



AKSARBEN, Avenue Scholars forge strong bond

Coming from a blue-collar family background, Dr. Ken Bird, Avenue Scholars Foundation President/CEO, never entertained the idea of one day being crowned King AK-SAR-BEN CXX.

And coming from a career background in education only added to the surprise of being selected for the honor.

However, friends, family and colleagues viewed Dr. Bird's coronation Oct. 15, 2016, as much deserved recognition for 45 to 50 years of service — "in one shape or form" — to the Omaha education community.

"From a personal standpoint, to have this honor bestowed on me, speaks to the value of education," Bird said. "Five or ten years ago, few would have ever thought a [former] superintendent would be King of Aksarben. This shows how the community has grown to value education."

The process of selecting the king is conducted in deep secrecy a year in advance of the coronation, held in mid-October.

"Kings and Queens are symbols of the past and present. Part of the fun is the speculation in the community of whom will be the next King and Queen," said Dr. Bird,

who became the 120th King of Aksarben. "It's not something you apply for; it's not a public vote of any kind. It is an honor to be on a list with all the prior kings — a who's-who of Nebraska, people I deeply respect, many of whom I consider to be mentors and friends."

Dr. Bird says being crowned a King of Aksarben provides another opportunity for him to share his goal of building stronger relationships between educational institutions and business partners in the community.

"Aksarben is in a period of transition. I think it was a big leap, in my case, to pick me on behalf of education."

Dr. Bird says the honor is shared with his wife, Annie, who has served the community in several roles in a number of charitable organizations. Ken and Annie are co-chairs of this year's United Way campaign. Along with his family, many people in the Omaha community have supported Dr. Bird throughout his professional career.

"I have had great mentors across the country, and I have also been blessed to work with outstanding Boards, past and present," Dr. Bird said. "They have all helped me grow."



COMMUNITY LEADERS. Sandra Reding, AKSARBEN Foundation President; and Dr. Ken Bird, Avenue Scholars Foundation President/CEO

With Aksarben recognizing Dr. Bird and the Avenue Scholars Foundation's contributions to the community, he plans to use his "royal" status to promote the Foundation's mission.

"That is definitely a reason I was willing to do it [accept the honor of being crowned Aksarben king]," Dr. Bird says. "I want to make the most of having this platform — to speak on behalf of education across the state, K through 16."

Avenue Scholars Foundation and Aksarben formed a significant bond two years ago when they launched the AKSARBEN/Horatio

Bryan grad enjoying Woodhouse job

Martin Gonzalez, 21, has found a place in the Omaha community that suits him just fine for now — as a Parts Counter service operator at Woodhouse Lincoln car dealership.

Gonzalez, an Omaha Bryan graduate, credits former Career Advisor Albert Varas with helping him find the job at Woodhouse.

“I used to work at a detailing place, but I wasn’t happy,” Gonzalez said. “So I talked to Albert, and a friend told me about this place; after three interviews I was offered the job.”

As a Parts Counter rep, Gonzalez orders parts, helps customers and keeps the process organized on his computer.

“It’s really fun here, and there is opportunity to move up,” he says.



Martin Gonzalez searches for automobile parts at his counter in the Lincoln store of Woodhouse Auto Family, which has several dealerships in Omaha and the surrounding area.

For now, Gonzalez is enjoying the steady job. He completed only one quarter of post-secondary school at Metropolitan Community College.

“Some day, I do want to go back to college and finish my degree,” Gonzalez said. “I am thinking about

real estate.”

Gonzalez says he will always be thankful for his Avenue Scholars experience.

“They taught me to focus on a career path,” he says. “They got me more prepared for the real world.”

Avenue Scholar pathway leads to promising career

Roman Long, 21, feels good about where “he’s at” now in his life — at a great job with Consolidated Kitchens & Fireplaces (CKF) and in a relationship set to culminate with a marriage to his fiancé July 21, 2018 — thanks to the nurturing push he received from Avenue Scholars Foundation.

In August, Long plans to solidify his status with an Associate’s Degree in Applied Science from Metropolitan Community College, with a focus in the architectural design program.

“I really like where I’m at now,” Long said. “I could see myself maybe later on getting a bachelor’s degree, but if I stay with the company, I could be



moving up. I can see myself staying here.”

For Long, his pathway took shape when he became an Avenue Scholar during his senior year at Omaha Benson.

“They helped me a lot with my transition to college,” he said. “Helping with homework, having a study hall, everyone watching out for me ... ev-

everyone is nice and helpful, especially Dr. Brad [Ekwerekwu]. Everyone helped me prepare for college.”

Several of Long’s classes at MCC involved using the AUTOCAD [Automated Computer Assisted Drafting] program. That experience helped him land the job with CKF.

“I started applying at jobs in December,” Long said. “My fiancé helped me find some openings. Dr. Brad helped me get connected to LinkedIn and get my resume posted on LinkedIn. After I applied at CKF, they emailed me to do an interview; they had me do AUTOCAD for the interview, and they said I did better than anyone else. I got the job and started the first of March.”

