

**DIGGING IN.** Cherish Thomas (left) and Nyamal Kuon (right) help a neighborhood volunteer pull weeds in a plant bed at the City Sprouts community garden.



**DOWN ON THE FARM.** Kaylea Walker, Jamie Johnson, Brettany McCarther and Cherish Thomas help with cleanup on the urban farm north of City Sprouts.

## Avenue Scholars learn, grow at City Sprouts

It's a warm, sunny day in early June. Ten Avenue Scholars Foundation students of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds — white, African-American, Hispanic, Asian, from North Omaha, South Omaha and in between — are getting their hands dirty, learning how to be urban farmers.

Jamie Johnson (Omaha North), Kaylea Walker (Omaha Bryan), Brettany McCarther (Omaha Northwest), Cherish Thomas (Bryan), Ann Brovold (North), Lenzel Hayes-Brown, (Bryan), Jonathan Castelan (Bryan) Cherish Thomas (Bryan) Angela Hawkings (Bryan), Nyamal Kuon, (Omaha South), were hired to work at City Sprouts, a com-

munity garden located on the corner of 40<sup>th</sup> & Seward, based on their interests in pursuing a career in agriculture culinary education and public health, according to Albert Varas, Career Talent Advisor and City Sprouts Board President.

"Throughout the summer we will be actively working on different projects where they will be gaining experience in those areas," Varas said. "For students who want to go into education, we have the opportunity for them to lead education classes here; for students who want to work in public health care, we have a public health component that includes a community project; for culinary, we have eight chefs coming in and doing

classes with students; for agriculture every single day they [students] will be growing and harvesting food."

According to a June 5 story published on seedstock.com, the community garden sits on a half-acre city lot and is comprised of 46 raised beds, a fruit tree perimeter and a perennial plant border. The garden is organic, relying mainly on regular maintenance and abundant compost that is created on-site. In addition to producing fresh produce in the garden plots, City Sprouts houses 10 hens that lay fresh eggs daily in summer. On the lot sits a three-story home built

————— *Sprouts continued on Page 3*

## 2014 Luncheons Honor Students



Jennifer Richardson, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska's Senior Vice-President of Operations, accepts an award at the Avenue Scholars Foundation spring luncheon; Xavier Johnson (Millard South) gets a selfie taken with John Hope Bryant, the luncheon guest speaker; Octavius Williams (Benson) introduces honored guests; Moneeka Robinson (Benson) gives a shout out to Talent Advisor Cedric Cooper, whose birthday was the day of the Senior Academy luncheon; Talent Advisor Jamar Dorsey introduces graduating seniors; Anthony Anderson, State Farm insurance agent, speaks at the Senior Academy luncheon.



# Post finds career in kitchen

For \$30, patrons of the SAGE Student Bistro on Metro Community College at the Fort Omaha campus could indulge in a five-course dinner prepared by Courtney Post.

Post, who will obtain her Associate's Degree in Culinary Arts & Management Aug. 15, prepared the elaborate meal — by herself — four straight days, May 12-15.

The meal featured an Amuse Bouche, “a one-bite appetizer to clean the palate,” consisting of a corn soup shooter, with popcorn, tossed in truffle butter; duck confit salad; a shrimp and basil pasta; entrée of steak, potatoes and carrots; and a choice of dessert from four options — Orange Parfait, Chocolate Cherry Pave, Upside Down Pear Cake, or Green Tea Panna Cotta.

Most students were paired up to work on the five-course assignment, but by ‘luck of the draw,’ Post had to go solo. Students had two to three weeks to create the menu, another week to create the purchase order of items, three days

of “prep,” and, finally, daily food preparation during the four-day run. Students working as teams could trade off days. Not Post.

“Being alone, I had to be here every single day. Monday I was here from 8 a.m. to almost 11 p.m.,” Post said.

The hard work paid off. Post is now working in the kitchen at the Nebraska Brewing Company in the Shadow Lake Town Center, Papillion.

Post became an Avenue Scholar in her junior year at Ralston, where Aprille Phillips was the Talent Advisor. Kristin Walsh supported Post as her College Talent Advisor, and the ASF Career Team continues to support Post as she navigates the world of work.

“I honestly don’t know that I would have been here without the help of Avenue Scholars,” said Post, who credits the advisors with helping her earn a Susan T. Buffet scholarship, which provided full-ride tuition for the MCC program.

Post’s sister, Miranda, is also an Avenue Scholar and a graduate of MCC.



She is now studying video game design at UNO.

“My parents are very, very proud of both of us, and very appreciative of what Avenue Scholars has done for us,” Post said. “No one else in our family has gone to college, so my sister and I were the first generation for our family to do it. They’re very excited.”

