

# PERSONALITY PROFILES

Interesting people from the Bison community

North Dakota State University,  
Fargo



## A DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

By advanced writing students of the Department of Communication  
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## Interesting people from the Bison community

Everyone has something to say. But too often no one is listening. We tend to focus our attention on the celebrities, the politicians, the sports stars. Perhaps that's okay, as mass media writing emphasizes the idea of prominence. But people who are not prominent are not necessarily less interesting. Maybe they are even more interesting. In this class documentary project North Dakota State University's advanced writing students consider some of those people who are part of the university community in its widest sense. Some are former sports people. Others help as counselors or spiritual leaders. Some are students or former students with a story to tell.

These profiles aim to tell those stories. Perhaps these individuals represent a small part of NDSU. Yet they play a noteworthy role in the large and varied community that comes together under the umbrella of a university. Writers hope to offer us an idea of what it might be like to meet these people, their hopes, their challenges, and their triumphs as part of a community that identifies with the NDSU motto: "once a Bison, always a Bison."



—Ross F. Collins, professor of communication, and the students of COMM 310, Advanced Writing for Mass Media: Nathan Ambrose, Blake Engebretson, Gracie Gellner, Emma Johnson, Ava Lee, Corbin Lee, Haley McClue, Ruby Ruen, Elle Sorenson, Max Wohl, Sammy Zehr and Allison Zenker.

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# Christian Dudzik:

## A life in motion, on and off the field

By Nathan Ambrose

Christian Dudzik's life journey weaves together football, family, community, and an unwavering passion for building others up. From his days as a four-time National Champion cornerback and safety for NDSU to his current role as the Director of Creative Content for NDSU Athletics, Dudzik's story is a testament to hard work, resilience, and the power of giving back. With every highlight reel he crafts or young athlete he mentors, Dudzik channels the values that have guided him from Omaha to Fargo, to Florida, to Washington, and back to Fargo again.

Growing up in Omaha, Neb., football was more than just a pastime for Dudzik—it was a family affair. His early exposure to the game, through his family's love for Kansas State University football, laid the foundation for his own ambitions. Dudzik's uncle worked in multimedia for the Wildcats, producing highlight reels that young Christian would watch over and over. "I'd watch his highlight videos and be ready to play football, to be just like the players, my heroes, that I watched in those videos," Dudzik recalls. These videos weren't just entertainment, they were inspiration, planting the seed for his lifelong love of the game and storytelling.

As a kid, Dudzik's dream was clear: he wanted to play Division I football. With unwavering determination, he worked hard to stand out as a student-athlete. "I remember being that kid dreaming of playing college football," Dudzik says. "I idolized those players in the videos, and I wanted to be just like them." Football wasn't just a sport; he says it was a way to connect with family, build discipline, and chase something bigger than himself.

Kansas State seemed like the perfect destination. The school's football program was iconic in his family, and Dudzik aspired to wear the Wildcats' purple and white. But when the recruitment letters didn't come, Dudzik hoped his journey wouldn't be over. He had to recalibrate. His search for the right program would eventually lead him to a place he hadn't initially considered: Fargo, North Dakota.

Both South Dakota State and North Dakota State offered him athletic scholarships after high school. After visiting each, Dudzik's gut told him to choose NDSU. "I really liked Fargo," he says. "It seemed like everyone was talking about NDSU football in the fall. It was kind of the environment I grew up around and enjoyed about K-State."

Dudzik said joining the Bison football program proved to be one of the best decisions of his life. From 2010 to 2014, he became a cornerstone of the team, contributing



to four consecutive national championships and helping solidify NDSU as a powerhouse in college football. Over those five seasons, he earned accolades, including a spot on the All-MVFC First Team in 2014 and recognition as a College Sporting News National All-Star.

While Dudzik's athletic achievements were significant, it was his style of play that truly made him stand out. Teammates and coaches alike admired his fearless, all-in approach to the game. Former teammate Cole Jirik shared his perspective on what made Dudzik such a special player. "If I could describe him in one word, it would be 'dynamic.' He could do a lot of different things on and off the field," Jirik says. "You'd give him a task, and he'd find a way to adapt and get it done. His versatility and ability to execute at any position made him invaluable to the team."

On the field, Dudzik was a player who always put his body on the line. Whether as a cornerback or safety, he played with a sense of urgency that demanded the respect of his teammates and opponents. "He was fearless. He didn't care who he was going against or what had happened the play before," Jirik recalls. "He was going to put his body on the line, go 100 miles an hour, and see what happened. That intensity, that drive—it was contagious. It pushed everyone around him to be better."

Dudzik's commitment to excellence wasn't just about his physical ability. It was also about his mentality. He was known for his ability to stay focused in any situation, even in the most pressure-filled moments. "He always did his job," Jirik said. "If his assignment was to do XYZ, you knew XYZ was getting done. He could play multiple spots on the field and excel at them all. His ability to be effective in a variety of roles made him a key part of our defense."

Despite his intensity on the field, Dudzik's leadership wasn't always vocal. He led primarily by example, showing his teammates what it meant to give everything you had. "He wasn't the loudest guy on the team, but you always knew what you were going to get from him," Jirik says. "His actions spoke louder than words. He always showed up, gave his best effort, and expected the same from others."

Dudzik's playing style was marked by adaptability, a quality that made him a standout on the defense. He had the ability to transition between positions—starting as a cornerback before shifting to safety, demonstrating his flexibility and skill set. "He could really play at multiple spots on the field," Jirik adds. "He was incredibly fast, incredibly talented, and just one of those guys who was really important to have on the team."

One of the defining moments of Dudzik's playing career came during NDSU's unforgettable upset victory at Kansas State in 2013. For Dudzik, the game held personal significance. "It was a dream come true," he says. "I wanted to play for them, but they didn't recruit me." Walking into the stadium where he had imagined himself playing as a kid was surreal, but beating the Wildcats was even more meaningful.

In that game, NDSU won 24-21 with a game-winning drive in the final minutes, shocking Kansas State and the college football world. For Dudzik, this was more than just an athletic triumph. "It was really important, not only for me but for our university," He explains. "That game showed what NDSU football was all about."

Looking back, the game wasn't just a victory on the field; it was a moment of validation for Dudzik and the entire Bison program. It also deepened his desire to share the stories of players and teams who rise to the occasion, defying expectations.

Following that historic win against Kansas State, Dudzik and the Bison carried their momentum through the 2013 season, finishing with an undefeated 15-0 record. This remarkable achievement culminated in their third-straight FCS national championship, further solidifying NDSU's dominance in college football.

Dudzik's exceptional career with the Bison extended into his senior year in 2014. He continued to be a cornerstone of the team, ending up starting an impressive 61 consecutive games—a testament to his consistency, durability, and importance to the program. He helped the Herd win and unprecedented fourth consecutive national championships from 2010 to 2014. His contributions on the field, both as a cornerback and safety, helped establish the Bison as a powerhouse, not just in the FCS but in college football as a whole.

However, despite these achievements, Dudzik was forced to face the reality that he wasn't drafted into the NFL. For a player who had dedicated so much of his life to the game, this moment was a significant crossroads.

As Dudzik's playing days came to an end, his passion for football didn't fade—it evolved. After graduating in 2014, he joined forces with fellow senior Jirik to open

Dynasty Performance Training, a personal training facility where he could continue to impact the next generation of athletes in the Fargo community. "The main reason we started the gym was because of our experience with NDSU and specifically with Coach Jim Kramer," Dudzik explains. "His impact on me was beyond physical development." At Dynasty, Dudzik led marketing and video content while also teaching speed work. He spent four years at Dynasty before moving back to Omaha, but his impact in the Fargo community was resounding. "I saw myself in these kids," he shared. "I remember the days when I was a kid wanting to play college football. If I could have a similar impact and give advice to them, I knew that would be fulfilling."

Jirik agrees. "Christian understands what makes people push themselves harder. He was not just helping them become better athletes—he was helping them become better people." Dudzik's relentless drive and commitment to uplifting others made Dynasty Performance Training a hit in the Fargo community.

At Dynasty, Dudzik led marketing and video content while also teaching speed work. He says he left the business for Omaha in 2018 for personal and professional reasons, including a desire to be closer to family.

But Dudzik's passion for storytelling never waned. He continued to refine his multimedia skills, driven by a desire to capture the heart and soul of the athletic journey. His internship as a video intern for NDSU Athletics in 2013 gave him his first taste of life behind the camera, and it became a calling he couldn't ignore. "I always admired how my uncle's videos could inspire people," Dudzik says. "That's what I wanted to do: create content that connects people to the game and inspires them."

After leaving Fargo, Dudzik used his connections to get an internship with the University of Washington Football team, and later the Coastal Athletic Association, sharpening his video production expertise. "I want to convey the emotions a player and coach experience during a game," Dudzik explains with a smile. "The highs, the lows—those are the moments people connect with."

As Dudzik's career in multimedia flourished, an unexpected opportunity arose to return to the beginning of his success. In 2023, he moved back to Fargo to take on the role of Director of Creative Content for NDSU Athletics. He could once again contribute to the program that shaped his own journey. "When the opportunity came up to return to NDSU and work for Coach [Tim] Polasek and his team, I knew it was the right time," Dudzik reflects. "I didn't know if I would return here one day, but as I've gotten older, I've learned that you can't always predict your life's path. I'm just thankful to be back, doing what I love."

Now in his new role, Dudzik focuses on telling the stories that make NDSU Athletics special. Whether it's capturing a player's first game or a team's championship run, Dudzik approaches each project with the same passion he had as a player. "I hope that kids are watching

my content on YouTube and social media and having the same kind of inspiration that I had as a kid,” he says. “I want them to dream big and work hard.

“When I create a video, I want people to feel the same adrenaline, joy, and emotion the players and coaches feel,” Dudzik explains. For example, in one of his recent projects, focusing on the players’ expressions and the jubilation of the moment.

Through this new chapter of his life, Dudzik has come full circle, merging his passion for storytelling with his love for football. He said his role now allows him to channel the values instilled in him during his time at NDSU. While the circumstances of his life and career have changed, his core principles remain the same.

Now 33, he’s settling back into Fargo with his girlfriend, finding a balance between his career and his life off the field. “The principles and values that are foundational to NDSU football—I’ve tried to stick to those and let the path open up in front of me,” he reflects. Those principles—hard work, integrity, and a commitment to community—continue to guide him, whether he’s behind

the camera or mentoring young athletes in the gym.

Dudzik’s life journey seems to embody the power of resilience and the importance of giving back. From his childhood dreams of playing college football to his championship years at NDSU, and now as a leader in creative content, Dudzik exemplifies what it means to live with purpose.

As Dudzik continues to shape the narrative of NDSU Athletics, he is building a legacy that will inspire generations to come. Whether he’s capturing the grit and glory of a rivalry game or helping a young athlete find confidence, Dudzik’s work is fueled by a desire to make a difference. For Christian Dudzik, the most meaningful victories are those that live on in the stories we tell.



# Craig Schwinden: Pro bowler, Air Force—and sports editor

By Blake Engebretson

A professional bowler, high school football official and a nearly two-decade stint in the Air Force. That offers just a glimpse into the life of this 59-year-old Fargo resident.

That doesn't even include his tenure as the sports editor of NDSU's student newspaper, the *Spectrum*, that Craig Schwinden was hired to run less than three years ago. In his mid-50s, Schwinden became part of an organization generally consisting of 18- to 22-year-olds. His first assignment was to cover the Football Championship Subdivision National Championship (FCS) game between NDSU and Montana State in January 2022.

Schwinden's story details his first trip to Frisco, Texas, where he took a bus that started in Bismarck, N.D., picked people up in Fargo and drove the 1,000-plus miles without staying overnight. He had a unique experience heading southbound, keeping a log throughout the trip.

"People in the back were singing 'If You're Gonna Play in Texas (You Gotta Have a Fiddle in the Band),' " said Schwinden. "It was cool. Glad I did it. Something I can look back on and laugh about now." Schwinden's story, "See America! Take a bus from Fargo to Frisco," can be found in an online search.

A Bison win was gravy on top of his memorable experience. NDSU's 38-10 victory marked its ninth football championship since 2011.

"I was so excited to be there and wanted to walk around and get the lay of the land," Schwinden recalled. "I walked around and said, 'Wow, I'm in Frisco, man. Toyota Field and NDSU is painted in one of the end zones. This is going to be great.' It was a whooping by the Bison and that was a lot of fun." Schwinden held his title of sports editor until he graduated from NDSU in May 2023 with an emergency management degree.

Schwinden is a Fargo native, "born and raised," he said, graduating from Fargo North High School in 1983. He kept school on the back burner of priorities, however. Schwinden began at Minnesota State University Moorhead out of high school for one semester before transferring to NDSU for two semesters.

"I didn't hate NDSU, I hated school," Schwinden said. "I had nobody there pushing me: 'Get in there, get it done, suck it up, get it done now and you'll never regret it.'"

But he came back to school and NDSU in 2019. That doesn't mean that as an older-than-average student he doesn't have observations a younger undergraduate might miss.

"The problem with college is it's kind of a money

making machine," Schwinden said. "The colleges and universities, number one, they're trying to make money and one of the ways they do that is with these four-year degrees."

He believes university study should be more targeted to major classes. "There's stuff that you shouldn't have to take in college. You should really only have to take the (classes) that are important to your major. The other stuff should be accomplished in high school, but part of the problem is the high schools are broken too."

Despite that, Schwinden's first attempts at post-secondary education can't be blamed on his criticism today, he said. It can be blamed on bowling. At least in part.

His education also took a halt, Schwinden said, because he was often on the road at bowling tournaments. As an elite bowler, Schwinden joined a tournament circuit, traveling across the Midwest. He can list plenty of positives in bowling. It's how he met his longtime friend Keith Bergseth. Schwinden's father, Ken, was good friends with Bergseth's father, Rick. Their connection allowed Craig and Keith to build their own friendship. Ken and Rick were avid bowlers and often hit up the lanes in the Fargo-Moorhead area with Craig and Keith.

"He's a Fargo North guy, I'm a Fargo North guy," Keith Bergseth said. "He likes bowling, I like bowling, sports, baseball, that type of thing. I think my dad saw him as a younger adult that he respected and thought that maybe Craig and I should get to know each other."

They did and often encouraged each other. "I would cheer him on (when he bowled)," Bergseth said, "and he would cheer me on that type of thing, so it's kind of a nice healthy relationship there."

Bergseth claimed jokingly that Schwinden used to beat him at the alleys "about nine out of every 10" times. That's not surprising as Schwinden was part of the Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) for more than a decade. He won several regional and state tournaments



throughout his life. A move to Wisconsin in 1990 only fueled his participation in the occupation, he said. He still loves it.

