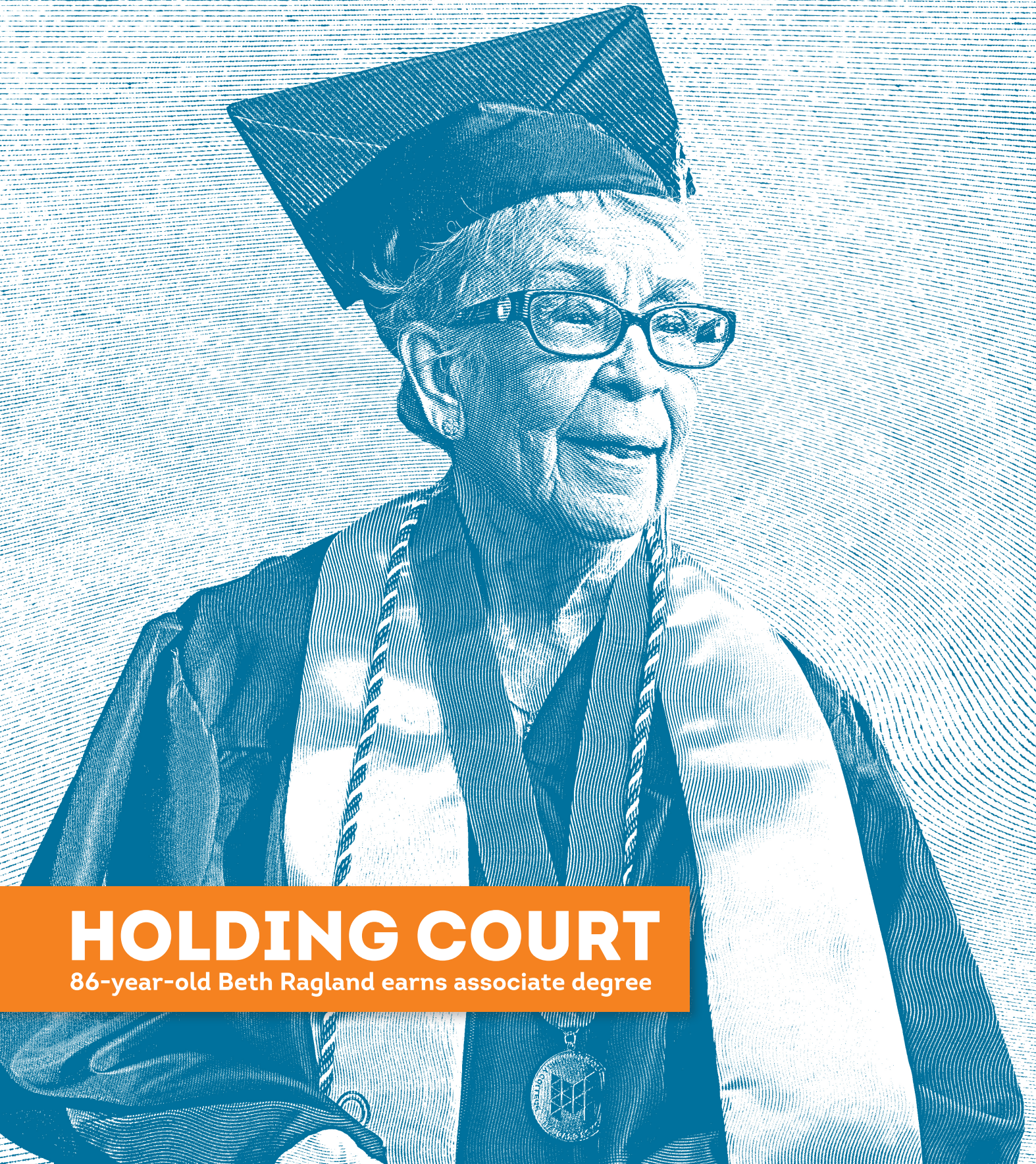


# COMMUNITY

THE MAGAZINE OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Volume 10, Issue 1



## HOLDING COURT

86-year-old Beth Ragland earns associate degree



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METROPOLITAN  
Community College

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## A LETTER FROM THE MCC FOUNDATION

Dear friends and supporters,

Summer is coming to an end, and cooler weather is around the corner. I for one am ready to watch fall sweep over the Metropolitan Community College campuses. While things tend to pick up in the fall, MCC kept busy over the summer. This is our 10th volume of Community magazine, and we've decided to give it a refresh. This new design is modern, clean and visually stunning. I can't wait for you to see Community in a new light.

In this issue, you'll read about Beth Ragland who graduated from MCC this past May at the age of 86. Beth's story encompasses what it means to be a lifelong learner and that it's never too late to follow your passion. You'll see how alumni are making a difference here at MCC and in their community. I'm excited to share the successes of our current students who have competed in national and international competitions over the summer.

You will also learn about our partnership with Jensen Tire & Auto and how our shared commitment to the trades is benefitting the local automotive industry and how our construction science students have built a lasting legacy in a new tiny home development. I hope you enjoy reading about our new Freight Farm, which highlights alternative agriculture solutions.

I love watching MCC continue to grow and adapt with our communities, and I hope you enjoy reading about it in this issue. As always, thank you for being a part of our community. If you haven't already, be sure to keep in touch with us by joining the Friends and Alumni Network at [mccneb.edu/fans](http://mccneb.edu/fans).

Sincerely,

Amy Recker

Associate vice president for advancement  
Executive director, MCC Foundation



Metropolitan  
Community College  
**FOUNDATION**







# Already dubbed “*the Betty White of Sarpy County*” by her business law instructor, 86-year-old Beth Ragland is on the way to becoming its next Perry Mason.

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Beth Ragland earned her Associate of Applied Science in General Studies with a concentration in pre-law classes from Metropolitan Community College in May 2022, but she has been holding court since she arrived on campus in fall of 2019 after transferring from another local college.

Ragland was part of a 2022 MCC graduating class of more than 1,500 at spring commencement. She strutted the stage at Baxter Arena with a gold sash worn over her graduation gown to signify the 4.0 grade-point average she carried all the way through her studies. The lifelong learner walked directly into an internship offer with the Sarpy County Attorney's Office.

Her end goal is to practice elder law.

“I want to practice elder law because there are so many elderly people who are mistreated,” Ragland said. “I like the variety of things I’ve learned and want to use the education I’m getting to help someone who doesn’t have it.”

Helping others has always been a part of Ragland’s daily operations. The requirement to go to her graduation party, which was attended by more than 200 family members and friends, was to bring a can of food for a local food pantry she has volunteered with for years.

“We filled my Cadillac with food donations and also had more than \$1,000 in cash donations,” Ragland said. “I was more excited about that than graduating.”

Ragland has also volunteered with several community organizations over the years. She and her late husband, Ken, who passed from cancer in 2014, were also politically active in Sarpy County and throughout the state. But during her studies, everything she was involved in took a back seat to school.