## Belter loves corrections officer job

Being locked in a room with 64 inmates at the Douglas County Department of Corrections (DCDC) and charged with managing their behavior might not present an enticing scenario for the average young man seeking a desirable career.

“You have to come into the room with the right tone, in the right mindset,” says 21-year-old Dylan Belter, who as of May 9 became the proud bearer of an Associate Degree in Criminal Justice, with an emphasis in law enforcement, and a Specialty Diploma for Community Based Corrections.

Belter beams with excitement and confidence as he discusses embarking on a career as a corrections officer. Friday, May 2, he graduated from basic training — which involved getting certified in several areas, such as CPR — at DCDC.

Belter’s pathway to a career in criminal justice began in his junior year (2008-2009) at Ralston High School



when a counselor there recommended he apply for the Avenue Scholars Foundation program.

“I had a rough sophomore year,” said Belter, who credits the Avenue Scholars Foundation, especially Talent Advisor Aprille Phillips, with helping him achieve his career goals.

## MCC Graduates 2014

**MELVIN RAMIREZ** (Ralston)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Transfer to UNO, major in education and work in Omaha Public Schools system

**MAKALA JONES** (Omaha North)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Transfer to UNO

**MAIA ROMANO MOLINA** (Ralston)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Transfer to UNO, major in International Studies, minor in Japanese

**NICOLE GOMEZ** (Ralston)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Transfer to UNL, major in architecture

**OLIVIA AVILES** (Ralston)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Undecided

**SEKOU MURRELL** (Omaha Benson)

**Degree:** General Studies

**Plans:** Transfer to UNO, major in athletic training

**BRENNAL PALMA** (Omaha North)

**Degree:** Dental Assisting

**Plans:** Clinical Studies

**STEPHANIE VALADEZ** (Omaha South)

**Degree:** Liberal Arts

**Plans:** Transfer to UNO, major in social work

**\*COURTNEY POST & DYLAN BELTER**

(See stories on this page.)

**URBAN CHICKEN.** Roxanne Williams, City Sprouts Executive Director, introduces Jamie Johnson and Kaylea Walker to one of 10 chickens kept on the City Sprouts property to produce fresh eggs. Walker and Johnson returned to the program for a second summer to focus on the education component of urban gardening and food preparation.



*Sprouts continued from Page 1*

in 1906, which houses the staff offices as well as a ground floor kitchen used for monthly pot lucks and weekly presentations on gardening, cooking and adopting a sustainable lifestyle.

One block north of the community garden, City Sprouts has an urban farm built on three city lots. Roxanne Williams, who trains the student summer employees, is the executive director of City Sprouts. A retired Omaha Public Schools teacher runs the farm and guides the students in maintenance of the garden and farm.

"As food grows they harvest it and present it at an onsite farmer's market and sell to the neighbors. They get the business experience from seed to table in terms of producing food for people in need," Williams says.

City Sprouts began in 1995 after the Orchard

Hill neighborhood's downturn into drugs and violent crime resulted in several shooting deaths, including the death of a young man who died on the lot where the City Sprouts community garden sits today.

"Concerned neighbors gathered together to change a place that had been a source of death and despair into a garden of hope and growth," Williams says.

For Kaylea Walker, who one day hopes to open a pet store or petting zoo, City Sprouts has been such an enjoyable experience that she wants to inspire others to continue the legacy.

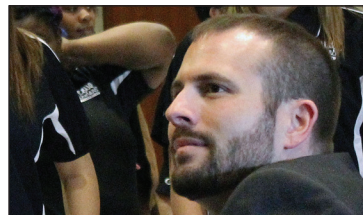
"My first year was awesome and fun," she said. "I learned a lot. I want to set a good example for my fellow workers and keep the legacy of City Sprouts going."

## ASF NEWS & NOTES

### Ken Bird receives 'Can Do Hope' award

Ken Bird, President and CEO of Avenue Scholars Foundation, received the first "Can Do Hope" award at the KIDS CAN! fundraiser luncheon May 6 at the Century Link Center. The award is sponsored by Gallup.

KIDS CAN! Community Center, an organization focused on empowering children and parents to reach their potential, honored Dr. Bird for his "dedication to providing graduation assistance and access to Omaha area high school students who have academic promise and financial need."



### Stahlecker earns academic honor

Adam Stahlecker, Avenue Scholars Foundation Controller, recently became a lifetime member of Beta Gamma Sigma, the highest academic honor for a UNO College of Business student.

Only 20% of graduate students are invited to join. The induction ceremony was held April 1 at Mammel Hall on the UNO campus.