“Three years ago now, I was the state champion in North Dakota in the 55-59-year-old (division),” Schwinden said. “I went out to (Las) Vegas and I came so close to winning the national, but I finished third.”

The success led Schwinden to being away and sometimes challenged his relationships. However, Bergseth, for example, always knew Schwinden would send a text if he was ever around Fargo.

“He’s a good friend,” he said. “He’s a very loyal person. Very trustworthy. I don’t know if you could say that he has lots of friends but the friends that he does have are good friends. They’re not false relationships. They’re relationships that means stuff to him.

“I appreciate having him as a friend. We can bounce ideas off of each other and there’s not a lot of judgment so it’s good to have people like that in your life.”

It wasn’t just bowling that kept Schwinden away from his friends, or even the United States, for that matter. The bowling gig had to at least slow down for a little bit, he said. Although he claimed he was still having fun, he needed a change.

“I started getting tired of the tournament bowling and wasn’t making a lot of money,” he said. “Just getting tired of the travel. That’s when I joined the Air Force Reserve. That changed the direction of everything.”

After 15 years as an amateur and Tier 2 professional bowler, Schwinden made a big move that predated the 9/11 terrorist attacks by just three years. From 1998 until that horrific day, Schwinden worked as an aircraft structural technician.

“It’s a fancy way of saying I was a sheet metal worker,” he said. “We made repairs on the airplane. It was fun and everything, but that was largely a one-weekend-a-month job.”

The remainder of his time in the Air Force was spent as an aircraft loadmaster where he worked on C-130 cargo airplanes. His duties consisted of unloading airplanes, doing paperwork, center of gravity checks and handling special cargo.

The job took him all over the world, getting as far west as Midway Island and as far east as Pakistan. As Schwinden attempted to count the number of countries work took him to with his fingers, he stopped at about 40.

“One of the things about being a loadmaster was it was a flying job, and there’s always things to do, always places to go,” Schwinden said. “In the winter, I’d fly around the world and be a reservist.”

After the 9/11 attacks, much of Schwinden’s life for the next half dozen years was spent overseas. The president’s “War on Terror” program added intensity to his job and forced many trips to the Middle East, visiting countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Israel, Ethiopia. He also worked in Germany, Key West, Fla., Puerto Rico and more.

“Joining the Air Force Reserve and becoming a loadmaster was the big event in my life that really turned things around because of 9/11,” Schwinden said. “It was a good job. It took over my life. I didn’t referee. I didn’t bowl. I didn’t do anything but play Air Force for, like, six years.

“Even when that started to slow down when Obama became president, we were still busy and we were still looking for volunteers for stuff. From 2002 to 2010-2011, I flew a ton. I loved it. Got to see the world.”

That gave Schwinden a lot of perspective, he said. Taking in the environments of developing countries has made him grateful for the country he lives in.

“When you go to places like Afghanistan and Iraq and Ethiopia, you realize how nice it is here,” Schwinden said. “You could drive from North Dakota to Montana to Idaho to Utah and nobody will stop you and say, ‘What are you doing? Where’s your papers?’ People just leave you alone.”

While his parents, Ken and Norma, and his brother, Doug, have lived in Fargo their entire lives, Craig’s sisters, Janet and Jennifer, have traveled like their brother. Janet’s husband, Robert, was, like Schwinden, in the Air Force. His sister, Jennifer, was a travel nurse working throughout the United States. That is all of Schwinden’s immediate family. He has never been married or had children, which he said he largely attributes to how infrequently he was grounded during his Air Force days.

Schwinden’s time was occupied not only by his duties as loadmaster. Other Air Force jobs generally took place during the winter months. The rest of the year, he worked for Dixon Engineering in Wisconsin, inspecting water tanks.

His “run of fun” with Dixon came to an end in 2017, shortly after he retired from the Air Force. The timing of several events, including some dissatisfaction with his role at Dixon, retirement and father’s declining health, overlapped.

That summer it all eventually led him to move back to his hometown. His father was placed in hospice care and died in fall of 2017. “We knew the end was near so I moved back the summer of 2017 to spend time with him before he passed.”

What next? Eventually, Schwinden said, the grieving period passed and he contemplated his next steps in life. That’s when, in January 2019, he decided to go back to NDSU.

“That just happened because I didn’t know what I wanted to do with myself anymore,” Schwinden said candidly. “I was back in Fargo. I didn’t ever see that happening. I liked Fargo, still visited Fargo, still followed the Bison, still followed North High School sports, but I wasn’t ever really looking at going back.”

He said he had a helping hand from Bergseth, the president of Bergseth Bros, a third-generation beer wholesaler in Fargo. Working to find a life direction after his father’s death, Schwinden was able to get his feet underneath him at his friend’s business.



“It just happened that I had a position open,” Bergseth said, “so I was like ‘Well why don’t you come back and run our warehouse and then you can just kind of figure out what you want to do?’”

Schwinden worked for Bergseth until he decided to return NDSU. He continued with the company while earning his degree, dropping in the store off and on to earn some extra cash. Bergseth said he still pops in “every now and then” for some side jobs. Otherwise, Schwinden currently services airplanes at Fargo Jet Center.

Schwinden said he has always had a love for sports beyond bowling, particularly football. In high school, he said he desperately wanted to play football but was too small. Instead, he became a team manager. He wrestled, bowled, played baseball and slow-pitch softball as well.

Today, one way Schwinden stays around the game of football is as a clock operator. He started at Fargo North High School after his move back, working basketball and later football games. That eventually led to a call to the high school from NDSU Sports Information Director Ryan Perreault, who needed a fill-in for a Bison home football game.

“And (Fargo North’s athletic director) gave him my name and number and the rest is history,” Schwinden said. “I told Ryan, whenever Ned hangs this up, let me know. Call me first, please.”

While Schwinden still occasionally fills in at NDSU football games, he has also worked the clock for the Dakota Bowl (North Dakota High School Football State Championships). He did so again just this November.

Last summer, Schwinden ran into an NFL official at a football officials’ clinic in Sioux Falls, S.D. who runs a game clock class.

“It’s an online thing and a two-night thing, and he talks about game clock procedures for college (games),” Schwinden said. “He said if you’re serious, give me your information and I’ll keep my eyes and ears open for jobs.” But he said he was told that he needs more college experience. Schwinden plans to attempt to work

more collegiate games in the area starting next fall.

“NDSU, Moorhead, Concordia, Valley City (State), Mayville (State) maybe,” he said. “I can stay close to football at high school and college and just do the clock. I’m going to try really hard next year to get some of these neighboring colleges to see if I can’t at least get on their substitute list or something.”

Schwinden participated in that officials’ camp in Sioux Falls because he’s officiated football for the last 40 years. It’s another way he’s stayed close to the game.

He first officiated in 1983 as part of his father’s crew. But the demanding schedule of the Air Force kept Schwinden’s officiating career intermittent. He officiated in Fargo for about seven years before a 10-year hiatus while in Wisconsin. He got back into officiating off and on before moving back to Fargo and returned to it in 2018.

“I didn’t officiate a lot (outside of North Dakota) because I just couldn’t with my schedule,” he said. “I was traveling on weekends, doing all the bowling.”

As the umpire on his football crew, Schwinden has worked two Dakota Bowls—2020 and 2021. Schwinden had to sit out the 2023 season due to surgery on his Achilles tendon—the result of an accident during his Air Force days, when his foot was crushed by an airplane ramp—but he was able to get back on the field this fall.

“I love it,” Schwinden said. “We’ve been really lucky with weather and quality of games. Now that my Achilles is better and I felt pretty good this year, if the weather keeps holding out and I’m still fairly healthy, the five of us want to keep working, Yeah, I’ll probably keep working.”

# Marney Gellner: NDSU grad is familiar face in Minnesota sports

By Gracie Gellner

At 51, Marney Gellner has spent decades in the field of sports broadcasting. She has become a well-known and recognizable figure on Bally Sports North, now FanDuel Sports, a livestream sports network. Gellner serves as a play-by-play announcer, pregame and postgame host, and sideline reporter for televised games of Minnesota Twins, Timberwolves, and Lynx. Her distinctive character has helped to make her a beloved personality in the Twin Cities as well as sports media in general.

From Minot, N.D., Gellner's passion for entertainment began in high school, long before she had considered sports broadcasting as a career. "I always knew I wanted to do something in entertainment," she said. "I wanted to be on 'Saturday Night Live,' and the whole town of Minot knew it." Early aspirations gave Gellner the confidence to pursue a career on camera. Graduating from NDSU in 2012 with a master's degree in communication helped Gellner to form valuable connections and feel a higher sense of accomplishment. Gellner said her proudest career achievement is that her success was entirely self-driven. "I did not know anyone in the industry when I started and didn't have a single connection to anyone in the sports broadcasting business," she said. "Having longevity in this career as a woman is not always a given, and I didn't get a head start from anybody."

What colleagues describe as Gellner's vibrant personality has deep roots. She said her personality was fostered by her upbringing and shaped by her high school experiences. Her mother, Lola Gellner, recalled Marney's natural ability to entertain others as well as her love for making people laugh. "Marney thrived in environments where her quick wit and humor could shine." Her mother said Gellner loved being in the spotlight, whether it was sports or academic. She excelled in both, Lola said.

Gellner's outgoing nature blossomed as she developed her sense of humor, earning herself a reputation for having a spontaneous energy, her mother said. That extended to sports. Gellner said that as a child, she pushed herself to participate in and learn about as many sports as she could. This included convincing her two brothers to let her participate in their all-boys neighborhood games.

Though Gellner has long embraced her role as a public figure, Lola noted that her daughter still struggles with criticism that invariably falls on people who make their living on television. "She didn't like it back then, and she still doesn't," Lola said. Lola explained that there could be 99 supportive comments across Gellner's social media pages and only one negative comment. But it doesn't

upset Gellner as much as it used to, she said.

Early in her broadcasting career, in 1997, Gellner became the first woman to work in the sports department at KXMB-TV, Bismarck, N.D. She remembers picking up a call from an at-home viewer, and hearing,

"I can't stand listening to that girl. She doesn't even know what she's talking about." Devastated, and the first time she had been criticized, Gellner said she called her mother in tears. But over many years in the industry, Gellner said that she has been criticized for everything from the sound of her voice to her appearance. She has learned to ignore and tune out negative comments, saying "Criticism is there daily if I want to find it, but I don't."

Her career journey has not gone without other challenges. Gellner reflected on her "dumb mistakes," including an incident in 2014 where on live television she blanked on her co-host's name, which she says is "still haunting to this day." She has since learned from that mishap, treating every live broadcast with meticulous preparation. Gellner is now able to consider the incident as a lesson in professionalism. It has allowed her to continue to flourish. Gellner greatly expanded her skill set, becoming what she calls "a Jackie of all trades." Whether it is play-by-play, sideline reporting, hosting or interviewing, Gellner tries to bring originality to each assignment. This adaptability was evident in 2018, when she became the second woman in history to call play-by-play for an NBA game, for the Minnesota Timberwolves. In July 2024, Gellner made history again by becoming the first woman to call play-by-play for a regular-season Minnesota Twins game.

Despite these accomplishments, Gellner prefers not to view her career through a historic lens. "I didn't want to feel like I was making history," she said. "I just wanted to do the job right." Her focus remains on preparation, even though sometimes she said it is overwhelming. "When I did play-by-play for the Twins, I almost broke my brain," Gellner laughed. But she said the preparation was extremely important, as Gellner did not want to be labeled



as a “woman broadcaster” if she were to make any mistakes live on air. “I have worked a lot of Twins games in my life and hadn’t been asked to do a play-by-play, so I knew it was a rare and flattering invitation,” she said. “Especially because there is a lot of responsibility with that type of job.” Considering her simultaneous assignments with the Minnesota Lynx, Gellner admitted that the workload she was facing at the time was intense, yet worth every effort.

Her inspiration comes from other successful women in the industry, like Michelle Tafoya, a former Sunday Night Football and Olympic broadcaster, who also broadcast for the Timberwolves. “She was the best,” said Gellner, crediting Tafoya for personally helping her navigate the challenges and issues that come with being a woman in the industry.

Managing the stress of live television is yet another skill that Gellner has worked over time to master. Revealing her coping mechanism for high-pressure moment, Gellner joked, “Personally, I swear a lot.” Recently, she said for the first time she accidentally swore on the radio. A seven-second delay saved her from broadcast embarrassment. “Twenty-plus years, and that’s the first time that I’ve ever sworn on live anything.” But after more than two decades in the broadcasting industry, she said she has been able to develop a habit of walking away for quick breaks in order to regain composure.

Working in an industry where job security is never a given, Gellner measures her success through longevity and consistency. Her contracts have been renewed every two years. She finds satisfaction knowing that the teams, including the Twins, Timberwolves, and Lynx, continue to ask her back. “It feels like success when people still want you around,” she said, adding that her pride for working in this business for as long as she has consistently keeps her motivated to stay at the top of her game.

In a field where women once had limited roles, Gellner’s career has surpassed expectations. Gellner said it is shocking, in the best way, to see how far women have come in broadcasting. “When I first started, it was very rare than a woman would be working in sports,” she said. “I always felt like I had to prove myself, and was very conscious of the fact that I could not make mistakes.” She said her motivation now is not to impress others or win awards. Rather, it stems from the satisfaction of knowing that she does a good job. “I’m very driven,” Gellner said. “I really don’t like when I’m not naturally good at something.”

Accomplishments, a quest for excellence, and the willingness to say yes to new challenges have led Gellner to where she is today. From her first job Bismarck to a well-known Minneapolis sportscaster, she has built a career defined by determination. As for her last name, Gellner decided to keep it professionally, even after marriage. Because she was single when she entered the business of broadcasting, and from the support of her husband Matt, she said the choice has allowed her to

maintain a sense of personal and professional identity. She said her husband had told her after they married, “You have already established this career as yourself.” Keeping her maiden name has also allowed Gellner to keep her two teenaged children’s identities more private, giving them the choice of whether or not they want to be seen in the public eye.

Gellner’s family is one that can be described as lovers of all things sports. Her husband, Matt Mathiasen, has been the ice arena manager for Dakotah Sport and Fitness, Prior Lake, Minn., for more than 20 years. The couple grew up playing sports, and Gellner even went on to become a two-sport student athlete while an undergraduate at the University of Mary, Bismarck, N.D. Gellner and her volleyball team won three conference titles, and her softball team four titles. She graduated in 1996 with a degree in communication. Her university has acknowledged her success by naming her a “distinguished Marauder.”

Gellner and Mathiasen’s two children, 16-year-old son Grady and 14-year-old daughter Finley, have inherited their parents’ love for sports. The two combined are involved in football, volleyball, basketball, and softball. They too have seen sports success. Their daughter as an eighth grader was asked to play on the high school varsity volleyball team. Their son has had a successful season with the varsity football team, playing the positions of center and defensive end.