“I thought, if I am going to put my time into it, I might as well go full blast, and that’s what I did. I gave up all my social clubs. I gave up everything. I was very active in the arts council, the women’s group, the Republican Party and volunteering, but I had to give it up because school was more important to me,” Ragland said.

It was from Ragland’s involvement in politics with Ken that her love of the law ensued. Long before pursuing a degree, she served as a layperson appointed by the governor in the judicial nomination process at the Sarpy County Courthouse. About 10 years ago, through that process, she became acquainted with District Court Judge Stefanie Martinez, who serves Nebraska’s 2nd Judicial District covering Cass, Otoe and Sarpy counties. It evolved into a friendship when they realized they shared a birthday on Valentine’s Day.

“We started celebrating our birthdays together. [Beth] loves to throw a good party, so she would always include me,” Martinez said. “She refers to me as her sister, and she is probably one of the closest things I have to family in town. We spend holidays and special events together. She’s close to my four kids, and I knew her husband Ken and went through that loss with her.”

Ragland said she was able to attend college utilizing her late husband’s military veteran benefits. In working through his loss in grief counseling, she met Michael Hennessy, now her fiancé, who lost two previous spouses, also to cancer. She credits Hennessy with helping to keep her focused on her goals.

“I have a fiancé who was a teacher at one time. He’s a pusher. He made darn sure we didn’t go out and socialize before I had my assignments done,” Ragland said. “I didn’t need a lot of pushing. I’m an ambitious person, but that little push really helped me.”



### Court is in session

To complete some of her assignments and finals requirements in her pre-law classes at MCC, Ragland observed court cases. Martinez gave her a seat at the bench in her courtroom to complete her coursework, as well as helped her determine which classes would be most relevant for continuing on to a degree in law after finishing her associate degree at MCC.

"I do a lot of criminal and domestic cases, so I would invite her to come to court and join me when I had a trial, and she would sit up at the bench with me. Beth really enjoyed it. She sat with me too many times to count on all different types of cases, and she diligently took notes. Then we would debrief, and she would ask questions about what happened or how I handled things," Martinez said.

At the beginning of those proceedings, Martinez would introduce Ragland to the attorneys with the prosecution and defense. In one such introduction, Martinez said a divorce attorney made a "flippant comment" about Ragland still going to school at her age.

Ragland's response had the same effect as a gavel making firm contact with oak.

"She just shut him down – he had no response to her, and that guy always has a response. It was really funny," Martinez said.

During her observance of courtroom trials, Ragland could not react outwardly or interact with the participants. But she could dish in the classroom about moments that caused her to raise her eyebrows in the halls of justice, such as a lawyer being unprepared for court, or a damaging piece of testimony being uncovered during a trial.

Carol Cleaver, an MCC business law instructor, said Ragland was a joy to have in class. Besides the straight-A average she carried and her notorious classroom commentary, the treats she often baked for her classmates also elevated her among her peers. Her cat named Baby Girl (first name) Baby Person (last name) also became a frequent point of reference in classroom discussions, Cleaver said.

"She had a lot of different life experiences that just had the class rolling. At first [the other students] didn't know how to take her, but as they got to know her, they just loved coming to class to see what she was going to say next," said Cleaver, who graduated from MCC at 49 and has been a practicing attorney since 2006. "What I think was amazing about her is they will look back and remember her as a woman who said, 'My life isn't over yet, and I still have a lot of work to do.'"







***“They will look back and remember her as a woman who said, ‘My life isn’t over yet, and I still have a lot of work to do.’”***





### The caring touch at MCC

Ragland first started her educational pursuit in 2017 at another institution, but she transferred to MCC in 2019. She also paused taking classes during the beginning of the pandemic before resuming her studies in the 2021 fall quarter.

"I wasn't sure how it was all going to pan out, so I just took time off due to COVID-19. The minute I found out everything was going to be okay, I went right back to it," Ragland said.

She credits the instructors and classroom setting she experienced at MCC in making it feel like the right place for her to be. Cleaver, with whom she took six classes, and her criminology professor, Brenda Smith, were particularly impactful, Ragland said. She also enjoyed meeting other students, including international students from Afghanistan and Russia.

"I didn't enjoy [the other college] as much. I learned there, but [MCC] is much more one on one. I got most of my smarts from [MCC]," Ragland said. "The instructors are very caring about their students and went into great depth, and if you ever had a question, they were right there to answer them in class, online – wherever."

Smith said Ragland provides inspiration to anyone who believes the opportunity to pursue new career goals has passed.

"Beth is a fantastic person and student," she said. "I hope that I have that much drive and determination when I am 86 years old."

Like the divorce attorney, everyone who comes into Ragland's orbit on her journey of achievement soon understands she's not filling time – she's maximizing it. While determining the next step she'll take toward going to law school, Ragland has continued taking classes at MCC. She enrolled in tort law and general biology classes during the summer quarter.

No signs of slowing down are on the horizon.

"After my husband died, I just figured, 'Hey, I'm not going to just sit around and grieve for the rest of my life. You can't bring him back, so you might as well move on,'" Ragland said. "I think that if people want to keep a bright and sharp mind, they should continue educating themselves. I don't care if it's at a college or what, I think you should take courses to learn how to cope with life the way it is because it's not easy like it used to be. It's very complicated sometimes."

Her nudge to anyone who is considering going back to school but is finding reasons not to:

"Give yourself permission and go for it. Or else you'll be 86 years old and going back to school," Ragland said with a laugh.









# MCC ALUMS SHARE WHERE THEY BEGAN AND ARE NOW

TAKE A **LOOK** AT THE **MCC GRADUATES** WHO TOOK **DIFFERENT PATHS** AND **RETURNED** TO THE COLLEGE **AS EMPLOYEES**, WHERE THEY ARE NOW AND **HOW THEY ARE CONTRIBUTING** TO **THE MCC COMMUNITY.**





"During my time as a general studies student at Metropolitan Community College, I used VA education benefits, did a VA work study in the Military and Veterans Services office and was the Student Veteran Organization president. Through these experiences, I learned a lot about VA education benefits and more. After graduation in 2014, I moved on to earn a bachelor's degree in general studies with a focus on nonprofit administration from UNO and began working for the Women's Center for Advancement as the Healing Warriors case manager.

In 2018, I returned to where it all started – as a veteran certifying official at MCC. I earned a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on Military Resilience and Executive Leadership. Many of the skills and knowledge I have acquired academically and while working here at MCC.

I am also currently working on a Career Certificate in General Management here at the College. I believe this program to be an important contribution to my ability to help students. I am able to mix my real-world experience as a former student who used VA benefits and intertwine that with the skills I have learned through my education to help students to navigate school. This not only helps them understand their benefits, but it also lets them know that the person on the other side of the desk/phone is someone who "gets it" because they have been through it, and that is important. If I have to go the extra mile to help a student, then that is what it takes to ensure that they start on the right foot."