### ASF receives School Bell Award

The Omaha Education Association named Avenue Scholars Foundation a co-recipient of its annual School Bell Award.

OEA's Board of Directors voted to recognize Avenue Scholars Foundation "for the commitment shown to students you serve throughout the Metro area."

The award was presented April 27 at OEA's annual Laurels Banquet, honoring retiring educators, as well as individuals or organizations who make outstanding contributions in support of public schools.

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





**MOTIVATED TO SUCCEED.** Above left, Alaina Cardenas poses with her son, Alan. Above right, Cardenas makes a presentation as part of her training for obtaining a Certified Nursing Assistant certificate.

## Cardenas finds motivation in adversity

When Alaina Cardenas, 17, gave birth to her son, Alan, two years ago, she did not realize that moment would be the impetus for turning her life around. He was the motivation to seek a better life. Initially, being a teen mom presented the usual obstacles. Cardenas just needed a gentle push through the new doorway that had opened to her.

"I was missing a lot of school my sophomore year," said Cardenas, who will be entering her senior year at Ralston High School this fall. "A lot of teachers pushed me to get into Avenue Scholars as a student. They thought I would be a good student for the program."

This year's Talent Advisor at Ralston, Amy Rector, continued to push.

"Avenue Scholars helped me with daycare for school, and they showed me the great potential I have to achieve my goals," Cardenas said. "Mrs. Rector would always tell me not to miss school. She stressed how important attendance would look when applying for a program. Everyone here told me not to give up on my goals."

Those goals included achieving a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate. Cardenas applied for the program through a Med Academy offered at school. The motivation to obtain that certificate drove her to improve attendance, study hard and learn well to pass the CNA skills test.

For Cardenas, the next steps include graduating from Ralston, earning a Medical Assistant Associate's Degree at Metropolitan Community College and eventually transferring to UNMC or another college program.

Regardless of where she chooses to pursue the nursing degree, Cardenas knows she won't give up.

"When things get rough, sometimes I want to give up, but then I look at him, and then look at how my life was and I say, no, I can't do that for my son. I want a better life for him," she says. "Without him, I might have gone different ways with bad influences. It [having a baby] made me grow up, a lot."



## Isiah Behrens wants to 'catch bad guys'

Blueblood. In the law enforcement career field, the term is associated with family members perpetuating a line of police officers.

Isiah Behrens, a 2014 Millard South graduate, wants to join the fraternity of family members — aunt, uncle, cousins, grandpa — who are currently, or have been, cops in Los Angeles.

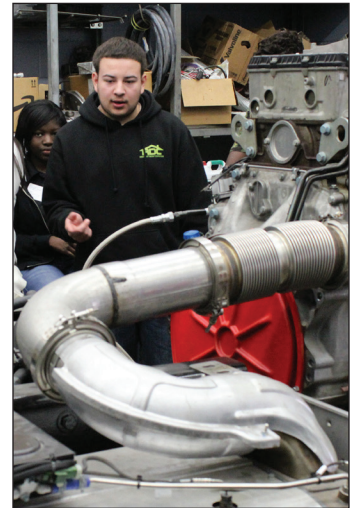
"I love being in high-risk situations," Behrens says. "it's my 'high.' I want to catch the bad guys. I want to be moving, not sitting in a chair."

Behrens will be a freshman at Metropolitan Community College this fall, aiming to earn an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice.

"I would like to be an agent in the FBI, or be a police officer," he says, adding that he might consider moving to Los Angeles. "I would like to explore more places, expand my horizons."

Behrens credits his Talent Advisor, Marcus Wagstaff, for seeing "a light in me." Avenue Scholars has helped him grow as a person, especially academically.

"During my sophomore year, I was in a dark place, sort of down on myself," Behrens said. "I never thought of college, didn't know if it was right for me. Avenue Scholars inspired me to go to college and gave me opportunities."



## Omar Rivera builds foundation for career

Omar Rivera has worked for RDC, which stands for Remodeling Dreams Construction, since December of 2013. In addition to providing some financial income, the name resonates in Rivera's personal life as he remodels his life through Avenue Scholars Foundation.

Emily Christensen is Rivera's Talent Advisor.

"Avenue Scholars has shown me what life is really about," Rivera says. "Without high school or college, there is not much future. I want to do something big. I am ready to get out of South Omaha."

Those dreams include being a first generation college graduate in his family and some day starting his own construction business.

"My parents are pushing me to go to college and to stay in college," Rivera said. "They are excited."

The first step will be to graduate from Omaha Bryan in spring of 2015. Step two will be earning an Associate's degree in construction management at MCC.

"I like doing things with my hands, in construction," Rivera said.