With two teenaged children, Gellner and Mathiasen stay busy even outside of work. Being involved in so many sports, her children’s activities keep Gellner occupied. Her high-demand job sometimes makes this difficult, Gellner said, as her schedule often prevents her from attending her children’s sports games. Even though Gellner said she always tries to prioritize her family, working in sports media does not always allow her to have days or holidays off that a typical job would. Gellner shared that she feels extremely lucky to have such a supportive and understanding family. Her career has also begun to interest her son, who has within the past year worked as commener for his high school’s basketball team.

But in the future, Gellner hopes to be working fewer games. She said she hopes to spend more time with her family, including this writer as—full disclosure—her niece. She does suspect, however, that she will still be in the industry a decade from now. “The schedule is the worst part of the business, having to work nights, weekends, holidays,” she said. “But I really love what I do.” And for Minnesota sports fans, for a while they can still appreciate Gellner’s face and voice on their televisions.



# Morgan Bakkegard: Transformation through Christ

By Emma Johnson

**M**organ Bakkegard, one of the new campus directors of the Christian fellowship student society Chi Alpha at NDSU, says she has seen firsthand how the love of Christ can transform a life. “God has consistently spoken over my life that there is always more,” she says. “You’re never too far gone, you’re never too far broken, and you’ve never made too many mistakes, because the love of Christ will always cover it.” Bakkegard knows from her own experience: she has faced roadblocks and challenges in her own life. These moved her to where she is now. “I have changed to be a completely different person through the love of Christ.” said Bakkegard.

Chi Alpha is a Christian fellowship group based in some 300 colleges and universities throughout the United States and world wide. Sponsored by the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal Christian denomination, its stated goal is to gather Christians together, grow the community, and grow together. “Find Jesus. Find Family. Find Purpose,” is its slogan. The group grew from the founding 1953 chapter at Missouri State University, Springfield. While chapter growth has fluctuated nationally, Chi Alpha at NDSU is growing significantly, to the point where the group has split into two services. According to Bakkegard, NDSU’s Chi Alpha has reached an attendance high, particularly in the last couple months.

Bakkegard is the wife of the lead pastor for Chi Alpha at NDSU, Bryce Bakkegard. Together, their goal is to serve students as leaders and mentors. Morgan Bakkegard’s inspiring testimony has empowered many, according to those who follow her passion.

Bakkegard was born in June 1999 in Algona, Iowa, a town of about 5,000 that, Bakkegard said, focused on farming, and a place where everyone knew everyone. She believes this close-knit environment shaped her love for family. Despite that, when Bakkegard was 5 her parents split. After the divorce, she remained close to both parents, but it was a hard transition. She said she tried to distract herself by setting her focus on school, both in and out of class. Her many activities included sports, band, and choir. “I loved trying to excel in everything I did,” she said. “I gripped at every chance to learn more and was curious about everything.” She said that she had filled all her days by being as busy as possible. But she was still looking for the thing that could fill the hole in her heart. Something was still missing. Bakkegard sought an answer.

Bakkegard said she was raised in a Christian family, but they did not try to cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus. “I never read my Bible or knew what a

personal relationship with God was like,” she explained. “To me, it was a religion, not a relationship.” She said she considered Jesus to be her savior, but only in times of trouble.

That would change after high school. Graduating in 2017, Bakke-

gard attended the University of Iowa with the goal of becoming a doctor. The reason was money and security. “Growing up, we didn’t have a lot of money, and I wanted to be able to provide for my family,” she said. “I didn’t want to rely on anyone or anything—I wanted to rely on my success and my wealth.” Initially she studied chemistry, thinking it would be easy like it was in high school, but it wasn’t. Bakkegard said she experienced an identity crisis, moving from a small town and graduating class of 93 to a university of 35,000 students.

“Wow, no one knows I’m the girl who is good at everything I do. Nobody knows I am good at school and sports. I am just a normal girl here,” Bakkegard remembered thinking. Despite her efforts to stand out, including moving into the Honors dorms, she soon realized she was not exceptional compared to everyone else. “I had a moment of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What will I use to fill me now?’” she said.

Bakkegard sought validation in what today she considers to be unhealthy ways. She said she fell into the college party culture. “I bought the lie of the college experience,” she said. “I was going out four days a week. It was so unhealthy.” Despite filling her time with jobs and social activities, she said the void in her heart remained. She changed her major from chemistry to pre-pharmacy, but nothing filled the emptiness.



During her junior year, she said she hit rock bottom. “Is this all the world has to offer?” she asked herself. “Is this the true college experience? I thought these were supposed to be the best years of my life and I still feel like I am missing something.” Bakkegard said that for the first time in her life she fell into a hole of depression, panic attacks, and anxiety. She wondered about the purpose of life, she said, and at that moment she knew she had to try something. “I Google searched churches near me. A church popped up that was nearby. Immediately, I was like ‘Oh my, I think this is what I was missing.’”

At the church, she was quickly introduced to her college pastor, Alyssa Stroh. Bakkegard said that she took her under her wing. “She had never judged me or spoken ill of me or the decisions that I was making,” said Bakkegard. “She had chosen to see me for who I was, who God had created me to be, and call out the potential that I had.” Stroh continued to mentor her and treat her as a friend and a sister. Bakkegard said they spent so much time together, from going to the grocery store, to watching movies, and going for runs. Bakkegard said she began to see something in her that she wanted. Joy. Underlying peace. She said she found this through a growing relationship with Jesus, the piece in her heart that she was missing the entire time.

Stroh reminisced on the beginning of their friendship. “She came over almost every day during COVID and would start a very unplanned Bible study with me and my roommate at the time. And then stayed the whole day to just hang out,” Stroh said.

“So, over only a few months, I got to watch Morgan go from being a very new believer who didn’t know much about the Bible and making a lot of choices that were not Godly, such as drinking, language, and getting too close with guys, to going all out radically for the Lord,” recalled Stroh. “She did not want to drink anymore, cuss, and she broke off relationships that she knew were not good for her. She quickly became a small group leader five months later, and she tripled our Chi Alpha attendance in just one year.” Being a small group leader, meeting with a group of women each week, and leading Bible study really helped propel Bakkegard in her faith and relationship with God, she said.

To Bakkegard, Stroh had such a close relationship with Jesus. It became clear that this is what Bakkegard wanted and needed in her life. “She had regular fellowship with God,” Bakkegard said. “She talked with him, and he talked to her, she was reading her Bible and knew what it said about her.

“She did not feel like he needed to strive for perfection, for money, for success—all those things that I had been clawing at my whole life trying to prove that I was good enough. I do not even know who I was trying to prove it to, it was probably myself.”

Although she said it was hard to get rid of old habits and ways of life, she learned and grew. She learned how to read the Bible, how to pray, and how to become more like Jesus every day. “It was the most fulfilling thing. It

was a fullness of a relationship that I had never had and I felt that hole in my heart start to fill,” she said. “And that was the love of the Lord. He was able to tell me who I was, comfort me, and give me a new purpose for my life.”

Bakkegard said her depression and anxiety began to clear. “I remember looking around one day and thinking ‘Oh my, I haven’t had a panic attack in weeks!’” she recalled. “It was just so fun to know that the God of the Bible is the God of today. I saw him do the miraculous things in the Bible, and I saw him do the miraculous things in my life too.”

By the end of her junior year, Bakkegard said she fully gave her life over to the Lord. But in her next year, she would have been starting the pharmacy program. While preparing, she thought to herself, “Wow, I haven’t prayed about what I should be doing in my life and if this is even what He wants me to do!” She said she didn’t realize that she could pray, ask questions, and get guidance. So, she started. After a couple of days, she felt it heavily in her heart that He was trying to tell her that she wasn’t supposed to be a pharmacist. “My intentions were pretty wrong from the start. I wanted money and security, but I realized that my security is in Christ alone. I started praying and trusting and would ask him, ‘Lord, if you want me somewhere else, you’re going to tell me, but until then, I’m going to be faithful and show up and I’m going to shine the light of Christ to my classmates and professors.’ This was in August of 2020.”

In spring 2021, Stroh sat her down for coffee, one of their favorite things to do. Stroh told her about an internship that she felt she needed to share. It was with Chi Alpha Christian Ministries. “And in an instant, I knew I was supposed to go and do it,” said Bakkegard. “There was something deep in me that leaped for joy. And now I know that the Lord was guiding me and promoting me.”

She started researching a possible internship with Chi Alpha Christian Ministries, the group Stroh led at the Iowa campus. “And it was cool because there were a ton of internships across the U.S., as there are a ton of universities that have Chi Alpha,” she said. Bakkegard grew up in Iowa, but she wanted to try somewhere different. She was thinking of choosing a warm place near the ocean, but “As I was reading the list, North Dakota State University popped off the page to me. I remember thinking, oh no, that’s not the place for me, that’s the opposite of what I want! Who even lives in North Dakota?! All I know about North Dakota is that it’s cold and windy! But I kept praying about why this state popped out to me. The Lord kept highlighting it, so I took the leap of faith, and I said yes.”

It was a season of change. She had to say goodbye to friends, family, mentors, places where she was comfortable, and her favorite coffee shops. However, she looked at this as a great opportunity to challenge herself. “I then moved to Fargo in August of 2022 to start my internship, and I instantly fell in love with the campus at NDSU. The people of Fargo are so kind and sweet, and I knew this

was exactly where I was supposed to be.” Bakkegard jumped right into Chi Alpha for the internship. During that time she met her husband, Bryce, who was also an intern. They became quick friends working together.

“Bryce and I first met in Springfield, Missouri, at a training camp called RUI for future Chi Alpha missionaries in June of 2021,” she said. “We started dating when I officially moved to Fargo in August or September of that year.” The couple were engaged in February 2022 and married in July.

Her time in Fargo took a twist, though. She was only supposed to stay for a year, but, “I fell in love with the campus, Fargo, and the students, and I just knew I needed to stay, she said. “I was in Fargo for the second year and continued to say, ‘Lord wherever you want me to go, I will go. I trust you with my future.’”

At NDSU’s Chi Alpha, Pastor Brad Lewis had been for 35 years the director of NDSU’s Chi Alpha chapter. Bakkegard had appreciated his leadership. “He is the best. He is so sweet and faithful and loves the students so well.” she said. Lewis had decided to retire and was considering next steps for Chi Alpha. Bakkegard said Lewis cast a vision for her and Bryce, what it might look like for them to step into his role. “In all honesty, I was so scared. I’m so young and new to this. I started disqualifying myself,” said Bakkegard. “What I kept going back to was that God had kept taking care of me every step along the way, and he wanted me be here and to take this opportunity.”

Bakkegard and Bryce accepted the offer in 2022, becoming the new directors of NDSU’s Chi Alpha. Lewis had not yet retired, so the Bakkegards had a year to shadow him, learn, and be mentored.

August 2024 marked the beginning of their first year as new campus directors. “It has been the most fun and rewarding challenge that I have ever experienced, but it has been so worth it,” said Bakkegard. “I know God has called me to be on this campus and take these steps to be where we are today. I know he has called me to minister to college-aged women who were hurting and broken, just like I was. Those who were looking for that missing piece in their heart. He has ignited that passion to help me bring people to Christ and to show them that there is something more.”

Stroh said she never knew how far she would end up going. “Morgan has one of the most beautiful and most caring hearts of anyone I know, and she is filled with so much joy and love that was even before she really knew Jesus,” she said. “As she’s grown with Jesus, all those parts have just become multiplied, even her wild and crazy side that we know and love so much. Now she is just wild and crazy for Jesus and it’s so amazing to see.”

After learning to trust God with her life, Bakkegard said she hasn’t made a “five-year plan” for her next steps with Chi Alpha. “I’ve learned that it’s ok to be where my feet are, to step into the Lord’s blessings for the day, to be excited for the future, but trust he’s going to take care of us.” she said. The couple have bought a house close to campus. Bakkegard said they love hosting students there for bonfires or putting up a huge projector screen to watch the NDSU football games. “Right now, we’re planning to stay where we are until the Lord tells us to move. If that’s until retirement, yay, so fun! If it’s not, yay, so fun!”



# Bailey Block:

## Building social media for Emerging Prairie

By Ava Lee

A shy high school graduate from Minot, N.D., growing up in a large and lively family, Bailey Block found a niche and a culture in Fargo's Emerging Prairie, a community resource serving the area's entrepreneurial community. "Getting my job at Emerging Prairie was huge for me," she says. "I went from a position at an advertising agency that I didn't necessarily feel valued at, to a job at Emerging Prairie that had an incredible culture and showed me how I deserve to be treated at the workplace."

The warmth she finds at her workplace today perhaps reflects a warmth she felt growing up in Minot. Bailey said she thrived in the warmth of her hometown, where everyone seemed like family. Attending a small school gave her the unusual experience of knowing every classmate and teacher by name. "I had a great experience in school socially and academically," she says. But her close-knit community also sparked a desire to explore beyond the familiar.

After graduating high school, she moved to Fargo to attend NDSU. There, she joined clubs, studied abroad, and learned the importance of networking. "Before moving to Fargo," she says, "I was very shy in situations that seem so easy to me now." Bailey explains that she was influenced not only by her parents and family but also by her interest in social media. "Living and growing up in small-town North Dakota, there is not a lot of diversity in terms of people, ways of thinking, etc. I feel that using the internet to see that there are other perspectives, lifestyles, and people in the world opened my eyes!"

### *Career and Journey*

Block's first jobs were at the large mall department stores JCPenney and Herberger's. "I would say that I realized how much I love working with people," she says. "I learned about selling products, and I found satisfaction in doing a good job." She learned about marketing, sales, and job satisfaction. In her senior year at NDSU she applied for a marketing coordinator position at Emerging Prairie.

Emerging Prairie is not like other organizations, says Block. It is a North Dakota-based organization focusing on innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology within the region. According to its website statement, Emerging Prairie creates a flourishing ecosystem that brings together innovators, entrepreneurs, and community members who cherish progress and collaboration. Initiatives aim to energize the local economy in North Dakota and develop the area into a center for growth and creativity.

Block says the organization is known for hosting



events and programs like STARTupBREW, Prairie Capital Summit, and more, to provide platforms for networking and exchanging ideas. It is a committed digital agency through programs that provide students or graduates like Block with digital skills.

At Emerging Prairie, Block organizes her work. She uses a planner and Outlook calendar to stay on top of her schedule. She thrives on having a routine, checking things off her to-do list, or doing anything that would help her with her productivity. Block says she wakes up early, works out, and then sets up a comfortable environment. If she gets distracted, she puts her phone in another room to stay focused. She says her skill set is her willingness to learn, accept constructive criticism, take accountability, and be personable with others.