- Kacie Campbell  
MCC Veterans and Military Resource Center  
Veteran certifying official



"It was after 15 years of working as a photographer that I decided that I wanted to switch fields for an opportunity with better job security. Being a self-taught photographer meant that it never really mattered that I dropped out of high school in 2005, but changing careers meant that I would need a degree, which also meant getting my GED. After doing research on degree programs around town, I quickly saw the value of getting a degree through Metropolitan Community College in the design, interactivity and media arts program being taught by industry professionals in addition to the lower cost of tuition.

Once I obtained my GED at the Fort Omaha Campus, I pursued an associate degree while working as the student director at the Gallery of Art and Design at the Elkhorn Valley Campus. Working at the gallery during the COVID pandemic allowed me to design and build a virtual gallery so that the Annual Student Art Show could continue virtually in 2020 and 2021. During my time enrolled at MCC as a student, I had original art shown at three of the Annual Student Art Shows where I won first and second place in 2021 and 2020, respectively, and a Purchase Award of two photographs, which now hang in the Horticulture building at the Fort Omaha Campus.

After graduation, I applied for a position as graphic designer here at the College and, to my delight, have joined a fantastic team filled with great people all committed to the College's mission. Since starting at MCC as an employee, I have taken on diverse design projects and designed the layout of this very magazine.

Needless to say, I have a truly rewarding experience at MCC and can't wait to see where my career goes from here."

- Jeremy Tutini  
MCC Office of Marketing and College Recruitment  
Graphic designer



# CULINARY ODYSSEY:

**SMALL-TOWN IOWA STUDENT TAKES OTHERWORLDLY TALENT TO ABU DHABI**  
 WILLIAMS HELPS MCC INSTITUTE FOR THE CULINARY ARTS REACH INTERNATIONAL HEIGHTS

An initial decision based on saving 20 minutes of drive time six years ago eventually led Brooke Williams on a more than 7,500-mile culinary odyssey culminating in Abu Dhabi in June. The southwest Iowa native had never been on a plane before representing Metropolitan Community College – and the entire continents of North and South America – at the Global Young Chefs Challenge. The international culinary competition was one of the main events of the 39th Worldchefs Congress & Expo in the United Arab Emirates.

While competing at the event, she received a job offer that she accepted upon returning to become head chef for Site-1 Brewing, a restaurant/brewery that will be expanding to Elkhorn with a new location later this summer. It will share space with Sunnyside, a breakfast spot. Site-1 will feature Williams' full menu.

"It's everything I've ever wanted, just short of owning my own place," Williams said.

Williams, 25, earned her Associate of Applied Science in Culinary Arts and Management from MCC in 2019. She continues her enrollment as a team member of Culinary Team Nebraska, the culinary competition team from the MCC Institute for the Culinary Arts. Competing against seven other chefs ages 25 or younger, she prepared a three-course meal from scratch at the event – a halibut appetizer with microgreens, veal filet and neck and a pastry dessert using Valrhona chocolate and two fruit purees. She estimates the dish would cost around \$300 at a local restaurant.

"She had a three-hour window to put out that food. For anyone who is less trained that would be a daunting task," said Chase Grove, coach of Culinary Team Nebraska. "Something that makes [Brooke] excellent is she has put out delicious food at a high execution and skill level without looking like she's running around mad trying to get everything done. She's very smooth and elegant in how she cooks."

While she didn't medal at the event, Williams said it was a wonderful experience.

"It was so beautiful, and everyone was so kind. The educational experiences and time with the other

chefs, food and restaurants were amazing. And the architecture in Dubai is so beautiful and functional," Williams said.

She joined the team in 2017 without expectation, but being a part of the team helped her also see an individual path forward.

"I would have never imagined this kind of opportunity would have been presented to me. I grew up in a small town in Iowa," Williams said. "I thought I would be on the team for two years, but it kind of makes you want more for yourself the further you go with it. Two years turned into five years, and I've retired three times."

## A PIPELINE OF GLOBAL-LEVEL CULINARY TALENT SHOWCASED LOCALLY

Culinary Team Nebraska has competed at a national level through the American Culinary Federation for nearly 20 years, but the College reached its highest level of competition when Williams qualified for the international event. She was accompanied by Grove; her teammate, Sierra Gonzalez; and James Davis, assistant coach of Culinary Team Nebraska. Grove and Davis are also MCC culinary instructors.

"The vast majority of Team Nebraska competitions have been in the role of underdog – the little guy who kept trying, with some renown and success winning national titles here and there along the way," Grove said weeks before leaving for the trip. "As far as competing at the international level, we've only attended the conference once before, but that was attending, not competing. This is unprecedented to have a Team Nebraska individual competing at this level. Going to this conference will be an amazing experience with some ridiculously good chefs there."

Grove said he believes Williams and Gonzalez are among a multitude of students in the culinary program who have the ability to compete at the highest level. Before accepting the head chef position with Site-1, Williams was the kitchen manager for one of Omaha's favorite downtown restaurant destinations, Block 16. She has been adding to her menu of skills with each year of participation.







Grove said her progression as a chef resembles a line graph, pushing past eventual learning-level plateaus through performance under the pressure of competition. The real-world experience gained from working the lunch rush in a thriving gastro pub within a strong Omaha dining ecosystem is also beneficial.

"Something that Brooke always had from very early in her education with us was the ability to make delicious food. Then she learned how to make technically correct delicious food, and then do it quickly and cleanly, while maintaining her composure," said Grove, also a past competitor of Culinary Team Nebraska before becoming a mentor and assistant coach on the team. "In her most recent layer of development, she still has the ability to check all those boxes, but she also carries her team along with her. She's built herself as a teacher and a mentor of others while pursuing this endeavor."

Like most team sports, chemistry is an important component, and Williams and Gonzalez have it. Gonzalez, a 23-year-old from Postville, Iowa, earned an Associate in Applied Science in Hospitality and Restaurant Leadership from MCC and has been on Culinary Team Nebraska since 2018. She served as commis at the competition, a nuanced and critical role. Functioning as the chef's assistant, she streamlined processes during the competition for Williams without providing direct support in cooking the meal.

She and Williams started working together last fall to develop every detail of their preparation, from finding time-saving efficiencies, like how items are packed and organized, to documenting and accounting for any competition need discovered during their practice routine.

"You really have to stay focused and there's a lot of paperwork and timelines that help you get there – a lot of organizational skills. That's where my friend and fellow teammate Sierra comes in and really helps with the business piece of the competition. She's a really great commis," Williams said.

Gonzalez said the focus of her job is to be a complementary force whose work provides a settling effect on the chef during intense competition.

"We've grown very close. We use a lot of nonverbal communication and understand each other really well," said Gonzalez, who works as a catering associate for Catholic Health Initiatives and an MCC culinary lab assistant. "Brooke is the more creative one of the two of us, and I am focused on making the operations run smoothly as a support person."

