koraleski sees the value-add increasing over time. "About the time I came to Avenue Scholars, Ken Bird got a bunch of us from the business community together and started to organize into career pathways for students to follow. I thought that held a lot of promise. With all the people companies like Union Pacific try to hire every year, it's really good to have an Avenue Scholars program and relationships with some of these young people at an early stage and then hire some of them. It's a win-win-win for the student, the company, Nebraska. Yes, it's an expensive proposition. But it's far less expensive than failure and having somebody go out of school, off on their own, struggling potentially for the rest of their life. You're not just providing an education, you're building a person to have the chance to do whatever they choose to do. And it gives them the skills they need to pursue it with an intensity and a determination that otherwise they may not have the opportunity to do."



Moving Forward

Koraleski and others acknowledge the social contract at work in this mosaic of education, employment and community. "This is going to help these young folks reach their full potential. They're going to be productive, caring citizens," he said. "If you look at the results that Avenue Scholars has had, it is remarkably successful."

Schmailzl said Avenue Scholars students flourish at MCC. "They are sensational once they get their feet on the ground with their academics. They've been very successful. There are hundreds of success stories of students who will tell you that if not for Avenue Scholars and MCC they don't know what they would have been. Which is the biggest testimony you could hear from a young person."

Cleveland is among those who need no prompting to share the difference the program made in her life. "Without Avenue Scholars I could have done the best I could to get good grades and apply to college and hope that I got scholarships or loans. But instead with Avenue Scholars support I ended up being at the top of the class, receiving a full-ride scholarship to MCC. That allowed me to get my CNA and associate degree without having to pay any money out of my own pocket. And then when I transitioned to UNO those skills I developed through the program helped me obtain other scholarships to pay for further education. I changed my focus to human services and psychology, and that happened to coincide with when an HR internship opened up at Signature Performance.

"Avenue Scholars put that fire in me of not necessarily wanting to prove people wrong but just prove what I'm capable of."

"That's certainly followed me throughout my career. From an HR intern to completely learning the ins and outs of the human resources field and of this organization, Signature Performance, to work my way up as an HR business partner and overseeing business lines."

Learning what it takes to be successful and what inner resources you have to draw on, she said, is all part of the experience. "It takes a lot of grit, hard work, long hours and certainly passion. Without the skills, the mindset,

the development I received through Avenue Scholars, I wouldn't have excelled as quickly as I did. I certainly attribute my success to Avenue Scholars. I know I couldn't have grown and moved up the way that I have without it."

Buffett has seen the dramatic difference Avenue Scholars can make. She recalls meeting a young man who was denied a scholarship by another program only to become an Avenue Scholar. "This kid is unbelievable. He's at Valmont Industries, and he's earning a great wage. He and his wife have three kids. He's a success story. I look at that and I think this is what, hopefully, happens for most of the kids. It won't happen for all of them. But we seem to have a pretty good track record."

Reaching the 15th anniversary milestone, the program is old enough that some graduates are now business partners. Cleveland has come full circle in that sense. She performs mock interviews with students. She assisted on the committee that did curriculum development. "I was in the room when Avenue Scholars rewrote its mission statement. That was really exciting to be a part of." Her work today with Avenue Scholars is about investing back in the program and paying forward what she received by being a partner and advocate.

"At Signature Performance, we have students come visit us who are in their career exploration phase," she said. "Being able to connect to the students and looking at where they are, I relate back to what I was feeling at that age. It's a very sweet experience. We have had a lot of Avenue Scholars intern with us who are now in their professional careers with us." Cleveland is among a cohort of Avenue Scholars well along in their adult career and life journeys. "I've certainly maintained a lot of connections. Some have found their way to Signature Performance the same way I did, which is really cool. Others are following different career paths. They seem to be doing very well. A lot of us are at the point where we're getting married, starting families, all while pursuing our professions."

The ties that bind remain intact. "I have students from when I first started eight years ago still reach out," said Gillian, an Avenue Scholars Career Coach. "That tells me I made some type of difference, some type of impact in their life."

Transformational experiences are at the heart of Avenue Scholars, which Bird describes today as "a best practice and quality change agent program." The results it's getting are being noticed and leading to expansion.