Block's traditional responsibilities include gathering and editing advertising content, developing effective marketing strategies, collaborating with other coworkers, and evaluating marketing trends. Block assists in developing marketing campaigns, managing social media accounts, and creating promotional materials like brochures, emails, and advertisements. Marketing coordinators often handle administrative tasks, such as scheduling meetings, tracking project timelines, and analyzing

marketing data to measure campaign effectiveness. They collaborate closely with marketing managers, designers, and sales teams to ensure consistency in branding and messaging. By staying up to date on market trends and audience preferences, a marketing coordinator helps a company maintain a competitive edge and reach its target audience effectively.

Working at Emerging Prairie, Block says her biggest strength is understanding how to grow a business on social media, one of her responsibilities as a marketing coordinator. She developed her strengths by working with social media, to learn how to create content. She said, in addition, that she grew her strengths through networking and workshops. A coworker explains Bailey's skill set includes creativity, independence, willingness to accept constructive criticism and learn.

On a typical workday, Block said she creates collaborations with coworkers to decide the best material to feature on social media. Her coworker says that Block oversees social media for all Emerging Prairie communications. Before they can post, Block says staff need to gather content including photos and videos to create a social media advertisement. Block says she likes using her skill, but "the most rewarding part of this job is being a part of a non-profit organization and doing great work in the community by connecting people."

She hopes her work has started to build a positive impact in her workplace, and the world. But though she looks towards the positive side in the workplace, she says she also faces challenges. One of those, Block explains, is collaboration with coworkers. People prefer different work styles, and Block explains that knowing how to navigate these can sometimes be difficult. "I would say a big challenge I faced before working for Emerging Prairie was not being valued or treated great," says Block. "I overcame the challenge by seeking a better job at Emerging Prairie with a better culture."

Another big challenge to her career-building came from the COVID-19 restrictions beginning March 2020. Many people were quarantined or forced to stay home, but she was still able to work online. Block explains, "While there were challenges and setbacks during COVID, I believe the shift to working digitally and taking classes online set me up for success with hybrid work model at "Emerging Prairie."

Block's ability to transition from working as a department store clerk to becoming a marketing coordinator reveals a keen sense of self-awareness and a willingness to pursue growth. She says her early experiences taught her how to connect with people on a personal level, understand customer needs, and build relationships. She says she laid the foundation for her marketing passion. Her choice to leave what she found to be an unsatisfactory work environment for Emerging Prairie highlights her determination to seek opportunities that align with her values and aspirations. Block considers this decision to be not just a career move but a personal milestone in understanding her worth and potential.

At Emerging Prairie, Block's work goes beyond traditional responsibilities. She tries to actively contribute to the organization's mission of fostering entrepreneurship and innovation. Her role in developing social media strategies not only helps Emerging Prairie grow but also strengthens the local business ecosystem by connecting businesses with communities and individuals. This impact underscores the importance of marketing in driving regional development. "I am proud of getting my job at Emerging Prairie. This job was my first full-time position." Block explains that she realized the importance of her work, how exciting and fulfilling it feels. When Block feels she has achieved another success at work, she celebrates by treating herself with her friends or her fiancé, Tommy Burke.

Working during the pandemic challenged that, but Block said ability to navigate challenges of the pandemic demonstrates adaptability and creativity. Some struggled with the transition to remote work. But Block said she found ways to remain productive and innovative. Her focus on video content was a meaningful change for her employer, allowing Emerging Prairie to maintain its presence and engage audiences effectively despite pandemic restrictions. Block said another key success was her realization of the broader impact of her work. For her, marketing is not just a career but a way to inspire and connect with people. She says she tries to drive herself to continuously improve, explore innovative ideas, and push boundaries of what is possible in marketing. "It is something that will keep me on my toes and stay fresh for the rest of my life."

### *Industry, Insights, and Trends*

The communication industry's rapid evolution excites Block. As she observed during her career, the rise of video content and tools like ChatGPT have significantly transformed how businesses approach their audiences. These trends offer many new possibilities and challenges, but Block sees them as opportunities to innovate and grow. She says efforts to stay ahead of change ensure that she remains an asset to any employer. Block's advice for aspiring professionals underscores her belief in the power of relationships.

Networking is not just a tool for personal growth, but a way to build meaningful professional connections that can open unexpected doors. She says her focus on kindness and respect aligns with her collaborative approach. She says she tries to leave a positive impression in every personal interaction. "Network as much as possible," she advises, explaining that she has many times discovered that it is not the information you know, but who you know. A referral or recommendation can take you further than you may realize. "Be kind and respectful to everyone you meet," she says. "You never know who's going to be interviewing you one day."

### *Other perspectives*

Block's friends and family often highlight her ability

to approach challenges with grace and resilience. Her willingness to seek feedback and learn from her experiences sets her apart as a professional and as a person, they observe. Whether she is working on a project or supporting a loved one, Block's approach makes her a valuable presence in any situation. Her fiancé, who also graduated from North Dakota State University with a degree in communication, describes her as someone who can find joy in the small moments while keeping her focus on long-term goals. Burke says her balance between living in the present and planning is a hallmark of her character, contributing to success and happiness. He says Block has an amazing way of making connections with everyone she interacts with. "Bailey helped market and design a community event at the air museum in North Fargo," says Burke. "It was a big event, and she was proud of how it went." Burke said Block tries to take that ability to her work at Emerging Prairie. "Working for a non-profit organization, this is meaningful because she feels that she is working hard for a bigger picture in the end."

Future goals include furthering a career in marketing, strengthening skills, growing in expertise, and someday continuing with a different company. Her dream position is to one day open her own marketing or social media agency. Her recent work underscores a need to develop aptitude for roles requiring social media management, communication, networking, and marketing. Block's vision of her future builds on these skills in her dream of her own marketing agency, where innovation and creativity thrive through impactful storytelling. Her goal is not just to excel in her career but to mentor and empower others. She hopes to make a difference, she explains, both professionally and personally.

In her personal life, Bailey also hopes to explore new environments and cultures. She says she believes that exposure to diverse perspectives will enrich her understanding of the world, that openness to growth and change is a defining characteristic that shapes future endeavors.

### *Conclusion*

Bailey Block's professional and personal journey emphasizes resilience, creativity, and the drive for growth. She says her ability to balance personal values with professional ambition has allowed her to thrive in a dynamic and ever-evolving field. She hopes her emphasis on collaboration, adaptability and innovation will make an impact not just within her organization but also in the broader community. And her focus on uplifting others, embracing challenges, and staying ahead she hopes will ensure that she will remain a trailblazer in the professional world of communication and marketing as well as in the world of personal growth. She emphasizes, "I want my impact and my work to leave people feeling inspired to be better people, create awesome things, and make the world a better place."



# Daryl Ritchison: North Dakota's weatherman

By Corbin Lee

**D**aryl Ritchison is the North Dakota state climatologist, director of North Dakota Agricultural Weather Network (NDAWN) and NDSU professor in the School of Natural Resource Sciences. You may be wondering how he manages so many responsibilities. For the love of the game, he explains. If you truly love what you do you may never work a day in your life. But Ritchison's game may not please everybody.

"I've never in my career ever had a Sunday night," he said, but "even when I had to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning, I never said, God, I have to go to work tomorrow and it's going to suck."

Dreading the work week may be common practice in our society. Perhaps not enough emphasis is placed on finding what you love to do and too much is placed on making more and more money. Perhaps finding your passion and pursuing it should be encouraged. And that's what Ritchison has done.

"Everything in the past is what makes you who you are today" he said, reflecting on the path he took to his current position. He said he knew about and he loved learning about weather, but growing up in the small town of Elysian, Minn., with a population of 350, there was no example to follow in choosing a weather-related career. The only weather-focused career he knew about was TV meteorologist, because he saw them on the news. But he had no idea how to pursue that career.

Instead, Ritchison began to build skills he would need for a career in education. While he became an outstanding baseball player and golfer, he said he never wavered in his conviction to study hard and advance his education. He was recognized in the local paper a few times and received some accolades for his excellent play at second base with the Waterville-Elysian Buccaneers.

"I was in the paper and won some awards but I don't keep any of that stuff, I'm just not that kind of person," he said.

Ritchison briefly considered a career in professional baseball. But he said as he learned how many hours and how much dedication that would take, he decided he simply did not have enough time between work and school. He said this helped him to realize his efforts would be best spent in academia, in preparation for what he thought would be a career in teaching.

He held tightly to his abilities in golf. He said he had played six out of seven days a week every summer for 40 years. During his best seasons he was a scratch golfer, meaning he could shoot par or below consistently. Most golfers never achieve this level of play. But Ritchison's golfing career was cut short due to a genetic

disorder in his spine. Ritchison said this forced him to face two separate neck surgeries and a warning from the doctor that the third surgery would likely cause irreversible loss of movement. That dreadful warning encouraged Ritchison to hang up his golf bag for good.

"I'll be honest, I don't like driving by golf courses" he said. "I really, really miss golf. (But) if it eliminates a little possibility of me going longer without losing range of motion and more chronic pain.... When I drive by them, every time I think, golly, I miss golf."

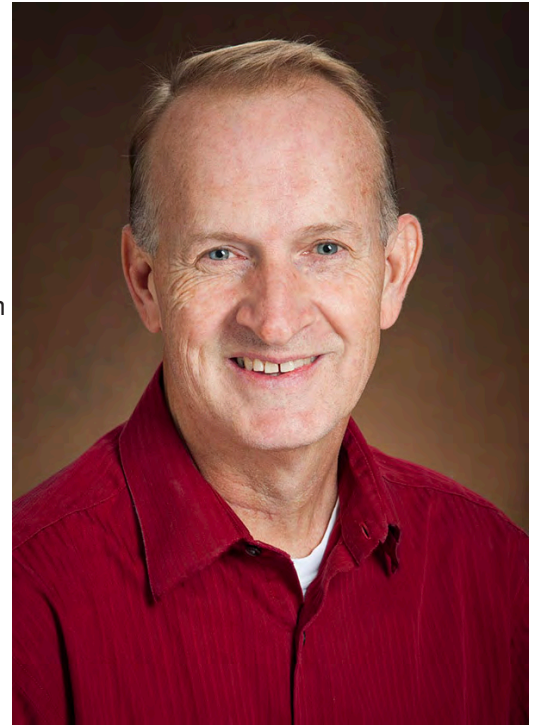
Bruce Sundeen, electronic media specialist with NDSU and previously with KTHI-TV news (now KVLV), knew Ritchison at the tail end of his golf prowess and would come to respect and cherish his friendship. He observed, "the worst I ever saw him was after he gave up golf."

Golf and baseball may have been his first loves. But he said they helped him realize his priority still was to always advance his academic skills, at Minnesota State University, Mankato he would be able to do so. Yet he still did not know a career path to being a television weather forecaster. So, he continued to pursue a degree in education, in hopes of becoming a teacher. Why did he not instead consider a degree in meteorology?

"I didn't even know those weather degrees existed," he said. "The only reason I went to Mankato was because it was close and cheap."

In 1985, he graduated with his degree in education. But at the height of the Baby-Boomer generation entering the workforce he found teaching jobs to be scarce. The ones that were available required experience.

"In a parallel universe I may have taught for 40 years"



he said. “But I don’t know if I would be happier for it, because my career worked out so amazingly, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

His father suggested he return to Mankato for a business degree, so he could actually get a job. He went back, but not just for the master’s in business administration. He also pursued a master’s degree in geography with an emphasis on atmospheric science.

Ritchison explained that the university had launched a new program to build a high-end weather lab worth \$100,000 (\$254,500 in today’s money). But administration did not have anyone yet to run it. Ritchison was not only working on a double master’s degree but also was filling in for an introductory weather class for a professor who died earlier in the semester. Based on recommendations, faculty overseeing the new weather lab project invited Ritchison to apply for director.

“I felt I was qualified, and the professor asked me if I could install a piece of equipment as a test. I remembered a story told to me by my high school shop teacher: ‘I was at a job site and the foreman asked if I could run a bulldozer and I said yup. Even though I had no clue, I jumped in, figured it out and got the job.’ So I told the professor, yup, I sure can, then I figured it out and got the job.”

He took that opportunity and ran with it while completing both his master’s degrees. His expertise in meteorology grew. In 1991, he would achieve one of his childhood dreams of becoming a TV meteorologist. KEYC-TV in Mankato would be the first but certainly not the last to trust forecasting to Ritchison. He stayed there until 1994, but had other goals in mind.

“I always thought it would be cool to be a state climatologist,” he said. “But also when I was a kid, I thought it would be cool to be a TV meteorologist.” He stayed in television for 25 years, moving from KEYC to KSFY-TV, Sioux Falls, S.D., from 1994-1996, and finally to WDAY-TV in Fargo. As a staff meteorologist there he caught the attention of Sundeen, who worked at KTHI/KVLY, a local television news operation in direct competition with WDAY. But Sundeen soon developed a professional respect for Ritchison.

“He is the total package” Sundeen said. “I kinda like his approach, he’s pretty fast. But I always thought (other announcers were) really slow and boring, and then Daryl picked it up.” Still, for a decade, their paths would not cross again until they re-entered the world of academia at NDSU.

Ritchison said he had connections with Concordia College in Moorhead. Perhaps they saw in Ritchison what Sundeen saw. Sundeen thought, “He’s a guy who should be teaching. He gets the students engaged, which a lot of professors don’t.”

In 2003, during the second week of classes at Concordia, Ritchison was on a road trip vacation in the Grand Canyon with his wife Wendy, their 3-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son. This was just the first of many family road trips in the decades to come, most

recently for the solar eclipse in Waco, Texas, in April. It was a long drive.

“All the way down and all the way back I think I got 90 minutes off. My wife and kids said ‘ahhh, you can drive, dad’” he said. Then he noted that this was not abnormal for their yearly road trip.

During the Grand Canyon trip, he checked his messages on a pay phone. Concordia administration had left a message. They asked Ritchison if he could quickly replace a professor who had fallen ill. Ritchison said he cut his vacation short and returned to teach the weather class at Concordia. “The nice thing is that class paid for the vacation.”

Ritchison left television in 2014, when he was offered the assistant/interim state climatologist position and a position at NDAWN. “Until I took this job, and I was 51, remember, I had never had a day job in my entire life.” During these first two years he would be a regular guest on the podcasts Sound Ag Advice and Sugar Beet Report. Both were produced by an old competitor—Sundeen. The two long acquaintances loved to chat. “The problem is he would come in and it would be yap, yap, yap,” Sundeen said. “And then we’d get the interview done and talk again after then an hour later we’d both say, ah, we better get going!” But their additional jobs and promotions left less time for chatting, Sundeen observed.