Grove and Williams both said the experience students are gaining from the competition format is being showcased throughout Omaha's restaurant community. Each team member of Culinary Team Nebraska has a "scroll" number, including Brian O'Malley, MCC associate dean of culinary, hospitality and horticulture, and the previous coach before Grove assumed the role in 2019.

"If you go through who has been assigned those scroll numbers, it's pretty prolific where those people are in the industry now. If you look at V. Mertz, there are four [former MCC culinary students] who work there. There are a few at Block 16. There are three at Boiler Room. They're everywhere, and it's really rewarding to see people who have committed to this team continuing to make Omaha more of the things that we love and elevating it," Grove said.







***“She’s built herself as a teacher and a mentor of others while pursuing this endeavor.”***

Williams said the experience has helped her climb the ladder quickly in the restaurant industry.

“I was put into a leadership position because of my ability, timing and the quality of the food I put out. The organizational skills you learn with the team help you be a better natural leader in the kitchen,” she said. “It’s kind of crazy how awesome it is for being a small community college in the middle of America. You learn so much and get so much back from the instructors because they care that you know everything you need before they send you to these restaurants.”

She said she enjoys being part of the respected Omaha restaurant community and is grateful for the support she received in readying for the Global Young Chefs Challenge.

“I’m able to have chefs from other restaurants taste my food because they also care, and a lot of them also went to MCC. I saw a chef from the Boiler Room in passing and asked if he would taste my food, and he said, ‘I heard about that, and I would love to taste

your food.’ I am supported by people I don’t even know personally,” Williams said. “It’s cool to be able to go to almost any restaurant in Omaha and tell them I was on the competition team and be able to get a job.”

#### NEXT ON THE MENU

Williams said she will take a break from competition to focus on her new role with Site-1 Brewing and build her menu. She said the experiences gained from being on Culinary Team Nebraska while attending MCC will continue to shape her.

“MCC has been so great for me personally. I came here because it was a 20-minute drive closer, and the program is so much stronger than the other school I was considering. I guess, at the time, I felt that drive would make a big difference,” Williams said.

It actually made all the difference.

“It’s kind of surreal just having this type of opportunity because I never really planned on traveling outside



of the country,” Williams said. “I thought I would travel inside the United States and live a kind of low-key life, but I guess there were other plans for me.”

## GOING THE DISTANCE

As the first-ever MCC student to represent the College in international competition, for Williams, taking part in the Global Young Chefs Challenge in the United Arab Emirates boiled down to:

**34 WEEKS**  
of training

**7,510 MILES**  
from Omaha to Abu Dhabi

**3 HOURS**  
to prepare a 3-course meal  
against seven other chefs







***“It’s kind of surreal just having this type of opportunity because I never really planned on traveling outside of the country.”***



# MOVING DAY

Mission-rich construction projects frame new solutions around homelessness, leave lasting impact on student builders



**T**he clouds were gray, the rain was cold and the wind was strong. Spring was roaring in like a lion on the mid-April day as precipitation turned the dirt into mud where the future site of The Cottages by Siena Francis would sit. As dignitaries, community organizations, partners and donors wedged chrome-plated shovels into the soft earth near 16th and Charles streets, the environment outside the tent used to host the groundbreaking event underscored the importance of reliable shelter.





A little over two months after that gloomy Midwestern day, Metropolitan Community College construction and building science students finished construction on seven single-occupancy dwellings they have built over the past year inside the Construction Education Center at the Fort Omaha Campus. On July 25, the tiny homes were delivered to the microcommunity operated by the homelessness outreach organization.

The Siena Francis project, which is being led by Arch Icon Development, will be a 50-unit, gated community that opens in March 2023. It is designed to help people who have experienced homelessness transition from the nonprofit's permanent supportive housing complex into their own tiny home. Occupants will pay subsidized rent for the nearly 300-square-foot houses, with each resident's payment not to exceed 30% of their income.

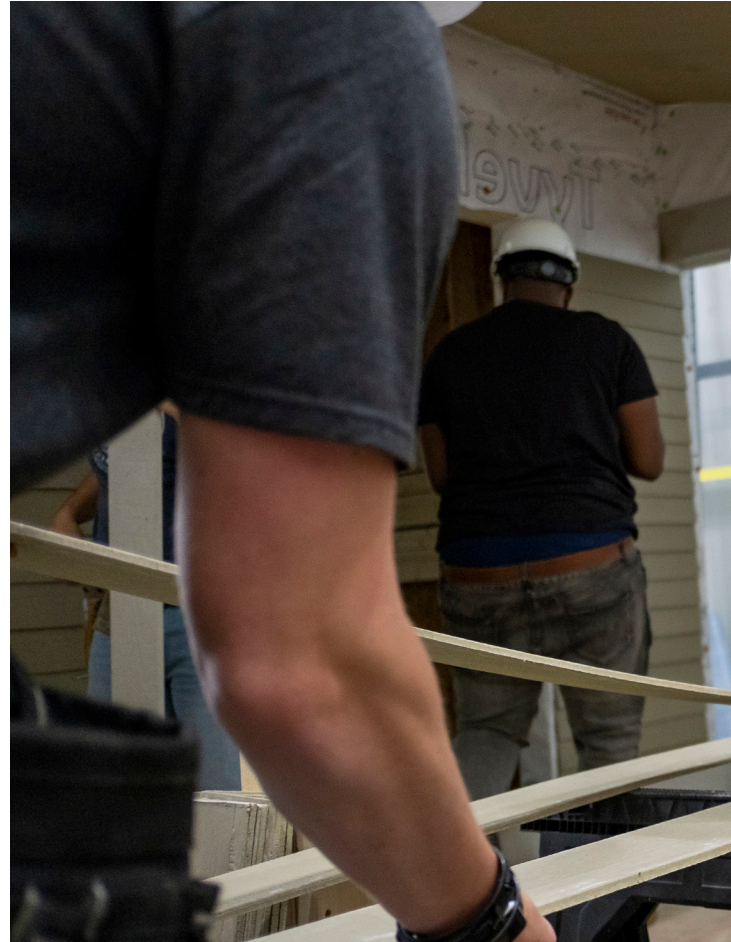
Each unit will have a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and living room, as well as a covered front porch. Before being delivered to the nonprofit in July, the tiny homes doubled as working classroom projects for MCC construction and building science students. Unlike most student work, these homes won't be pulled apart, stripped down and rebuilt for future lessons. They will be places the students can visit years after graduating.

They represent new opportunities for people who have lived periods of their lives in places without house numbers.

"Having a project that is being delivered to the community adds to the value of what we're doing in the classroom," said Trevor Secora, a construction technology instructor with the College. "The students seem to put a little more effort into it and up their game a little bit. They know somebody is going to use it. They're going to be able to drive by it after graduation and be able to tell their family and friends, 'I helped do that.'"