The Journey Continues

The journey of Avenue Scholars is not just a story of the past, but an exciting vision for the future.

More inquiries to expand Avenue Scholars into other communities, some outside the Midwest, are coming, and Bird expects they will keep coming. Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen, who visited with Avenue Scholars leadership and presented the keynote address at the 2023 Celebration Luncheon, has expressed interest in seeing the program expand statewide.

Even if Avenue Scholars doesn't expand into every new community or region that expresses interest, Bird is fully transparent about the program and its operations. "People will learn from us and modify what they do, and more kids will be better served because of it," he said.

"Walter Scott instituted ironclad discipline about not getting overextended beyond our resources," said Wally Weitz. "He always insisted we didn't take on new schools and projects until we had capacity in hand, both in money and staff. That discipline was critical to keep the program viable, and I think that extends to today."

"We made the changes we needed to make to continue embracing the community," Bird said. "If we had not aligned ourselves with community needs and had not asked where these young people are going after high school, I think it would have been a critical misstep. Having alert, flexible leadership was very important. We listened to the high schools. It took a lot of trust on their part to welcome Avenue Scholars into the hallways and classrooms. Our partnerships, with the Omaha area schools and with MCC and others, were key. Involving Randy Schmailzl at MCC

early was a difference maker. Connecting with the business community helped make Avenue Scholars the successful program it is today. The important thing is we're listening and always working to respond."

An ability to identify and develop staff who catch the vision and work tirelessly to realize it has been key. "Ken Bird has built bench strength," said Koraleski. "He's done a really good job of building the kind of bench that you know can keep this thing moving forward." Finding individuals willing to join the organization at the start was a challenge, Bird said, because it was new and untested. But the passion to make a difference, combined with competitive pay and benefits, he said, attracted people from education and other careers to join the program. "Quality attracts quality," Bird said, "and when we started getting some good people aboard it helped a whole lot. You've got to be connected to the mission. If you're not connected, you won't be with us long."

That mission-first investment starts at the top. "I really believe we have the right leader, and he's got a great team," Buffett said. "Ken and his staff are amazing. They've done an amazing job. They built this from nothing, and it's making a big difference for a lot of people."

May said Bird has vision yet is very practical. "He's possibly the most networked, connected individual I've ever met," he said. "There's hardly a corner of this community where he can't go in and get an

appointment because they know who he is. Which is very important working with business CEOs, educators and philanthropists. He's very comfortable in all those different settings." Buffett simply said, "Ken knows everybody."

Funding or partnerships can never be taken for granted. "You have to constantly renew, refresh relationships," Koraleski said. To continue growing and reaching more students, Avenue Scholars may need to do a formal fundraising campaign in the future. "I think the next big challenge is going to be how much growth can we take on," he said.

"One of the challenges is absolutely the money," Buffett said. "The challenge is that we have a small group of donors that I think needs to expand. I think the funding piece has to become more diverse and broader. In my perfect world, I would like every high school in the Omaha area to have Avenue Scholars in it. But that's a money issue, too, and it's a talent issue. We have to find the right people for those jobs, and that's not always easy. It can be done, but it will take some time."