In 2016, Ritchison was named interim director of NDAWN. Ritchison said the network has added almost 150 weather stations since he started, increasing the number from 73 to 220, with more on the way. This may not have been one of his dream jobs, but he cherishes it, nonetheless. “It’s always my funnest days when I’m just out working digging holes.” he said.

Aside from him enjoying getting his hands dirty out in the field, the work with NDAWN allows him make use of his education and previous jobs. “I manage more than \$10 million in grants” he said, “so this job is a great fit for my two master’s degrees.” Despite this marriage of skill sets he uses as director of NDAWN, he said his other dream job eluded him in title alone. As state climatologist he was still only an interim. Several years later that changed. In 2024, at 62, he was named North Dakota state climatologist, while still maintaining his position with NDAWN.

Three jobs, but he’s not complaining. “I get to run this mesonet [a network of weather stations]. I get to be a state climatologist, I get to teach, and I could speak every day of the year with how many invites I get...I could just pinch myself...I don’t consider anything I do, work.” Sundeen countered with concern that Ritchison was overworking himself. But laughing, he added that Ritchison was the most optimistic guy he’s ever met.

Ritchison may sound like a fictional character. Nobody could love their job this much and be this happy. But in response Ritchison referred to a book by Scott Adams, *Reframe your Brain*. He said it describes two people watching the same movie, but each sees something dif-

ferent based on their perspectives. He said he believes he reframed his brain around age 26. Emotionally he was going through the most challenging time in his life. He realized that worrying about the past was a waste of time and energy. He decided he would leave it behind. He said his philosophy of life would be entrenched in this pivotal moment, always looking forward from that point and no longer dwelling on the past.

Ritchison said he does his best to help others down that path. His motto for his employees at NDAWN is: "failure is an option." He said that means he encourages staff to innovate and believe in themselves without fear of repercussions. He also encourages them, and is willing to give recommendations, for staff who may consider opportunities elsewhere. Ritchison said he wants what's best for the person and not just for NDAWN or himself.

He explained that if someone is curious or concerned

about the weather, staff members should engage with them even at the expense of getting less work done. "You might make that person's day," he said, "Being a good person is more important." As for suggestions that he overworks?

"Honestly my brain doesn't work that way," he said. "I just think I'm the luckiest human being in the world, I really do. I never ever take it for granted, you can never take things for granted because this could all change. I could get in a horrible accident on my way home, closing off tons of paths for my life. I could've ended up with different jobs and maybe made billions and ended up one of the richest people in America. I can't fathom that I'd be happier than I am now."



# Kelsey Seeba: Helping students succeed

By Ruby Ruen

Some people are born to be athletes or movie stars. But individuals like Kelsey Seeba are all about helping others. Though she did not spend childhood dreaming of being an academic advisor, Seeba, NDSU advisor in the College of Arts and Sciences, always had the knack for aiding those in need.

“I’ve always just naturally been a helper, and I like to really step up when it’s needed,” she remarks. Seeba was born in Lakeville, Minn., in 1994 to parents Leo and Mary. Her selfless attitude reflects her upbringing and the values that were instilled from an early age.

Growing up in a family that cared for her, she learned how to care for others. Her parents were on the stricter side as a means of protection, she notes, although they eased up as she grew older. How her and her siblings’ time was spent was crucial to Seeba’s mother and father. “They were more strict as in their rules...and then also just about responsibility,” Seeba explains. She details what kinds of expectations held for her and her two brothers, Leo and Nick. While she had the freedom to go out and have a personal life, certain questions needed to be answered. She said before approval she needed to explain what the plans were, who they were with, and where they were going.

As she and her siblings grew older, her parents emphasized added responsibilities outside of academics. “You had to be working if you weren’t in a sport that was taking up a lot of your time,” she explained. It kept them busy, but Seeba said it also offered opportunities to learn valuable skills to apply later in life.

Despite rules and responsibilities, Seeba said her family bonded through countless vacations, trips ranging from lake resorts to visits with their grandparents in Illinois. Hours spent in the car and out adventuring provided ample time to enjoy each other’s company and build lasting traditions.

“My family, ever since my dad was a kid, would go to the [Minnesota] Boundary Waters every year, and so we’ve continued that on,” Seeba said. She highlights how special this annual trip is, transitioning from her parents’ boat to her brother’s, and how it lets her relive childhood experience through her younger nieces.

Seeba said her relationship with her brothers has changed as she has gotten older. “I would say it’s really shifted,” she noted. While she grew up closer to her eldest brother, Leo, life and its responsibilities pulled her closer to her middle brother. “My middle brother and I were the typical siblings that fought all the time,” Seeba said. As she and Nick were closer in age, it increased the friction between the two.

However, as time has gone on, the siblings have their own lives as adults, and their relationships have shifted. Her brother Leo is married with three kids under the age of 3, so his time is often caught up in his own family. Her middle brother lives closer and has a more flexible schedule.

Seeba said when that she was younger, and her parents approved her to go out with friends, she often spent time at a nearby recreation lake. “If I’m being honest, we would just sit on the dock and kind of hang out and chit-chat about life,” Seeba confesses.

Although she had fun outdoors, Seeba said her childhood was not particularly busy. “I grew up and I was never big into joining organizations or clubs,” she noted. As Seeba’s interest in sports was strictly for occasional entertainment, little was left to take up her time.

This continued into high school as Seeba’s involvement was limited to taking part in DECA, an organization for students interested in business. She also served as a carpenter building sets for school plays. “I always really wanted to do backstage, but if I’m being honest, I was very shy when I was in high school,” Seeba added. By going in on a few Saturdays and working for a few hours each time, her and other carpenters contributed to productions like “David and Lisa” and “the Music Man.”

Instead of clubs and sports, Seeba said it was academics that held her attention. “When I was in high school, I took a forensics class and I was really interested.” Seeba highlights. She considered forensics science as a career goal, considering the field of crime scene investigation. But Seeba said she was disheartened to



learn that a prerequisite to that was becoming a police officer.

"I respect what police officers do, because they do go into a lot of situations that are dangerous, but I am not a good person in emergency situations," Seeba explained.

She did not have all the answers but nevertheless enrolled at the University of North Dakota. "I actually didn't jump around at all...I went straight in as undeclared," she said. After working with an undeclared academic advisor, Seeba enrolled in a variety of courses and took a career interest assessment where she found her calling: psychology.

Pushed out of her shy comfort zone, at university Seeba became more willing to take part in opportunities offered on campus. "I felt like I really got involved, and that's also where I kind of started my higher education journey," she says. Peer mentoring was a key area of involvement. Seeba was a peer mentor at UND for nearly three years. She focused on mental health, setting up programming and presentations known as the Health and Wellness Hub.

In addition to engaging with undergraduate students, particularly those in sororities and fraternities, her role included presentations to graduates studying law and medicine, emphasizing stress reduction and mindfulness.

Seeba moved to a role with UND's School of Nursing, managing the applicant selection process for a highly competitive program. But it was not a long-term career goal.

Working with faculty during her undergraduate years, Seeba "built a relationship" with a psychology faculty member who helped her navigate her future. This mentor recognized outstanding potential in Seeba and the passion she held for psychology. "She really wanted me to pursue my Ph.D. But I didn't," Seeba said. "She saw so much more potential at the time than I had seen." Instead, she chose to compromise by applying to a master's program.

Seeba was accepted at Winona, Minn., State University. She began in a master's degree program in clinical mental health counseling, but did not graduate in that discipline. "I didn't have the best graduate school experience," she explains. She said lack of work-life balance and relationship issues among the program's faculty members disrupted her learning experience. High expectations, such as perfect class attendance, made it difficult for her to navigate other responsibilities and opportunities. A reassessment of her goals landed Seeba on a different path. She graduated instead with a master's degree in professional development and human services.

Despite her academic experience being less than perfect, Seeba said she made the most out of her time in graduate school. "Winona is amazing for being outdoors," she points out, with an abundance of outdoor adventures. Student status offered Seeba deals on summer passes for activities at nearby lakes: kayak rentals,

5k runs, hiking paths, bluffs and deer parks.

Reflecting on her undergraduate background as a peer mentor, Seeba continued to teach and work in higher education. An opportunity to teach a class on alcohol use and abuse at Winona State offered another chance to work with students. "I met with students a lot one on one to really try to help them find success through some of those personal challenges and pressures that come along with attending college," she remarked.

At NDSU, Seeba's work began at the admissions office, where she often oversaw the tour guides. But she missed closer student interaction. "I never really got to know the students that were coming in and applying to join campus," she recalled. Seeba was left feeling that she could be doing more.

She decided to be proactive. Instead of being confined to helping students who might not attend, she applied for a position as an academic advisor. With her experience in higher education and institutional knowledge of NDSU, Seeba found a new position in the career and advising office, advising for students in the new College of Arts and Sciences. But it wasn't an easy transition.

"It was a pretty sharp transition," Seeba said, with a steep learning curve. She knew a great deal about NDSU itself but needed to pick up on North Dakota University System policies. In addition, working in the College of Arts and Sciences, Seeba was tasked with advising students across 18 distinct majors.

According to the NDSU Career and Advising website, Seeba has the highest workload among advisors. Majors needing her advice span a wide variety of departments, from communication to education, interior design, apparel and textiles and art.

Seeba said she is perhaps the busiest around important dates in the school calendar, late fall and mid-spring during registration in particular. She describes a typical day as "doing any emails or phone calls that you need to return." Time is spent meeting with students from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., and performing miscellaneous tasks between sessions.

During other times of the school year, when work is slower, Seeba and other advisors take time to prepare for the next busy season. She mainly prepares by meeting within departments to keep up to date with curricular changes. Her advisees appreciate that. "She very much validated all of my concerns, all my feelings," said Brooke Jangula, an interior design major who switched from pre-veterinary science. "She made me feel heard and like I was making the right choice." Jangula was concerned that her credits would not transfer, and she would be set back a couple of years. Through Seeba's help, she switched majors with minimal issues.

When meeting with students, Seeba likes to try ice-breakers, or broad questions to get to know students. She said she's found that basic questions, like "How's your semester going?" or "How are you doing?" help students feel more comfortable and willing to open up. Addressing a student's need from the start ensures See-

bas provides effective support.

“I never want to judge a student; it’s more I want to be here to figure out what we can do to help you find success,” Seeba explained. Students may feel apprehensive about scheduling an advising meeting, so she notes it is imperative that advisors do what they can to get students involved. Her message to students is a clear one—meet with your advisors.

“We’ve been through the academic journey ourselves and we’ve been through some of those challenges and barriers,” Seeba says. By meeting with advisors like Seeba, students can plan for their future, gain academic stability and ensure they’re receiving their education at full value.

Not only does she help create a solid plan for students, but she aids them in seeing it through. Seeba shoots for creating clear and concise plans as universities sometimes throw students curveballs. “It’s meant to get you as stable as possible,” Seeba remarks.

“She’s just very welcoming, and I see it every day when students come in, said Dr. Nadeje Alexandre, college assistant dean for student success. “It makes them feel like she wants to see them and makes them feel special and welcome. Alexandre describes Seeba as helpful and notes how she goes beyond for those around her. Additionally, she highlights how the loss of Seeba’s “positive, wonderful energy” and infectious smile would change their team—and not for the better.

Growing up in Minnesota, Seeba always held a love for hockey. One of her older brother’s brief stints on an intramural hockey team boosted her interest as well. “I was already excited because I had a friend in high school

and her and I would go outdoor skating,” she said.

Her interest in hockey matches led to another match—with her husband. When she is not on campus aiding students, Seeba can be found spending time with her husband, Chris, taking part in hockey-related activities. While the pair met during their freshman year of college, it was not until their final year that they made the relationship official. “We were both very passionate about hockey,” Seeba said. The pair got engaged in 2018 and were married the following year.

As both are avid hockey fans, the two can often be found watching a game during the season—in person or at home. “We’re season ticket holders actually at UND, so we go up for every home game,” she said. When not at games, Seeba can be found watching various USHL and NHL matches, rooting for both the Fargo Force and the Seattle Krakens.

As Seeba extends her NDSU time in advising, she emphasizes the idea of building connections with students. “A big thing for me honestly is just being able to talk and build connections,” Seeba said. Whether she is spending time with family, engaging with peers, helping students or pursuing her personal interests, Seeba consistently looks to create meaningful connections with those around her. Her drive to build relationships highlights her commitment to supporting bonds and fulfilling a sense of community wherever she goes.



# Ayden Hightet: From college dorms to the graduate studio

By Elle Sorenson

**A**yden Hightet's story is one of growth—of a shy teenager figuring out his place in the world, a college student adapting to challenges, and a graduate student on the verge of a new chapter. From his childhood in a small Minnesota town, to the landscape architecture studio at NDSU, Hightet's journey has been marked by growth, perseverance, and a deep appreciation for the people around him.

Hightet grew up in Shakopee, Minn. He spent his early years living between his divorced parents' houses, a dynamic that gave him a unusual perspective on family life. He shared his early years with his younger sister, and now has a half-brother and six step-siblings, all of whom are older than he. The large and diverse family shaped Hightet's early life, though he admits that growing up he was reserved.

"I kept to myself in high school," he says. "I had my group of friends, and I was pretty simple." With high school classes and a part-time job at his home-town dry cleaner, Hightet said he lived a different balance than he does now. "I worked three times a week, spend time with my friends, and admittedly, I did not do homework in high school," says Hightet, now in grad school. Still, he did well enough to consider higher education. When it came time to apply, Hightet remained undecided until the last day deadline before applying to NDSU.

"I was originally going to Iowa State," he says, "but then my mom and I talked, and financially, NDSU was the more realistic choice."

Like many 2020 high school graduates, Hightet started his university journey during the COVID-19 pandemic. With no in-person classes, often a pass/fail grading system, and few expectations, Hightet was off to begin his next chapter. But it was not easy. "Freshman year was a hard turning point," he says. "Learning to live on my own and figure out my new schedule was difficult right away." Hightet says he faced challenges of adjusting to his new surroundings, getting used to online classes, and navigating campus life.

Hightet began at NDSU as a civil engineering student. "I had no idea what I was getting into," he says. "But then I took an intro to landscape architecture class and started hearing more about it, and something clicked. I



realized I wanted to design spaces that people use."

By spring semester, Hightet had decided on a major in landscape architecture. He began his bachelor's degree in environmental design, the first step. But during his second year, Hightet says he faced a moment that shifted the way he thought about school—and himself. He had just received a B on a project. It was not the grade he thought he deserved. Hightet says this professor had been his toughest yet. He decided to meet with her to ask about the grade. Anna-Maria Visilia was happy to sit him down and to break down reasons behind the grade. Hightet says that he was upset, and had not planned to go down without a fight. "I stormed in her office ready to argue," he laughs, "but I left realizing that it was time to apply myself in school and not just expect things to come easy."