Franklin Garay, a 22-year-old MCC student from Lexington, Nebraska, started pursuing his Associate in Applied Science in Construction Technology in spring 2021. As he worked on the finishing touches of the tiny homes, like the siding, shingles and soffit, he remembered when the first pallets of wood for the flooring arrived on the loading dock.









Garay said solving the unique construction challenges that a tiny home presents are among the most technical aspects of the build.

"It's crazy to think of everything you can fit into these spaces," said Garay, who wants to build custom houses when he completes his degree. "Working in these tight quarters is the hardest part, but we're getting some great experience building in these small spaces, and you feel great to be able to help other people out."

Jack Hinsley, a 19-year-old MCC student who graduated from Omaha North High School last year, said the project connects to his ambitions differently from Garay, but still in an applicable way.

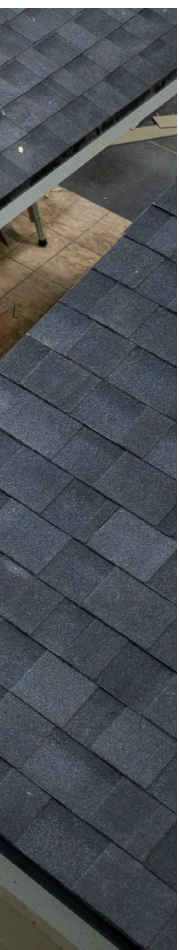
"I want to start a community music project building wooden instruments, so this is the first step of learning how to woodwork with very refined details. The finishing work for the tiny homes is similar because of how specific it is and needing to get the right cuts," Hinsley said.

Hinsley added he enjoyed the collaboration and camaraderie developed throughout the project with other students.

"I think it's important for students to see that finished product wheeled out because it's been different groups of us attacking different parts of this project. It's like seeing all the pieces of the puzzle put together," Hinsley said. "Getting this done was a huge learning experience to see what it takes to make things run efficiently at a job site."

Garay has a strong sense of gratitude for attending MCC with projects like these in the works.

"I just want to thank the community and everyone involved who participated in this project for giving us the opportunity to build these tiny houses," Garay said. "I hope they enjoy them."





### ONE NEIGHBORWORKS AMERICA PROJECT WRAPS UP, TWO MORE PLANNED

The tiny homes project highlights the College's participation in a series of affordable housing solutions in Omaha over the past year as urban areas throughout the nation attempt new approaches to better serve the unhoused.

In addition to seven student-constructed residences that will serve people at The Cottages by Siena Francis, MCC architectural design technology students designed a 1,100-square-foot ranch that they completed in the Center for Advanced and Emerging Technology, all in partnership with the nonprofit NeighborWorks America.

In order for the capstone project to be delivered to the neighborhood off 25th and Fort streets, blocks away from Fort Omaha Campus, it had to be designed so it could be separated into four different sections and reconnected on top of a crawl space foundation. Two more similar projects are already planned with NeighborWorks America, a congressionally chartered nonprofit that supports redevelopment projects in the United States and Puerto Rico.

"Some of the people that our projects impact and benefit hit pretty close to home for some of our students as well. It benefits the neighborhood where they go to school," Secora said. "There's a sense of pride there because they know they are using skills that they'll continue to use when they leave the program."

### 'GRANNY POD' PROTOTYPE INTERCOLLEGIATE PARTNERSHIP

MCC students also completed construction of a prototype for a "granny pod," a detached, modified and prefabricated bungalow. They are being introduced as alternatives to assisted living that enable elders to stay near their families but live independently. Designed by the engineering departments of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Omaha, the granny pod was moved to the Baxter Arena campus where it is spending the next two years having its design tested.

"The granny pod has a solar panel roof, so it's able to produce its own energy, along with highly rated insulation with special doors and windows. It's an advanced design," Secora said. "It's called a granny pod because you can drop it in your backyard and grandma can live there without having to tie into the grid."

Secora said these kinds of creative projects are generating community interest and support for future ones given the community need.







### REAL-WORLD EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH COMMUNITY IMPACT

According to Siena Francis, on any given day in Omaha, about 900 people are in need of supportive housing. Siena Francis served more than 3,000 people through its programs in 2021. The organization provided more shelter last year than any other in its 50-year history.

"I am not the expert on what model is going to end homelessness and make affordable housing readily available – apartment buildings, tiny homes or small houses. But whatever the structure is, it needs to be built," Secora said. "There is a huge demand for skilled labor out there that can lead to meaningful careers in the construction industry. Teaching students these skills while adding value to the community during their training is a source of a lot of pride in our construction and building science program."

Secora said having the support of MCC administration, the facilities to do the work and strong community partnerships are critical to making bold projects happen.

"Having the administration believe in what we're doing and trust us to do it, and being able to align the donors and community that has helped fund these buildings that we're operating in, that is a huge part of our success," Secora said.

Like the residents who will soon move into their new homes next year, MCC students can continue to make progress on their goals without fretting about the elements.

"Our students can build 1,600-square-foot homes indoors, 365 days a year in a 72-degree environment. I know a lot of skilled trade workers who are jealous about that," Secora said. "That means we don't have to slow down our education and don't have to worry about whether it's going to rain or not."

For more information about the construction and building science program, visit [mccneb.edu/construction](https://mccneb.edu/construction) or email Trevor Secora at [tsecora@mccneb.edu](mailto:tsecora@mccneb.edu).



# MCC SHOWS OFF SKILLS IN ATLANTA

**Six students brought home medals and 21 competed at the SkillsUSA National Leadership & Skills Conference**

**M**etropolitan Community College students returned from their first in-person competition in two years at the SkillsUSA National Leadership & Skills Conference in Atlanta in June. The annual event features more than 6,500 of the top career and technical education students across the nation taking part in more than 100 timed and judged competitions among high school and postsecondary participants. In all, 21 MCC students who qualified for the national competition by medaling in the SkillsUSA Nebraska Championships made the trip to Atlanta.

Contests ranged from architecture and construction, audio/video technology, business management, health sciences, manufacturing, STEM, transportation, welding and much more. Mock job interviews with industry employers are built into the competition so students learn the important soft skills needed to professionally manage the work, in addition to the technical skills to perform it. A total of six MCC students brought home medals at the national competition across four events.





Alayna Kustka had the top finish of MCC students with a silver medal in photography for her black and white self-portrait, a color composite print, field assignment and editing and technical skills. It was the first medal an MCC student had ever won in photography, said Bob Maass, an MCC video/audio communication arts instructor who led the TV, video, audio and digital cinema production student contingent.

"The photography competition is typically very commercial, and our photography department is more on the artistic side, so that is where our students have struggled in the past, but this year, when I saw Alayna take second place, it was a nice surprise," Maass said.


At 19, Kustka still considers herself new to photography. She said she had to adapt her style around the parameters of the competition, which stretched her from a technical and artistic standpoint. But she still found ways to inject creativity into her assignments, which she believes ultimately helped

draw the judges' eyes to her photos.