On a typical day, a templater goes out and templates the existing cabinets in a resident’s home. Then, the AUTOCAD template is sent to Long, who creates a countertop based on the template’s specifications. Then the work order goes through pre-sale estimates before Long submits the work order to materials allocations.

“I have been averaging up to 15 jobs a day,” Long said. “The days fly by. It’s fun.”

Long believes Avenue Scholars provides a great path to a career.

“They provide so much help,” he said. “If you’re willing to work at it, there is no reason you should not succeed.”

Scholar lands job as MCC assistant navigator

For Morgan Greer, 23, being an Avenue Scholar was like being in “a Life 101 class.”

Greer was one of 20 students selected for one of the first Avenue Scholars classes at Ralston.

“They taught us career options and how to make a resume; we learned about life,” Greer said. “My talent advisor was like a counselor; she got me through some hard times.”

After taking four years to earn an Associate’s Degree in General Studies, Greer is now “giving back” as an Assistant Navigator at Metropolitan Community College.

“It fits well for me,” she says. “I am still young. I can relate to them and their life situations, their school situations. I can guide them to the

right teacher resources, to the Learning Center and to the Writing Center.”

Although it took Greer four years to navigate through a three-year program, she is proud of her persistence and the approach she took to obtaining her degree.

“I say take your time. I took two classes per quarter. I had financial help and did not have to work full time. I finished with a 3.4 GPA.”

Even the route to her part-time job as an Assistant Navigator was an unusual one.

After graduating from MCC last May, Greer found a job bartending at Brickhouse Sports Bar. However, a motorcycle accident in September prevented her from returning to that job.

“I talked to Terrence [Gil-



lian, Career Talent Advisor], and he told me this position [a newly created position] was opening,” Greer said.

“There were five people in the interview room. I was so nervous, but I nailed it.”

Greer started the job in October.

“I am honored to be part of something that has such an impact,” she said. “I think, wow, we do a lot for these kids.”

King promotes education — continued from Page 1

Alger Career Scholarships program.

“With the support of the Aksarben Foundation and Metropolitan Community College, we have awarded 383 two-year AKSARBEN/Horatio Alger Career Scholarships, valued at \$8,000 each,” Bird said.

In his coronation acceptance speech, Dr. Bird said, “Annie and I accepted this honor on behalf of the education community and in recognition of the outstanding work our public and private schools are doing across the Heartland. I truly believe that we can

build a stronger Heartland by building better ties between our business communities and educational systems.

“This is what the AKSARBEN/Horatio Alger Scholarship program is doing. During the year to come, Annie and I plan to use our position with AKSARBEN to increase the awareness of and funding for the AKSARBEN/Horatio Alger Scholarship program and to work to expand business/education partnerships across the Heartland.”

New AKSARBEN President

Ken Bird, President/CEO of Avenue Scholars Foundation, is looking forward to continuing the strong relationship with the AKSARBEN Foundation and its new president, Sandra Reding.

Reding assumed her duties March 6, succeeding Jon Burt, who left AKSARBEN to join the Gallup Organization.

“We have a great partnership and it will only get stronger,” said Reding, who was most recently the Executive Director of the Children’s Scholarship Fund of Omaha. “Certainly, we hope to grow the scholarships and increase our fundraising profile.”

AVENUE SCHOLARS FOUNDATION

Staff

KEN BIRD
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
Special Projects & Partnership Director
PENNY DARNELL
Accounting Manager
KELLY BERNADT
Student Support Coordinator
KRISTIN WALSH
Student Support Coordinator
JENN FRANCIS
Office & Staff Assistant

Career Talent Advisors

BRADLEY EKWEREKWU
Director of Career Programs;
Catie Dagle, Terrence Gillian, Carnetta Hardin, Michael Hughes, Marissa Marx, Brit-tani Tanhueco, 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
Communications Consultant
SHARLENE KARBOWSKI
Technology Consultant
NANCY MITCHELL
Scholarships Consultant

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

WALTER SCOTT, JR.
Chairman of the Board
SUSIE BUFFETT
Vice Chair
HENRY DAVIS
JOHN SCOTT
BARB & WALLY WEITZ
Directors

Avenue Scholars Foundation
7101 Mercy Road, Suite 240
Omaha, NE 68106

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

CAREER EXPLORER POSTS



(Left) Students try their hand at welding under the watchful eye of a trainer at Distefano Technology and Manufacturing. (Below) A Bellevue police officer explains the mechanics behind the use of a taser gun.



(Top) An Avenue Scholar gives a thumbs up to his attempt at welding. (Above/middle) Scholars pay close attention to a mechanic at a Woodhouse service garage; (Above) A Bellevue police officer explains a tribute to fallen officers.

(Above) Khon Le, Jacob Cantrell, Sergio Bonilla and Colten Hobza listen closely as a Woodhouse mechanic talks about engine repair. (Left) Students enjoy a tour of the Boys Town museum.