This moment of constructive criticism helped Hightet see academics in a new light. "Anna-Maria shaped me as a person. After that, I took school a lot more seri-

ously.” Fast forward to today. Highet is now a graduate student. Visilia is still part of his academic journey as his master’s thesis advisor. “I basically begged her to be my advisor,” Highet admits. “She made me the student I am now, and I owe her a lot.” With a clear vision, Highet continued his journey. In spring 2023 he completed his Bachelor of Science degree in environmental design. He was, and still is, involved in the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), giving him an opportunity for more hands-on activities within the discipline field.

Anyone who has been to college knows it is a balancing act, and Highet did not want a busy schedule to get in the way of opportunities to enjoying life. Throughout his undergraduate years, Highet worked two jobs in addition to being a full-time student. This would overwhelm some students, but Highet said by now it’s nothing new for him. “I’ve worked two jobs since my sophomore year,” he says. His has been at his first job, at the Fargo Country Club, for three years. He also worked at NDSU Campus Attractions to organize student events.

As a graduate student Highet now serves as a graduate assistant in the NDSU admissions office, and as a supervisor at the country club. Highet says he enjoys opportunities to meet all kinds of people, to help out, and to offer information to prospective students. “I love getting to work with students who are really excited to come to NDSU,” he says, “and exposing them to the university’s strengths.”

Friend Skyler Stone shares his observations about Highet’s hard work through the years. “I’ve always admired Ayden’s passion for his major,” Stone says. “With every project and assignment he does, no matter how difficult, he never loses his enthusiasm and drive to do quality work.” Even with his own work to do, Stone said Highet never failed to be there for his friends for academic support or simply being there when they needed him. “He was always there for us.” Stone says. “From staying up late to help with homework, to getting up early to get coffee before our classes.”

With that all on his plate, Highet said he has learned to manage his time. “School right now is very manageable. I am in the studio working for three hours, but then I can leave it all there,” he explains. “I also make sure to have one day off a week. Saturdays are my social days, no school, no work, just whatever I want to do.”

Considering his three jobs, Highet says he still works for the most part all other days of the week. He works five or six days a week at the admissions office, two nights a week at the country club, and spends the other three week nights doing homework. Balance is key, says Highet. “I give myself one mental health day a month, whether I feel I need it or not. If I don’t take one that month, it doesn’t roll over, so I have to use it.” He says that for him this simple system helps to avoid burnout and promotes better health.

In addition to academic and job challenges, Highet says his time at NDSU has been defined by the relationships he has built along the way. Shy and reserved in

high school. “I had no idea what to expect from college. I never thought I would turn into someone who loves to talk to everyone and be social.” Highet says that after Covid constraints he almost immediately grew into a social butterfly. He said he owes it to his best friends, Samantha Tate, Kaia Sorby and Skyler Stone. “They pushed me to be more social, and it was huge for me.”

Highet says he first met Tate while in high school working at the dry cleaners. He knew she was at NDSU, so he texted her to ask about hang out the first week of school. That night in the dorm he also met Sorby, later Stone, “and the rest is history, we were never apart after that.” The four lived together for the next three years near campus, and Highet says they remain close. “I met Ayden right away, and we instantly bonded,” Stone says. “Without him, I don’t think I would have graduated and ended up on the career path I’m on now.”

Tate, Highet’s first college friend, admires him and his friendship. “Ayden is the most loving roommate and friend a person could ask for,” she says. “He made my time at NDSU so special and pushed me to be a better version of myself every day.”

Highet says his favorite college memories were in company of his best friends. “Skyler, Sam, and I went ice skating downtown one night for hours. It was just so fun to enjoy each other’s presence.” He laughed recalling the time spent with his roommates. “One night we stayed up all night dancing to One Direction music videos for hours on end. It was so important to leave college with friendships like that.”

Highet says his friendships have helped to shape who he is today. “When something went wrong, I could turn to them,” he recalls. “When things went well, I celebrated with them. We just got each other.” It was the relationships that made NDSU feel like home.

Now months into his graduate program, Highet says he’s still trying to sort out what comes next. “It is nerve-racking,” he says. “Before I could just fall back on the idea of grad school being my next step. But now, I really have to figure it out.”

While plans are still up in the air, he does know one thing for sure: “I’m living with my sister for a bit after graduation. I don’t know where that will lead, but I’m just going to roll with it.”

To cope with stress and uncertainty of life after graduation, Highet explains that he has developed a few habits to help him stay grounded. “I go on walks all the time,” he says. “it’s my time for myself.” He also enjoys doing crosswords, a simple activity that helps him clear his mind. “I use it as a way to disconnect,” Highet explains. “A few times a week, I go to a coffee shop and just do crosswords.”

Highet’s advice to students seems simple yet powerful. “Protect your peace. Don’t get caught up in thinking you have to do everything right now. You’ll get where you need to, just take care of yourself first.” Highet said his college journey has taught him that he shouldn’t take life so seriously all the time, and that it is important to

do things you want to do as well as need to do “Always remember to stop and smell the roses—and enjoy your crosswords.”

He also encourages students to embrace opportunities that come their way. “Say yes to things, even if you’re unsure. I wouldn’t be where I am now if I hadn’t stepped out of my comfort zone right away.”

Looking back on his time at NDSU, Highet sees just how far he has come. He said he started as shy freshman navigating remote classes, but now has become a confident grad student ready to take on the world. It is a journey of growth and self-discovery that define

the college experience. “Honestly, I used to take things too seriously,” he emphasizes. “I’ve learned that it’s not always so serious, and it’s okay to just step back and enjoy the little things.”

As he prepares to leave NDSU behind and take on whatever comes next, Highet says he knows one thing for sure: life is a balance, and it’s all about searching for the moments that matter the most.



# Chad Stark: A football hero returns to Fargo

By Max Wohl

Anyone who knows Chad Stark, or at least his name, can say so for a plethora of reasons. It may be from seeing him or hearing his name on a broadcast when he was a star football player. It may be from seeking financial advice for a mortgage. It may be from seeking guidance with faith from him as a high school ministry group leader at Hope Lutheran Church in Fargo.

Stark has grown roots all over the Fargo-Moorhead area. That is something he said he “never expected.”

Stark was born April 4, 1965, in Decorah, Iowa, a small college town. He said he was the result of an unplanned pregnancy between two students before their senior year at Luther College. Due to the stigma around pregnancies out of wedlock during that time, his parents married very soon after they found out he was on the way. Shortly after he was born, he was thrust into a constant childhood cycle of moving.

His father, John Stark, was a human resources specialist for the hardware chain Coast to Coast (now True Value) and his mother Lynne was a stay-at-home mom who had her hands full with Chad and his three siblings that followed. Constant relocation from store to store across small towns in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota tampered with Chad’s ability to make lasting friendships. Nevertheless, he said he was never lonely. “Since I was always good at sports,” Chad said, “it was never really that hard for me to make new friends.”

Stark’s life became more stable after a move to Brookings, S.D., where he attended high school. It marked his 16th move. At Brookings High, Stark’s athletic abilities grew into his reputation as a highly touted football fullback and running back. He received more than 60 offers to play college football. Major universities leading in his recruitment included North Dakota State University, Oregon State University, South Dakota State University and his hometown school, University of South Dakota.

However, he had caught the attention of the scouts at a larger program in Division I, Iowa State University. He said he saw a future at Iowa State. Then he was hit with bad news: the coach who had been recruiting him resigned, and his scholarship offer was rescinded.

“Money was tight for my family at that time, so I knew I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to get a scholarship,” Stark said. “So, I had to reconsider where I wanted to go.” He looked back to the Division II schools that had made offers. He had his pick shortly after reopening his recruitment.



“I chose to go to NDSU because it was close to home, and they had a recent history of success both in their conference and nationally, so it felt like it would be a good fit for me right away,” Stark said.

It turned out to be the right choice. After limited playing time for half the year, he was thrust into the starting fullback role for the remainder of his freshman season. With Stark starting, the NDSU Bison won the 1983 Division II football national championship — the program’s first in Division II and fourth in school history. It was another thing Stark said he “never expected” to happen in his first year with the team.

In his sophomore year, Stark and the team picked up where they left off. They steamrolled their competition, compiling an 11-1 record en route to a title game against Troy State. Despite a hard fight, NDSU ultimately fell short after a missed field goal at the game’s end. “Standing on the field after that loss with the team and feeling the lump in my chest will always be my most vivid memory from my time at NDSU,” Stark said. He said he never wanted to experience that feeling again—and, at NDSU, he would not have to.

The following two years proved to be just as fruitful as his freshman season, if not more so. By the end of Stark’s college career NDSU had won two more championships, in 1985 and 1986. Stark served as the team’s leading rusher in the playoffs.

Stark’s final game with the Bison concluded on Dec. 13, 1986. He finished his career with the second-most career rushing yards and fourth-most touchdowns in program history. He also held the school record for most rushing yards in a single game, and the NCAA record for most rushing yards in a postseason career. He also

boasts a list of all-conferences and All-American team selections for play and academics.

“All the success I earned was given to me by the great teammates I had along the way,” Stark said. “Even after the All-American ceremonies and individual trophy presentations, I never had as much fun as when the clock wound down to zero and I was able to celebrate on the field with my teammates.”

Five months later the 1987 NFL draft reared its head. In the 12th round—today no longer a round in the draft—the New York Giants selected Stark. “I was very excited at first,” Stark reminisced. “Being a kid from small-town Midwest and having the potential to live in the big city while playing for a team with the means to win it all was a dream come true.”

Stark remembers showing up to train for preseason. He said he met a harsh reality check when he saw Lawrence Taylor, now regarded as the greatest linebacker in NFL history, across from him. The new playing level and speed of the NFL proved to be too much. Stark was cut from the Giants before the season started.

Football-wise, this seemed to be the beginning of the end for Stark. Shortly after his release from the Giants, he made his way to the Canadian Football League for preseason camps. Then, in a stroke of luck, the NFL experienced a player strike during the first three weeks of the season. Because Stark was not on an active roster at the time, he was signed and played two games for the Seattle Seahawks as a “scab” or Picket Player.

However, after the strike, rosters returned to normal, and Stark was left off a team while the Giants, the franchise that drafted him, went on to win the 1987-88 Super Bowl. Stark was signed with the Miami Dolphins in 1988, but it was entirely spent on injured reserve, leaving the two games he played with the Seahawks as his only appearances in the NFL. “I was a good athlete, but everyone in the league was also a good one or a great one,” he said. “So, being the big fish in a small pond for my entire football career up until that point and getting that flipped 180 in a year—I was definitely a deer in the headlights. But I’m glad I recognized that sooner rather than later and was able to move on.”

He said it’s a decision he has only grown happier with now that concern has mounted following studies on brain trauma among football players. Having played the physically demanding position of fullback during an era when the game was much more physical, Stark believes his early retirement did wonders for his long-term health.

After Stark’s brief time in professional football, he returned to NDSU to complete his bachelor’s degree in business administration. Shortly after graduation, he accepted a position as a financial advisor for Merrill Lynch. He stayed in that position for seven years before moving to Wells Fargo, where he served 22 years in the same role.

But Stark remained connected to Bison football during the 1990s and into the 2000s, helping run camps, but never holding an official position within the program.

Sean Fredricks, a Bison Athletic Hall of Famer like Stark, played 10 years after Stark. He said Stark’s presence was still felt around campus. Fredricks, who grew up in Jamestown, N.D. and watched him play as a child, recalls their first meeting at a camp, noting that Stark was intense when talking about football. However, after getting to know him in a more personal setting, Fredricks said, “He was always one of the kindest guys I have met through my time at NDSU.”

Their relationship continued to grow after Fredricks’ playing days. He became president of the Bison Football Player Association, a group of former players that sets up charity events, mentorship opportunities with current players, and other gatherings. Fredricks said Stark was as committed to the Bison as anyone he had ever met and was “more than happy to help” if it meant supporting other players, both past and present.

After “retiring” from his position at Wells Fargo in 2022, Stark became managing director for RBC’s Financial Advising and Consulting Group, The F.I.T. Wealth Management Group, in Fargo. Recent NDSU graduate Allison Jacobson, a RBC financial advisor, is nearing her first year of full-time employment under Stark’s management. Jacobson said Stark made a normally intimidating process much less stressful. “His kindness and encouragement really stood out, and he made me feel confident by showing faith in my abilities while also being honest about the hard work ahead,” she said. “It was clear he wanted to see me succeed.”

Jacobson said Stark creates a joyous work environment but always expects 100% effort. She said Stark ensures he is there to help, even if it requires getting a little more serious from time to time. She also praised Stark for going above and beyond with customer service, “taking the time to understand clients’ goals, stories, and values.”

Stark also regularly gave his time to Hope Lutheran Church in Fargo for over a decade. He started leading small groups with his children as they progressed from Sunday school to confirmation. Even after his children aged out of the programs, Stark stayed involved, continuing to lead high school ministry groups. “Spending time with the kids there and giving them guidance and advice in their spiritual journey, as well as learning and talking about their life in general, has always been an eternally rewarding thing for me.”

Jennifer Jones-Dees, co-leader of a small group with Stark at Hope Lutheran, has fond memories of their time together. “Chad always provided a comfortable environment for discussions regarding life, faith, and mental health. Because of his calm demeanor, students felt that they could relate to him.”

Some may have found it surprising that Stark returned to Fargo after his pro football career ended, particularly as he had lived in so many places. “I really wanted to stay in Fargo because the people and the city were always so gracious to me,” he explained. “I knew starting my real professional career, as well as a family, in Fargo

would be an ideal scenario.”

He believes it was a fruitful decision. It was in Fargo where he made many of his current connections. More importantly, it was in Fargo where he raised four children with his wife, Jennifer, and now has an expanding troop of grandchildren who are often featured on his Facebook page. And he stays close to his beloved Bison, ensuring he never has to miss a home tailgate or game. He loves to celebrate and watch the success the Bison earned over the past decade. “Just being able to see the dominance they brought to the table all those years,” he said. “I was a part of a few great teams and great players, but

the teams that Brock Jensen, Carson Wentz, and Easton Stick commanded changed the trajectory of the program immeasurably.”

However, he is quick to note that the teams he played on were no slouch. Particularly the 1986 team, which he says was as dominant as any to play in Fargo, telling anyone who disagrees to simply, “Look at the stats.” Chad Stark’s tremendous legacy at NDSU extends beyond his 2002 enshrinement in the NDSU Athletics Hall of Fame. He has become a strong local presence in business, family and athletic excellence.