"I was honestly shocked I placed so high, and that's not to say that I didn't try my best or didn't work really hard to earn what I did, but you're competing with the best of the best," she said. "There were several people who had more years of experience and a lot more expensive equipment than I did. I think my dedication to adding depth to my photos as well as my creative style is what stood out to the judges. Placing second makes me excited for the future because I look forward to seeing what else I can accomplish."

Jakob Shiner took bronze in automotive damage appraisal at the national event; Mason Ingram won a bronze in firefighting; and the welding fabrication team, consisting of Elijah Bothwell, Ty Coshow and Jack Doyle, also took home bronze medals.

"Last year [the competition] was virtual. I did like being in person more because I got to go around, meet new people, make connections and learn about different



***"It's not unheard of to get hired right off the competition floor. Omaha is small, and there are connections to make all across the state."***





careers,” Shiner said. “Last year when Joe [Baker] said I had won state, I didn’t know what to think about it because I hadn’t gone to a state competition, so this time around, it kind of carries more weight and a lot more excitement. And getting to go to Atlanta is a huge experience. Just the opening ceremony is massive – thousands of people, huge show.”

Zach Pechacek, an MCC electrical technology instructor and advisor, has a long history of involvement with SkillsUSA, first competing with MCC while attending Bellevue West High School in 2006. A three-time qualifier for nationals, he won a silver medal in the Team Works competition with teammate Elise DeMaranville, who is now training manager for the MCC career and technical education program.

Pechacek has also held leadership positions with SkillsUSA. He became the first national officer from Nebraska in 2013, and he recently completed a three-year term on the SkillsUSA Nebraska board of directors. He said his involvement with the organization would not have happened without taking part in a career academy with MCC in high school as a way to hang out with his buddies and “get out of football practice.”

It led to a career as an electrician, despite his initial interest being in construction.

“SkillsUSA is important because it ties students to industry, so when they are looking for jobs, when they compete in these events, they’re showing employers they’ve taken an extra level of initiative,” Pechacek said.

Industry recruiters often see it firsthand at state and national events, and in addition to medals, some students even leave the events with jobs.

“It’s not unheard of to get hired right off the competition floor. Omaha is small, and there are connections to make all across the state. There’s a really important networking piece that happens at these events, and it builds it as you continue to participate,” Pechacek said.

Shiner, 23, completed MCC Career Certificates in Auto Collision Estimating and Auto Collision Entry Level Technician and is working as an apprentice at Woodhouse. He said attending MCC and competing at SkillsUSA provided valuable, real-world experience with a lot of camaraderie among teammates and competitors from other programs.

Shiner’s collision damage appraisal of a 2017 Mustang with a smashed front end at the state competition got him to Atlanta, using the processes he’s learned at the MCC Automotive Training Center. The format of the competition at SkillsUSA is done in a professional environment and under time constraints, he said.

“There’s a lot of similarities to the classroom, but the main difference is you’re working in a confined area. Other than that, it’s really similar to the work we see come in the door at Woodhouse,” Shiner said.

Pechacek said the SkillsUSA framework – personal skills, workplace skills and technical skills grounded in academics – produce well-rounded workers ready for hire.

“The interviewing skills and soft skills are a part of the score that can really set you apart from the hands-on projects. And there’s also the friendships,” Pechacek said. “There are 104 different events at SkillsUSA, from the trades to drone technology, culinary and cosmetology – there’s something for everyone.”



Pechacek said good things happen when MCC students open doors to opportunities that SkillsUSA presents. Shiner is glad he opened the door when Joe Baker, an auto collision instructor, encouraged him to compete.

“Joe got me to start going to these, and I’m glad I did. It’s just been a really nice experience. I’ve made a lot of friends and learned a lot of different processes,” Shiner said.

Maass, who started the digital cinema production competition in Nebraska, said he’s excited to see the College’s participation continue to evolve and thankful for the support of the Metropolitan Community College Foundation.

“The College has always been so supportive and given scholarships to state and national winners,” Maass said. “I’ve had students who have paid for a lot of their degrees through our foundation’s support.”

**More than 75 MCC students participated in the SkillsUSA Nebraska Championships, with 20% winning gold medals. MCC students medaled in the following events at the state competition:**

**Automotive Service Technology (postsecondary)**  
Zane Bender

**Automotive Refinishing Technology (high school)**  
James Frazier

**Collision Damage Appraisal (high school)**  
Tyler Kramar

**Collision Damage Appraisal (postsecondary)**  
Jakob Shiner

**Collision Repair Technology (high school)**  
Kaden Backstrom

**Electrical Construction Wiring (high school)**  
Cooper Cook

**Welding Fabrication (high school)**  
Ethan Bothwell, Ty Coshow and Jack Doyle

**Collision Damage Appraisal (postsecondary)**  
Connor Stotts

**Collision Repair Technology (high school)**  
Zachary Prewitt

**Electrical Construction Wiring (postsecondary)**  
Sam Lichti

**Welding Fabrication (postsecondary)**

Landon Barrett, Cody Fosmire and Brandon Ramos

**Audio/Radio Production (high school)**  
Ryan Buchannon and Connor Robb

**Digital Cinema Production (postsecondary)**  
Caitlin Chandler and McKinley Matlock

**Photography (postsecondary)**  
Alayna Kustka

**TV/Video Production (postsecondary)**  
Emily Balkovic and Joe Hass

**Firefighting (high school)**  
Caleb Jashinske

**Firefighting (postsecondary)**  
Mason Ingram

**Firefighting (high school)**  
Jacob Rupp

**Firefighting (postsecondary)**  
Mason Quesenberry

**Technical Team Problem Solving (state only)**  
Jacob Rupp

**Technical Team Problem Solving (state only)**  
Anthony Babbott, Zane Bender, Brian Ibarra-Ortiz, Andrew Nguyen and Wayne Price







## JENSEN TIRE & AUTO FUNDING PUTS LOCAL AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY ON THE LIFT

**J**ensen Tire & Auto, a family-run automotive services provider, will celebrate its 50-year anniversary serving the Omaha area in 2023. The company has seen a great deal of change in the industry throughout its history, with the past decade ushering in some of the biggest advancements – technology that has enabled electric vehicles; enhanced safety features; automated driver assistance technologies; and improved diagnostics and performance.

As cars today more closely resemble rolling computers, and as baby boomers simultaneously retire from service shops across the country, Jensen Tire & Auto is funding Metropolitan Community College outreach intended to inject the local sector with a talent pool of young workers.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 69,000 openings for automotive service technicians and mechanics are projected each

year through 2030, with most openings expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer occupations or exit the labor force. Scott Henry, MCC automotive outreach specialist – the position funded by Jensen Tire & Auto – spends his workdays recruiting high school students throughout a four-county region (Douglas, Sarpy, Dodge and Washington) to enroll in MCC technical training programs. He visits schools to give in-class presentations, brings large groups to tour MCC facilities, attends career fairs, hosts open houses and goes to industry events.