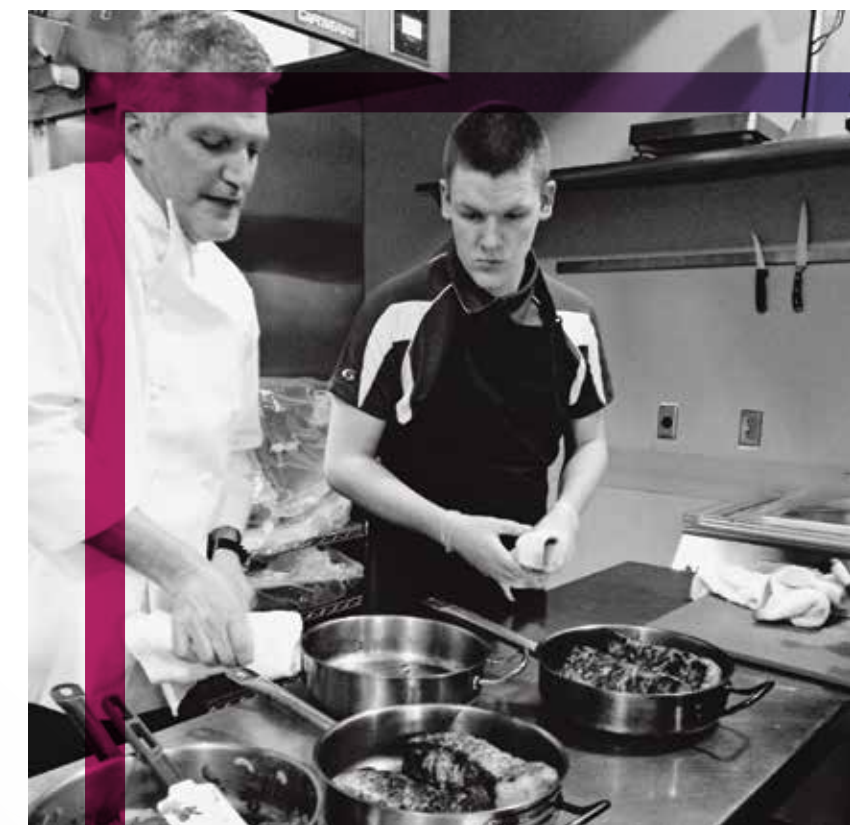
Even though word is getting out about Avenue Scholars beyond its partner schools in Omaha and across the river in Iowa, "I still think it's a little bit of a secret," Buffett said. "The more people we can get to know about it, hopefully the more donors we get, which we need."

Those that do know about the program tend to become its strongest advocates. "The ambassadors this program has created in the community keep growing," Schmailzl said. "We're certainly ambassadors for it at MCC. For every person we move forward to get an education and to be successful, that's one more ambassador to tell that story."

"I'm very passionate about the program and the people that make the program work each and every day," Cleveland said about her ambassador role. "I'm passionate about the students. Maybe they don't know exactly what they want to do or they're feeling lost right now, but I know they're going to do great things because of the program and their own dedication and grit. I certainly look forward to hearing more success stories."

Since 2008, 3,700 students have been recruited to be a part of the program. The ripple effect of this work extends beyond the individual, touching families, neighborhoods and communities. In the heart of Avenue Scholars lies a profound mission: to support young individuals in finding fulfilling, sustainable pathways on their life-career journeys.

Over the past 15 years, countless lives have been transformed, but the need for the program work persists. In essence, Avenue Scholars is on a mission to reverse the cycle of poverty through collaboration, one Scholar, one family and one community at a time.



A Note of Thanks

To our **founding donors**, your visionary commitment to the unique Avenue Scholars model has been the bedrock of our success. Your willingness to invest philanthropic dollars in a wild idea has helped the program serve and support thousands of Scholars. To our new donors, because of you we continue to grow and expand our services through your generosity.

To our **educational partners**, your trust, openness and collaboration have been critical. Welcoming Avenue Scholars into the hallways and classrooms of high schools, and the ongoing dialogue about where young people are headed after high school, have been instrumental in our mission. We value the relationships we've built with the Omaha-area schools, Metropolitan Community College and other postsecondary educational and training partners.

To our **business partners**, your invaluable connections and support have helped make Avenue Scholars the successful program it is today. Your engagement, feedback and commitment to the mission have contributed not only to the success of our students but also to the broader community.

Finally to our **phenomenal staff**, whose dedication and passion have been instrumental in shaping Avenue Scholars, it is your collective effort that has truly made the difference in the lives of our Scholars. Your involvement extends far beyond financial contributions, access to classrooms and job offers—it is a testament to the power of collaboration, vision and a shared commitment to the betterment of our community.

The shared belief in our mission and the understanding that we must constantly renew and refresh our relationships to continue growing is at the heart of our journey.

We are inspired by the ambassadors you have become, those who passionately advocate for the program and its impact. Together, we will be witnesses to more Scholar success stories, more young lives transformed and to continuing this extraordinary mission together.

Our appreciation and thanks to each one of you for your unflinching commitment to Avenue Scholars!



Mission

Avenue Scholars, the leader in bridging the gap between education and business, guarantees careers for our youth of hope and need through supportive relationships, individualized coaching, education, and training.



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SCHOLARS**

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