# Crystal Jamerson: From psychology to public service, a journey of engagement

By Sammy Zehr

When 33-year-old Crystal Jamerson strides into the office at Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota each morning, she brings more than just her years of experience—she brings a palpable energy that ignites the whole team. “She has this amazing way of lifting everyone’s spirits,” says Anne Hoefgren, the executive director at Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota. “It’s in her voice, her positive outlook, and even the way she carries herself.” As the community and engagement coordinator, Jamerson is a key leader, deeply dedicated to connecting vulnerable populations with the legal support they need—a role that is both challenging and fulfilling. Her presence is a source of motivation for her colleagues, and her compassion is a lifeline for the community members she serves.

Jamerson’s professional journey began at NDSU, where she earned a degree in psychology. For her, the study of psychology was never just about academics; it was a way to explore human behavior and understand what drives people’s actions. “Psychology wasn’t just an academic pursuit—it was a way for me to understand people’s inner experiences and motivations,” she says. However, after graduation, Jamerson realized that psychology wasn’t the path she wanted to pursue professionally. “I didn’t have a background in communications, but I was drawn to the idea of sharing stories and connecting with people in a meaningful way,” she explains. Over time, her career naturally gravitated toward communications, where she discovered a passion that surpassed her initial interest in psychology. “I realized I liked communications much more,” she says. “It allowed me to connect with people in real time and amplify voices that needed to be heard.”

The transition to communications wasn’t immediate. After earning her degree, Jamerson worked in administrative roles, managing data and operations. “I started in behind-the-scenes positions,” she recalls. “But I kept finding myself volunteering for projects that involved interacting with people and representing organizations. Eventually, I knew communications was where I belonged.” While some may view her shift in career paths as unconventional, Jamerson sees it as a natural evolution of her desire to connect with others. Each step, no matter how indirect, brought her closer to a career that felt purposeful and fulfilling.

Jamerson’s sense of purpose didn’t develop in isolation. Growing up in Moorhead, Minn., as the eldest of three siblings, she often stepped into a caretaker role at home. “My parents both worked long hours, so I took on a lot of responsibility early on,” she says. “It taught me

to listen, to empathize, and to problem-solve—skills I still rely on today.” These formative experiences shaped her into the empathetic leader she is today, someone who not only understands the struggles of others but actively seeks to help them navigate through challenges.



Her personal experiences as a single mother of two have further deepened her understanding of the importance of support systems. Living in Dilworth, Minn., with her children, ages 7 and 9, Jamerson balances the demands of her career with the joys and challenges of raising a family on her own. “Being a single mom has taught me resilience in ways I never expected,” she says. “It’s not just about managing schedules or juggling responsibilities—it’s about showing up, every day, for the people who depend on you. That’s a lesson I carry with me into my work.” This dual perspective—both as a professional advocating for vulnerable populations and as a mother navigating her own challenges—allows her to relate to the families who walk through the doors at Legal Services. “When I see a struggling family, I can’t help but think, ‘That could be me.’ That’s what drives me to give my best every single day.”

Jamerson’s role at Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota ties together her background in psychology, her passion for communication, and her lived experiences into a singular, impactful position. Every task she undertakes reflects her deep understanding of people and her commitment to making a difference. “Empathy is at the heart of what we do,” Jamerson explains. “To advocate effectively, you need to understand what people are going through. It’s not just about providing legal services; it’s about building trust and giving people the support they need to take the next step forward.”

Now raising two children, Jamerson finds that her role as a parent directly informs her work. “Being a single mom has given me a different perspective on the struggles families face,” she shares. “When I see a parent

walk into our office overwhelmed and unsure where to turn, I can empathize on a deeply personal level. That could easily be me.”

Her work at Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota seamlessly ties her background in psychology, her passion for communication, and her lived experiences into one cohesive role. Every task she undertakes reflects her deep understanding of people and her commitment to making a difference. “Empathy is at the heart of what we do,” Jamerson explains. “To advocate effectively, you need to understand what people are going through. It’s not just about providing legal services; it’s about building trust and giving people the support they need to take the next step forward.”

The organization often assists clients in incredibly vulnerable positions—families facing eviction, individuals entangled in complicated custody disputes, and people navigating daunting legal issues with little to no resources or support. “When people come to us, they’re often at some of the most difficult points in their lives,” she says. “Meeting them where they are, emotionally and practically, is essential.” This ability to connect with clients on both a professional and personal level has been a hallmark of her work. She approaches each interaction with genuine care, ensuring that those who walk through the office doors leave feeling seen and understood. Jamerson’s ability to foster these connections has made her a standout leader and a driving force within the organization. “Crystal has an innate ability to make people feel heard and valued,” says Anne Hoefgren, executive director of Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota. “Whether it’s clients, partners, or colleagues, she brings her whole heart to the table. She has a unique ability to connect with people in a way that feels authentic, which is invaluable in the work we do.”

Her role is dynamic, encompassing a range of responsibilities, from organizing impactful community events to crafting strategic social media campaigns and cultivating partnerships with local organizations. One of her most memorable achievements was spearheading a large-scale event focused on raising awareness about legal aid. “That event was a huge undertaking,” she recalls. “Seeing the community come together, knowing we were helping people access resources they might not have known about, was incredibly rewarding. It’s those moments that remind me why I do this work.” Beyond the office, Jamerson’s passion for her community is evident. A frequent volunteer at local events, she is particularly dedicated to raising awareness about mental health—a cause deeply rooted in her psychology background. “Mental health is foundational,” she explains. “When someone is struggling mentally, it affects every other aspect of their lives, including their ability to navigate complex issues like legal matters. If we can even indirectly support mental health through our services, we’re making a difference. Sometimes just knowing there’s someone in their corner can be the lifeline they need.”

Despite her busy schedule, Jamerson also embraces

the challenges and joys of being a single mother. Balancing her professional responsibilities with her role as a parent has given her a deeper understanding of the struggles many families face. “Being a mom has taught me so much about patience, resilience, and unconditional love.”

Reflecting on her career, Jamerson acknowledges the unexpected twists and turns that ultimately led her to where she is today. When she graduated from NDSU, she says, she didn’t have a clear career path. “Psychology was always fascinating to me because it helped me understand people. But after working in various administrative roles and being exposed to communication tasks, I realized I enjoyed communication more than psychology.” It wasn’t a seamless transition—she didn’t have a background in communication and had to learn on the job. Yet, she embraced the challenge and discovered a passion that has since become her career’s cornerstone. “My path hasn’t been a straight line,” she says, “but every experience taught me something valuable—whether it was learning to advocate for myself or recognizing the power of a story well-told.”

Her advice for those considering a career in community engagement or communications is simple but powerful: “Stay curious. The best communicators are those who genuinely care about people’s stories and never stop learning. And don’t be afraid of change—sometimes, the detours lead you exactly where you’re meant to be.”

Looking ahead, Jamerson is eager to continue evolving in her role, with a particular focus on leveraging digital tools to connect with younger demographics and underserved communities. “Our goal is to make sure everyone—regardless of age, location, or background—knows they have access to the support they need,” she says. “There’s so much potential to engage people in new ways, and that’s what excites me the most. I want to reach the next generation and ensure they know they’re not alone in their struggles.”

Her work at Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota is more than just a job—it’s a calling that unites her skills, experiences, and compassion into a force for good. Every event she organizes, every strategy she develops, and every client she helps is a testament to her dedication to making her community stronger. For Jamerson, the journey from psychology student to communications professional and single mother has been filled with challenges, but it has also been deeply rewarding. Her story is a powerful reminder that with resilience, adaptability, and empathy, it’s possible to turn life’s twists and turns into opportunities to create meaningful change.

For now, Jamerson continues to bring her passion for people and her talent for communication to Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota, where every day presents an opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of others. Whether she is developing outreach strategies, organizing events, or simply listening to someone share their story, Jamerson approaches her work with an

unwavering commitment to fostering understanding and hope. “It’s not just about providing legal services,” she says. “It’s about reminding people that they matter, that their struggles are valid, and that there’s a path forward.”

Her journey from a psychology student uncertain of her future to a community leader with a clear sense of purpose is a testament to resilience, adaptability, and the profound impact of an open mind. Each step of her path—whether it was learning to navigate the challenges of single parenthood, finding her voice in a new career field, or overcoming the uncertainty of choosing

an unconventional path—has added to the strength and empathy she brings to her role.

Colleagues say Jamerson’s story is a reminder that growth often comes from embracing the unexpected. The ability to channel personal challenges into professional strengths not inspires her colleagues. “She’s proof that you don’t have to follow a straight line to find your calling,” says Hoefgren. “Crystal shows us all that with enough perseverance and compassion, you can create meaningful change no matter where you start.”

# Monica Stensland: From single mother to success

By Allison Zenker

**D**reams of leaving your hometown upon graduation can be swiftly interrupted. They were for Monica Bartels when during her senior year she discovered she was pregnant. Amid a strict upbringing and big hopes for a different future, this unexpected turn left her facing many challenges. Despite the feeling of disappointment from her family, and the absence of support from her boyfriend, who chose not to be a part of their lives, Bartels decided to pursue both motherhood and her dream of going to college. Her journey would prove to be one of remarkable strength: balancing single parenthood and higher education. And that was not all for the communications coordinator in the NDSU agriculture communications division. It was barely the beginning of a challenging life's journey.

Bartels grew up in Wadena, Minn., with seven siblings. The age gaps between them were significant, and as a result, they were not particularly close. While they shared a household, their differences in age and interests kept them from forming strong bonds. They faced challenging household dynamics. "We weren't really close," Bartels said. "I would say I was only close with two of my brothers."

Their mother, she said, was a complicated woman who was cold and not very affectionate. Growing up, Bartels seldom heard "I love you's" or received any kind of physical affection. She and her siblings responded by having a very difficult time connecting with one another, especially their parents. Her father, on the other hand, was very open and loving, she said. But two opposite parenting styles challenged the household, she said. It became strict and rule oriented. "My parents raised us very old school, but me and my mom do not have a very good relationship," Bartels said.

When Bartels reached high school, she began to long for the day that she could leave her big and complicated family, to attend college and start her own life. The pregnancy threw a wrench into those plans. Having a baby was not in her 10-year plan. Regardless of the disappointment her parents felt towards her and the baby's father breaking up with her (she wants to keep his name confidential), Bartels decided to keep the baby and raise it on her own.

"I was super scared, nervous and worried," Bartels said. "I didn't know how I would be able to manage life with a child, but I was willing to take on the challenge."

Bartels was determined to have the baby and pursue her dream of going to college eventually, just not right away. In the fall of 1994 her baby boy, Cole, was welcomed into the world. Her small studio apartment was



perfect just for the two of them, she said. At first, she said she was upset knowing she had to do it all alone. Bartels needed some time to adjust to single motherhood, so she halted her college dreams for a while. She said she and Cole did everything together. "It was me and him against the world," Bartels said. "I would love to go back and slow down and just enjoy him as an infant again."

Everything seemed to be working out. That is, until she found out her four-month-old had Retinoblastoma cancer in both of his eyes. Bartels was devastated. With little money and emotional support, she felt alone. Over the next few months, she made many trips to the University of Minnesota eye clinic. "The diagnosis really shook me to my core," Bartels said. "I was scared he would lose his vision in both eyes."

Cole recovered, but lost one eye. He was fitted for a prosthetic eye in August 1995. It was also around this time that Cole's biological father decided to completely cut himself out of their lives forever. He wanted nothing to do with either of them. "It was difficult, but I knew we were better off without him," Bartels said.

Finally, Bartels decided she was ready to take on a college education in the fall 1995 at St. Cloud State University. But she quickly realized this was not where she and Cole were meant to be. Instead, in fall 1997, she enrolled at Northland Community College in Thief River Falls, Minn. Upon graduation in spring 1998, she



decided to further her education, and double majored in English and mass communication at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Cole, today looking back as an adult, found his mother's determination to be amazing. "It was remarkable that after giving birth to me at the age of 18 she was able to put herself through college, while also working jobs and raising me."

As a student at MSUM, Bartels enrolled Cole in a day-care. She was doing good in all her classes. Though her social life was limited, she was proud of all she had accomplished on her own. It was soon after that she would meet her first husband (she wants to keep his name confidential). After one year of marriage, they welcomed Lauren into the world, and Morgan three years later.

On the outside, Bartels said they looked like a picture-perfect family. But everything was not what it seemed. Bartels endured emotional and physical abuse throughout the relationship. In 2006 Bartels said she secretly planned to leave her husband. She hired a lawyer, saved up money, got herself a new phone, and asked her husband to leave. After continuously arguing he reluctantly left and accepted his fate. "I stayed so I could keep the house," Bartels said. "I wanted the kids to have a safe place to grow up."

Once the dust settled, after a nasty, strung-out divorce, Bartels said, she was finally free from her nightmare. Her ex-husband, on the other hand, pushed away from the family, including her two daughters. That was very hard for Bartels. "Over the years he just became an absentee father," Bartels said. "I'm not bitter though; I made the choices I made and got my kids out of it."

Bartels was content now on being single forever. Recovering from the trauma of her past relationships, she enjoyed having her friends and kids. "I wasn't looking for anyone to date and didn't really want to date."

Out of the blue, Jeremy Stensland, a member of the North Dakota Air National Guard, sent her a message on MySpace, asking her out on a date. She decided to take a leap of faith and see where this unexpected connection might lead.

Finally, Bartels said her life was looking better. Until Cole, then 13, developed some sort of mystery illness. Bartels was determined to find the cause. She said despite many doctors brushing it off, and one even accusing her of Munchausen syndrome (faking illness) by proxy, she never gave up. "It was hard when my mom gut was telling me something was really wrong, but they weren't able to get a diagnosis," Bartels said. She recalled feeling as if she had to push the doctors to listen to her. Eventually, Cole was diagnosed within five minutes by a doctor who determined the illness to be Crohn's Disease, an inflammatory bowel disease, and Colitis, chronic colon inflammation. While he would carry these illnesses with him for the rest of his life, Bartels continued to be a steadfast source of support to help Cole manage his condition.

A year later, in 2009, Jeremy and Bartels married with

the three kids by their side. One year into their marriage they welcomed a baby boy, Cullen, into their family. Her name was now Monica Stensland.

Career life for Stensland has been anything but simple, with family challenges complicating career goals. As a young mom in and out of school, her work life took on many different roles. She has worked for Ferrell Gas, a propane distributor, as a receptionist and customer service worker. Following that, she was hired at United Sugars in customer service. But she said she never had a passion for that line of work. Stensland was always drawn to working in higher education. "I loved the aspect of being around students, campus life, and mission-based work."