“A lot of students currently don’t have the opportunity to work in an automotive shop in high school because there are still schools that have not transitioned back to offering the trades as part of their educational programs, so I am working on letting high school students and their families know about opportunities in the automotive industry,” Henry said.





**NICK JENSEN**  
Jensen Tire & Auto

Nick Jensen, vice president of retail operations for Jensen Tire & Auto, said the College's investment in its Automotive Training Center, a more than 100,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility, provides specialized auto collision and automotive technology education that is ideally suited to train the automotive workforce of today and tomorrow.

"When I got into the industry 20 years ago, the standard of training used to be, 'Hey, go ahead and follow this guy around, and in a year or so, you'll be ready to go,' Jensen said. "We don't have the time or people to do that anymore, so we rely on community colleges to train the workforce on the latest technology because it's always changing.

"MCC has really come to the table in recent years and improved its facilities. Students are well prepared for careers because MCC programs take students off site for training with instructors, rather than doing traditional job shadowing, where the student may be learning from someone who might be more concerned with getting the job done in a timely manner for a customer rather than focusing on the teaching component with the student."

Henry said industry professionals who visit MCC automotive facilities leave impressed. One group visited the Automotive Training Center at MCC shortly after visiting a school in Texas known to have top facilities.

"They left our tour saying not only were our facilities bigger, but they were better overall. The ventilation alone in this building is on grade with the air quality of a hospital. It's not the dirty garage experience some might expect. It's one of the top facilities in the Midwest," Henry said.

With its opening coinciding with the pandemic, it's not as widely known as a facility of its caliber typically might be. Henry is working on changing that, as well as increasing awareness around the diverse pathways to lucrative careers in the automotive sector. Many receive their education at little or no cost – often with paid, off-site learning integrated.

In just under a year in the role, Henry has presented to more than 500 students who mostly attend schools that no longer offer automotive programs.

"A lot of these jobs are paying more and giving kids in the community more options instead of all being funneled in the same way," Jensen said. "We want to give back by developing the workforce and making sure we have better quality employees across the entire industry."





Scott Broady, MCC associate dean of industrial technology, said having the commitment and funding support of Jensen Tire & Auto for MCC outreach will benefit the entire industry.

"Jensen sees the overall need in the industry. As schools across the country transitioned away from the trades, it created an awareness gap about career opportunities, wage growth and what the experience is today working in a modern shop," Broady said. "Having a position solely dedicated to reconnecting young people to careers in the field raises all boats in the industry. MCC, the area automotive industry and the greater community are fortunate to have Jensen's support."

Henry began working in the role during the surge of the COVID-19 delta variant in July 2021 and unique economic conditions affecting the automotive industry have followed. In addition to technological

innovation driving wage growth, supply chain issues affecting the availability of new vehicles, higher fuel prices and increased travel expenses are also fueling demand for workers in the industry.

"I would estimate that in just the last five years, wages are up almost 50%, and the used car market has increased by about the same margin more recently. People are holding onto their vehicles longer, and we need great technicians to fix them," Jensen said.

The local and regional industry is responding with exclusive, direct-to-hire education, training and certification programs, such as the existing Toyota T-TEN program. This cohort program is the first of others coming on board at MCC like the new auto collision cohort program and the new MOPAR® Career Automotive Program offering.

"There is such a need, and this is a high-skill trade. The way the technology is changing, it also takes bringing workers in for continuing education, so whether it's bringing new workers into the industry or developing existing ones, our partners can see the ways being involved with MCC is going to help them in the long run," Henry said.

Jensen Tire & Auto is a local employer of 225, and since the opening of the Automotive Training Center at MCC, Jensen estimates around 20 current employees have attended the College for training. In addition to funding MCC outreach, Jensen Tire & Auto also makes it easier for people to get started on their careers in the industry by purchasing the first set of tools for its employees, which can cost thousands of dollars.

"There are a lot more jobs available, so the more we can get people interested in the trades, the greater impact it will have on the local workforce," Jensen said. "As an industry, we just need to continue to come together and show the value we bring to the community."

The MCC automotive technology program is accredited by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence Education Foundation (Master level) and the MOPAR® Career Automotive Program and offers more than 19 National Coalition of Certification Centers certifications to both students and the public through MCC continuing education programs.



**SCOTT HENRY**  
MCC automotive outreach specialist





For more information about MCC automotive technology and automotive collision repair programs, visit [mccneb.edu/automotive-technology](https://mccneb.edu/automotive-technology) or email Scott Henry at [shenry1@mccneb.edu](mailto:shenry1@mccneb.edu).



# HARVESTING LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The MCC Freight Farm is the centerpiece to academic and community programs at Yates Illuminates

**D**ays before COVID-19 arrived in Omaha, a shopper could visit any grocery store without worrying about being able to find the items on their list. But in the beginning days of the global pandemic, items typically found in abundance were nowhere to be found, no matter the expected shelf life. Hoarding happened.

While still in the midst of supply chain issues that have disrupted many elements of daily life over the past two-plus years, the pandemic continues to remind us that we live in a highly interconnected and interdependent world. The arrival of a 320-square-foot indoor container garden at the Metropolitan Community College satellite location at Yates Illuminates community center represents lessons learned from the pandemic, community solutions for a warming planet and innovative methodology to achieve food self-sufficiency.

The LED-powered “Freight Farm” is a revolutionary vertical crop-growing system that can produce more than two acres of food over the course of a year in an indoor, climate-controlled setting. Positioned as it is in the courtyard, it is truly the “centerpiece” of the Yates Illuminates, a collaborative nonprofit with a focus on education.


It is the first Freight Farm in Omaha, the second in Nebraska and the only one in the state with formalized academic programs attached to it. The hands-on curriculum offered at the Freight Farm is designed with the highly diverse residents of the Gifford Park neighborhood near 32nd and Davenport streets in mind.

“When fully up and running, the MCC Freight Farm will be a solar-powered source of immersive learning with a focus on programs that promote diversity, equity and inclusion,” said Gary Girard, MCC associate vice president for community and workforce education.

The converted shipping container can grow more than 500 varieties of crops year-round in a nontraditional learning setting. According to the manufacturer, the hydroponic system can support more than 13,000 growing plants at one time using just five gallons of water per day. Over the course of a year, that can amount to an annual harvest of between two to six tons of produce – lettuces, leafy greens, herbs, root vegetables and more.







“Our Freight Farm will showcase alternative and local growing solutions that are self-sustaining and create food self-sufficiency, which can be an issue in urban settings.”

Yates Illuminates is a partnership committed to delivering adult education and employment services. Girard said the College's on-site Freight Farm will create a wide variety of learning opportunities across many academic focus areas offered at MCC. It will also help launch a new certification for sustainability, as well as offer a full continuum of community programs that serve people from age 3 to the aging population. Programs will continue to develop with input from Gifford Park neighbors and beyond.

“Our Freight Farm will showcase alternative and local growing solutions that are self-sustaining and create food self-sufficiency, which can be an issue in urban settings,” Girard said.

Course content will have application for students studying business, culinary arts, health, horticulture, science, sustainability, technology and more.

“We'll look at alternative ways of growing, the science behind it and food equity – all the ways we can use this location to serve underresourced folks in the community,” Girard said.

Girard added that determining how the Freight Farm will be implemented at MCC has relied on strong collaboration within the College's culinary and horticulture programs, which are natural partners that function like academic consultants for developing curriculum.





"Our culinary and horticulture programs have been highly involved in MCC sustainability initiatives, so it was a natural progression for these programs to provide input," said Brian O'Malley, associate dean of MCC culinary, hospitality and horticulture. "We are excited for the opportunity to have this innovative growing system as part of our programs and the potential it brings for community education and impact."

Classes will be offered later this summer with courses on organic farming, sustainable agriculture, farming technology, consequences of food deserts, supply and demand and plant care already scheduled.

Girard said one of the key benefits of the addition to the College's footprint at Yates Illuminates is how the Freight Farm builds on existing programs at MCC. For example, at MCC North Express, a satellite location in the Highlander Building on North 30th Street, visual lessons on climate change are projected on the large Science on a Sphere globe display that hangs from the ceiling. Those global learning experiences can then be linked to local applications and lessons at Yates

Illuminates' Freight Farm by learning how to grow food from alternative sources, using renewable energy, etc.

"The Freight Farm really can intersect with almost every academic focus area that we have on campus, from farm-to-table dining as part of our culinary program to the technology running the Freight Farm you would learn about in our IT programs. You can manage the entire farm from an app on your phone," Girard said.

Like all aspects of Yates Illuminates, the Freight Farm will be community-driven and collaborative. Girard said MCC will look for opportunities to connect with other schools and engage students. For example, synergy can develop from MCC student workers connecting with others participating in youth programs at Yates Illuminates.

"Just like our food chain, we want everything that happens at Yates Illuminates to be interconnected. We hope to take student engagement to a whole new level and use the Freight Farm as a tool to bring people together," Girard said.

Photos courtesy of Freight Farms





***“Just like our food chain, we want everything that happens at Yates Illuminates to be interconnected.***

***We hope to take student engagement to a whole new level and use the Freight Farm as a tool to bring people together.”***



# BOOSTING COMMUNITY ACCESS TO DIGITAL RESOURCES



**The Metropolitan Community College Fort Omaha Campus is opening even more doors for the community, connecting students and neighbors to free digital resources and public meeting spaces with its fall opening of Digital Express. The facility design and programming draws heavily from local stakeholder input, including community organizations, area businesses and the residents the digital library aims to benefit.**

The 13,000-square-foot facility is located in the completely redesigned Building 10 and will offer device and materials checkout and support, as well as a host of free services and resources. Visitors and students at MCC Digital Express will be greeted when they arrive and offered customized assistance. Patrons will be able to check out laptops and iPads, as well as try their hand at digital technology. A learning commons area and Creative Zone will offer academic assistance and hands-on technology experiences for students and the general public.

Digital Express also will add to the College's STEM learning footprint with the ability to host College for Kids and College for Teens programming in the reimagined space.

"I believe that Digital Express can be a wonderful partner and community asset that will introduce

and enhance student and community access to the digital tools that make the world turn," said Beverly Lahlum Taylor, director of Digital Express. "This is a space that is designed for people to just go and be in. Not many spaces like this exist anymore without requiring payment of some type."

A key benefit available to the public is Reboot Central, where people can bring their malfunctioning technology devices to an industry partner working the service desk, who will troubleshoot issues at no or low cost. Lahlum Taylor said the idea is to have MCC students involved in the diagnostic/repair process, learning hands-on from experienced industry professionals.

Community members can also take advantage of quiet, collaborative meeting rooms outfitted with technology for presentations or brainstorming sessions. Parents and their children can also find





***“It’s so important for our staff to have the people skills that create a feeling of belonging for anyone who walks through the door.”***

help with homework on technology that may not be available at home. In addition, a quiet space is available for MCC faculty to plug in and work or connect with students and community members away from their office.

Lahlum Taylor noted that the transformative ideas for Digital Express came directly from community members. For example, two important

takeaways that emerged from input sessions with 37 community organizations were for operations to be flexible to accommodate visitors with different needs and to provide multigenerational assistance representative of the community.

“It’s so important for our staff to have the people skills that create a feeling of belonging for anyone who walks through the door,” Lahlum Taylor said.

**For more information on Digital Express, contact Beverly Lahlum Taylor at [blahlumtaylor@mcneb.edu](mailto:blahlumtaylor@mcneb.edu).**



A photograph of Mitch Sawyer, a man with short brown hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored plaid shirt. He is smiling and holding a clear glass award trophy. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and trees.

# DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

Mitch Sawyer  
2022 Distinguished Alumni Awardee

## FREMONT BUSINESS OWNER MITCH SAWYER HONORED WITH 2022 DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

Over the last 15 years, Mitch Sawyer has become a well-respected business owner in the Fremont community. He is the owner of S2 Roll-Offs & Refuse, which currently employs about 45 people.

Born and raised in Fremont, Nebraska, Mitch started helping his father at the family construction business, Sawyer Construction, at the age of 12. Don Sawyer, Mitch's grandfather, started Sawyer Construction in 1955. Upon graduating from Fremont High School in 2000, Mitch enrolled at Metropolitan Community College in the construction technology program to strengthen the skills instilled in him at a young age by his father and grandfather.

After graduating in May 2003, he joined Sawyer Construction full time while exploring other jobs. In 2007, Mitch was ready to start the next chapter of his career. With the help and support of his parents, he began S2 Roll-Offs. He rehabilitated an old roll-off truck that his dad had purchased but never had the opportunity to fix. That August, S2 started with one truck and one roll-off container. Mitch used his connections in the Fremont area to grow the business. In 2010, S2 began offering residential and commercial garbage and recycling pick up. S2 has grown to more than 8,000 customers

in six counties, along with adding portable restroom rentals for construction projects and special events.

In 2013, S2 was named small business of the year by the Fremont Area Chamber of Commerce.

In 2016, S2 Repair and Maintenance opened as a full-service diesel repair shop to fix, service and maintain all of the S2 trucks and equipment while also providing maintenance service for outside customers.

During the March 2019 catastrophic flood in Fremont, Mitch and S2 assisted his brother Tom and Sawyer Construction to help stop the flooding from ruining the Fremont metropolis. After half the community was under water, Mitch and his team continued to do repairs for months after the floodwaters receded.

Mitch was named one of the 20 under 40 from the Fremont Area Chamber of Commerce in 2021. He currently serves on Fremont Planning Commission, Fremont YMCA Board of Directors and Fremont Construction Employers Association Board.

Mitch has been married to his wife Bridget for almost 10 years, and they have two daughters, Elliott and Evaleigh.



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