As luck would have it, in 2014 she obtained what she thought was her dream job. The Concordia College, Moorhead, Advancement Center hired her. Throughout her years at Concordia, she took on various roles, but she said something was missing. She felt that she had outgrown the position after seven years and needed a change in her life. Stensland transitioned into a marketing job at Western Equipment Finance, but quickly realized it was not for her. "I took a very winding path to get to higher education," Stensland said.

Finally, after deciding that higher education was where she belonged, Stensland accepted a job at the NDSU agricultural communications office as a communication coordinator. Although the shift to agriculture-related work was difficult, she said she was up for the challenge. "I'll never be done learning; I just love it," Stensland said.

Stensland has met many different people throughout her many jobs and in her personal life. One is Deb Tanner, a graphic design artist in agriculture communication. Tanner thinks very highly of Bartels and recalls her being a great mother, advocate, co-worker and overall wonderful human being. "She is a great friend: thoughtful, funny and fiercely loyal," said Tanner. "I'm so thankful to have her as a friend and coworker."

After all that Stensland has been through, she has managed to raise successful children who are doing well. Her oldest son, Cole, and his wife, live in Michigan. Cole has a Master of Music degree from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is currently a professor of trombone at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant. Cole has built a successful career taking part in many esteemed ensembles and publishing his own record album. His wife and him recently found out they are expecting their first child in May 2025.

Stensland's daughter Lauren is newly married and recently graduated from NDSU. She is a third-grade teacher at Robert Asp School in Moorhead. Bartels' younger daughter, Morgan, is a junior at NDSU and hopes to become a child life specialist. Bartels and Jeremy's youngest son, Cullen, is a freshman at Moorhead High School who loves basketball and baseball.

"She is a great mom and has four kids who are great people and are successful in their lives," said Tanner.

Aside from her career and being with her family, Bartels enjoys gardening, watching documentaries, and being part of her kids' activities. She said she is looking forward to being an empty nester in the near future. Cole observed "One of the things I continue to value so much in my mother is her dedication to being involved and interested in whatever her four kids are doing."

Stensland eagerly anticipates the arrival of her first grandchild, a milestone she's been looking forward to with excitement and joy. She said she is excited to spoil the little one, sharing the love and lessons she's instilled in her own children. "I'm so excited and happy for them." Stensland said. "I already started buying gifts for the little one."

Stensland said all her kids are hard workers who are determined to achieve their life goals. "I feel I'm a different mom than I was when I was raising Cole." she said.

"I think of the path I could have taken if I didn't have Cole, but without him I wouldn't be the mom I am today."

Positivity, love, and hard work are something she said she has tried to pass down to her kids. Through the many challenges of her life, Stensland has always found ways to be grateful. "I've always told myself that there is someone with much worse luck than you, so always find good in every situation."

# Cheryl Wachenheim: A legacy of leadership, teaching and service

By Haley McClue

For over 25 years, Dr. Cheryl Wachenheim, professor of agribusiness and applied economics at NDSU, has been shaping the minds of students while learning just as much from them in return. From sharing stories of “back in the day” to actively engaging in campus organizations, the 58-year-old’s dedication to teaching, mentoring, and military service has earned her respect and admiration across the campus and beyond.

Wachenheim says her journey to NDSU began with a twist of fate. While serving as a faculty member at Illinois State University, she made a pivotal decision to enlist in the United States National Guard. During her 10 weeks of basic training, she received a letter inviting her to apply for an open faculty position at NDSU. Unable to contact anyone outside of basic training, her secretary submitted the application on her behalf, without her knowledge.

“When I got back, I found out I had an interview in just a couple of days,” Wachenheim recalls. “Since I am originally from Minnesota, I thought, ‘Well, why not?’ The interview went well, I took the position, and I have been here ever since.”

At NDSU, Wachenheim has served in a 60% research, and 40% teaching assignment throughout her career and is currently the interim chair. Beyond her faculty responsibilities, she has dedicated over two decades to advising student organizations. Wachenheim has advised numerous organizations, including the National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) for more than five years, the Agribusiness Club, and the Ceres Women’s Fraternity until it disbanded. Currently, she serves as the advisor for Sigma Alpha Professional Agricultural Sorority, a role she held briefly when a chapter was established at NDSU, and again now.

“Sigma Alpha was much different back in the day, but it is still the same strong organization today,” Wachenheim says. “They have done so many wonderful things, like starting the career fair. I really enjoy working with students—it is inspiring to see their energy and excitement for their organizations. With teaching, it can be stressful and students are not always happy, so I enjoy seeing students happy in a club enjoying their college experience.”

Wachenheim says her students have made a profound influence on her as well. By working closely with agricultural clubs, Wachenheim gets to know many of her students both inside and outside the classroom. The current president of Sigma Alpha emphasizes the support Wachenheim offers to student groups. “I have gotten the opportunity to work very closely with Cheryl over the

past year as she is currently serving as the advisor of Sigma Alpha,” says McKayla Ewing, an agricultural economics student and president of Sigma Alpha. “As an advisor, she is just as supportive and encouraging as she is in the classroom.

She promotes sisterhood and academic success amongst the girls in the sorority and is always willing to help the girls with whatever is happening at the time.”

While Wachenheim says she treasures her time mentoring students, balancing professional and personal responsibilities has not been without challenges. One obstacle was motherhood. She did not get maternity leave. “I am not sure what policy we have for maternity leave now, but back when I had my kids there was no such thing,” she says. “Essentially, you had three days of sick leave and daycares would not take babies until they were eight weeks old.

Wachenheim says when her daughter was born in the summer she could make it work. “But when my son was born in October, I literally had a three-day-old baby and I took him everywhere with me.”

Wachenheim credits her student-activity work for helping out during a stressful time, especially as a single mother. “Student organizations were like my savior,” she says. “I would bring my children to meetings for the sorority, Ag Business Club and NAMA, and they would just have a ball. I have tons of photos of students taking care of my kids. My kids loved the ladies and the young gentlemen, and I had a two-hour break where I could get other work done and everyone would take care of them.”

As an educator, Wachenheim emphasizes that she learns from the students on campus as she teaches and works with them, growing personally by using her knowledge of the younger generation to help relate to her own kids, who are now 20 and 21, and growing professionally



in leadership as she continues to gain experience mentoring and advising.

“Over the years, as my children grew up, working with students helped a lot because even though I do not understand half of what students are talking about with their lives and social media, being exposed to those discussions helped with my own children and vice versa. It has helped me grow and helped me interact with my children because they are about the same age.”

Wachenheim brings high-level skills in her work with students, but her academic credentials also are solid. She holds a bachelor’s degree in animal science from the University of Minnesota, and a master’s degree and doctoral degree in agricultural economics, along with an M.B.A., all from Michigan State University. Her research spans precision agriculture, decision-making in farm and agribusiness firms and pedagogy.

She has garnered many accolades in her years at NDSU, including the NDSU Excellence in Mentoring Award, North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture Distinguished Educator, USDA Excellence in Teaching Award, Agricultural and Applied Economics Association Distinguished Teaching Award, Sloan Consortium Board of Directors Award and Fulbright Distinguished Chair Scholarship. She was also selected to deliver NDSU’s 60th Faculty Lectureship, a prestigious honor recognizing her contributions to teaching, research, and service.

Students may not know about the awards, but do appreciate Wachenheim’s support. “I have had Cheryl for several classes” said Ewing. “As a teacher Cheryl is very passionate about her students and what she is teaching.” Ewing said she will go above and beyond to ensure that her students will exceed and have the tools to exceed. “If students do not have them, she goes out of her way to provide those tools. She very much promotes success in her classes and will help students any way they need.”

But Wachenheim’s methods evolved, she says. After teaching for over two decades, she has seen many challenges, from technological advances to the pandemic in 2020. “Things are changing,” she says. “Teaching used to be about imparting knowledge, and now we are standing back and helping students discover the knowledge on their own. Nowadays you can learn anything from a book or from the internet.”

Wachenheim emphasizes that today teachers can really make a difference by helping students connect with

people. “In reality, helping students network and developing soft skills like teamwork and problem-solving all come from the co-curricular part of college. I think that is where teachers can really help guide students, that is where we are really of value.”

In addition to her academic and mentoring achievements, Wachenheim has demonstrated extraordinary commitment and resilience through her 25 years of service in the Army National Guard. Balancing her roles as an educator and an officer in the guard has presented challenges. During her time at NDSU, Wachenheim deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, where she faced the complexities of teaching remotely from a military base nearly 7,000 miles away, navigating time zones while trying to ensure stable communication. Despite the physical distance and logistical obstacles, she continued to deliver lectures from the frontlines. Whether in the classroom, on campus, or on deployment, she says her goal has always been the same: to ensure her students feel supported, valued, and equipped with the tools they need to succeed. “The primary thing I want students to know is that I care,” she says. “To me, everyone is important and just being there to understand and talk with them is crucial.”

Wachenheim compares her role as an educator to her role as a parent. “I want everyone to have the tools they need to be successful, and I want to make sure I do not hover over them, but when things go wrong I want students to be comfortable coming to me and to know they are not alone. That is the most important thing I can impart, really there is nothing else that I can do for them.”

Wachenheim’s journey at NDSU is a testament to her unwavering dedication to teaching, mentoring, and service. Through her roles as a professor, advisor, and military officer, she has consistently gone above and beyond to inspire and support her students, shaping not only their academic achievements but also their personal growth. Her ability to adapt to challenges, embrace change, and foster meaningful connections highlights her enduring impact on the campus community. Wachenheim’s compassion, resilience, and excellence will leave a lasting effect on NDSU and the next generation of leaders.



# About the writers

**Nathan Ambrose** is a third-year strategic communication major from West Fargo, N.D., set to graduate in May. Passionate about all things sports, he currently works as a communications Intern with the NDSU Athletics Department and hopes to build a career in the sports industry. Last spring, he had the chance to study abroad in Brisbane, Australia, an experience that made a huge impact on his perspective and enriched his academic journey.

**Blake Engebretson** is a junior at North Dakota State University studying journalism. Engebretson is originally from Velva, N.D., where he graduated in 2022. While unsure if he will graduate in the 2025 spring or fall semester, Engebretson aspires for a job in media/journalism. He enjoys sports, dogs, watching TV shows/movies, working out, reading, writing and spending time with friends and family. He is the youngest of three children. Engebretson joined NDSU's student newspaper, the *Spectrum*, in 2022 where he worked as a sportswriter during his freshman year. He has been an intern at Bison Report, a subsite of 247Sports, since the spring of 2023. He primarily covers NDSU football and men's basketball.

**Gracie Gellner** is a senior at North Dakota State University, originally from the small town of Grafton, N.D. She will be earning her degree in management communication with a history minor in December 2024. Coming from a small town, Gellner enjoys the simple things in life. Trying out new coffee shops, reading, sunset walks and spending time with her friends and family are just a few of her favorite activities. Following graduation, she will continue to reside in Fargo and work full-time for the Marvin company.

**Emma Johnson** is a senior at NDSU, graduating in Fall 2024. She is majoring in strategic

communication and minoring in entrepreneurship. Johnson grew up in Pine City, Minn., between Duluth and Minneapolis, and fell in love with everything outdoors—from snowboarding, rock climbing, and hiking. In her free time, She enjoys working at Rosewild in Downtown Fargo as a server and running her business as a wedding planner, Graceful Gatherings and Events.

**Ava Lee** is from Berthold, N.D. She was originally born in Fargo. Lee majors in agriculture communication with a minor in agriculture business. On campus, She is involved in Greek life and her studies in agriculture. Her interests include listening to music, hanging out with friends and family, and skiing during winter.

**Corbin Lee** is a junior at North Dakota State University, majoring in journalism. Originally from Chisago Lakes, Minn., Lee moved to North Dakota to pursue his college education. Growing up just outside the Twin Cities, he developed a love for sports and sports media. He dreamt about finding himself in a production truck during a game, behind the scenes watching and helping make the magic happen. He recently accepted a position at Midco Sports doing exactly that for University of North Dakota home basketball, football, hockey and volleyball games. The childhood dream of a young Midwestern lad has begun to materialize. He will continue to hone his skills at NDSU, hoping to one day return to Minnesota under the employment of Fanduel Sports Network, formerly known as Bally Sports North, to cover the teams he grew up watching.

**Haley McClue** is a junior majoring in agricultural communication with a minor in crop and weed science. Originally from Lake City, Iowa, she is actively involved on campus, serving as public relations officer and social chair for Sigma Alpha Professional Agricultural Sorority,

as vice-president of National Agri-marketing Association, and hosts a weekly podcast on KNDS radio. In addition to her campus involvement, McClue works as the outreach and engagement assistant for the North Dakota Soybean Council, combining her passion for agriculture with her communication studies.

**Ruby Ruen** is a Fargo native currently in her third year in the journalism program at NDSU. She is pairing her major with a double minor in public health and anthropology and hopes to use her knowledge and perspective to become a public health journalist. At NDSU, Ruen currently serves as a staff writer for the variety section of the school newspaper, the *Spectrum*. Additionally, she is a member of the NDSU Lion's Club, college democrats and Public Health Association. When she isn't on campus, Ruen can be found baking—both at her job and home. Her two-year-and-counting-long position at Breadsmith has sparked a great love for baking, as well as sharing with those around her.

**Elle Sorenson** is a senior from Stanley, N.D., studying strategic communication. She is interested in marketing and events, insurance, and social media marketing. In her free time, she enjoys running, spending time at the lake, visiting her family, and traveling. Elle looks forward to graduation and plans on staying in Fargo working at State Farm as an agent team member.

**Max Wohl** is a native of West Fargo, N.D., and has spent his whole life a Bison fan. He grew up in the dome watching his family run the chains on the sideline and the team run wild on the field. Now, Wohl is currently a senior at NDSU majoring in strategic communication. Wohl is a massive sports fan and will never miss an opportunity to meet up with friends and watch the game. When

his beloved Bison are in the off season, he fills his time with trips to the lake and watching the Dodgers, which is also the namesake of his six-year-old dog.

**Sammy Zehr** is a senior at North Dakota State University from Portland, Ore., majoring in strategic communication with a minor in English. He has a strong passion for social media, event planning, and creative writing. Outside of class, Zehr enjoys exploring new music, taking relaxing walks, and spending time with his friends and his dog. As he looks forward to graduating, Zehr is excited to return to Oregon and pursue a career in communication, where he hopes to combine his skills in storytelling and organization to make a meaningful impact.

**Allison Zenker**, a proud native of Gackle, N.D., is a junior at NDSU majoring in agricultural communication with a minor in business. She balances her academic life with a vibrant professional life, working in NDSU's agricultural communication department, managing a social media page for Midwest Seed Genetics, and running her own permanent jewelry pop-up business. In her free time, Zenker enjoys playing volleyball and basketball, traveling, watching movies, and spending time with her family and friends.





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