

COMMUNITY

THE MAGAZINE OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Volume 10, Issue 3



FINE TUNING:

CLASSICALLY TRAINED MUSICIAN
TO MOBILE DEVICE MAVEN

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Lead editor and contributor: Emma Stokely

Assistant editors and contributors: Brian Ayers, Alejandra Cortes

Lead art direction: Emily Bunch, Shayla Muller, Susana Vanourney

A LETTER FROM THE MCC FOUNDATION

With spring here and summer around the corner, I am thrilled about a change of season. As graduation approaches, this time of year allows us to reflect on the people and programs that make a difference in our community and make Metropolitan Community College a special place.

In this issue of Community, we introduce you to Diedra Williams, an MCC alumnus and current employee who turned personal struggle into a thriving business. We also celebrate the connection between education and community outreach with our new Mobile Device Repair Academy. And right on the heels of the Oscars, we take a look at the budding film community at MCC.

You will also hear from some Papillion-La Vista South High School students who are reaping the benefits of taking our dual enrollment classes. They are among the more than 6,400 Nebraska high school students who have signed up for MCC dual enrollment courses since the College started offering them tuition free last fall.

We are proud to make higher education more accessible for students and families across our four-county service area and love hearing from high school students who are seeing their futures come into focus in our classrooms. Reminder: dual enrollment classes are offered tuition free through the 2024-25 academic year. Visit mccneb.edu/SecondaryPartnerships for more information on our dual enrollment programs.

This issue also features the MCC Career Forward program, which connects students to employment opportunities and provides training stipends to help participants reach their career goals. And, you'll hear from a kindergarten class at Field Club Elementary that already has their eyes on higher education. We hope to see some of them at MCC soon, whether it's taking College for Kids classes or after they graduate high school. It's never too early or too late.

We have a lot to celebrate at MCC, and we hope you enjoy learning more in this issue. Thank you for being an important part of our community.

Sincerely,

Amy Recker
Associate vice president for advancement
Executive director, MCC Foundation



Metropolitan
Community College
FOUNDATION



FINE TUNING: CLASSICALLY TRAINED MUSICIAN TO MOBILE DEVICE MAVEN

DeWater brings expertise to MCC Mobile Device Repair Academy, a first-of-its kind program in a community college nationwide.

It became clear to him on stage minutes before the start of a Christmas concert where he was performing with the Omaha Symphony.

Jason DeWater, who played Principal Horn for the Symphony, set down his centuries old instrument and put a damaged iPhone in front of the sheet music on his stand. Pulling one of the tiny screwdrivers he always carries with him out of the front pocket of his white jacket, DeWater went to work on the Second Horn's phone — one of the 50 million mobile devices that get damaged every year in the United States.

DeWater soon realized he was in the wrong line of work.

"I'm a musician working with these folks, and they saw more value in me as someone who could fix their phone. They needed that and so did the rest of the city," said DeWater, the founder of iFixOmaha, an independent electronics repair shop with four locations in the Omaha area and goals for regional expansion. "I didn't have any business background at all, but device repair created a path to entrepreneurship for me."

DeWater is sharing his path to a new career with Metropolitan Community College students this spring. He and other industry-certified professionals from iFixOmaha are involved in training MCC students interested in the relatively new field, hoping they will work their way to



employment with his company, or to compete against it — he's really 100% okay with the latter.

From the newly renovated MCC Digital Express (Building 10) on the Fort Omaha Campus, MCC launched its new Mobile Device Repair Academy this spring, a first-ever offering at a community college nationwide. Provided in partnership with the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association (CTIA), the national trade organization for the wireless industry, and iFixOmaha, the MCC Mobile Device Repair Academy is a credentialing program that includes a one-week boot camp. An eight-week internship follows that can lead to a job offer at program completion. Participants who finish the Boot Camp earn two Wireless Industry Service Excellence (WISE) certifications.

"There's a significant market need for mobile device repair, and MCC is thrilled to partner with CTIA and iFixOmaha to be able to offer this first-of-its-kind program," said Gary Girard, MCC vice president for Community and Workforce Education.

A major benefit of the noncredit program is that it will provide a resource to the greater Omaha community for mobile device repair at cost. The general public can bring their malfunctioning devices, like smartphones, tablets and laptops, to Reboot Central, the technology support service desk at MCC Digital Express. Reboot Central will be staffed by MCC students who have completed the Boot Camp and earned WISE Level 1 and 2 certifications. Repairs will be supervised by WISE-authorized training administrators with iFixOmaha.

"The commitment of our partners makes it possible for our students to benefit from valuable training that can help them enter a technology career with exceptional growth potential, while offering our community access to low-cost device repair," Girard said.

In addition to hands-on training fixing broken devices, participants will also gain customer service skills, which are important when meeting with clients who may be stressed when they bring their devices in for repair.

"The internship piece is what makes the program truly unique, providing immediately employable workers to the regional workforce," Girard said.

"By the completion of the program, students will demonstrate the technical skills and the soft skills needed to work in a professional mobile device repair shop."

SETTING THE STANDARD

The WISE certification program was established in 2019 by CTIA after years of coordinated efforts by more than 50 organizations across the spectrum of the wireless industry to establish a standard for employee training and best practices for mobile device repair.

WISE certification ensures that consumers have a predictable, high-quality repair experience. It also provides access to careers in a \$4 billion industry for people who complete the program. Level 1 certification is knowledge-based, and an online test covers topics such as an introduction to the smartphone and the evolution of the mobile repair industry; safety and best practices; common repair terms/conditions; tools and equipment; device features and characteristics; anatomy of a mobile device; the device intake and inspection process; and common mobile defects and repair methods.

Level 2 certification moves on to practical skills, which includes hands-on learning with real devices and repairing real-world problems like broken screens, buttons and charge ports. The Level 2 exam is in-person and requires the candidate to successfully diagnose the problem, fix it and put the device back together again in one working piece.

Before an industry standard was established for mobile device repair, consumers didn't have access to a reputable service.

"The phone manufacturers didn't want local yokels like me opening up these beautiful devices and possibly damaging them," DeWater said. "There were no support mechanisms for someone who wanted to fix a phone, and in the beginning, sourcing parts and tools to make the repairs involved going through strange channels."

DeWater said an online community of phone mechanics emerged with the creation of fix-it websites filled with user-generated content for sharing tools and information for making repairs.

"We were basically creating guides for one another, usually destroying our own phones in the process," DeWater said.

As self-trained technicians began to open physical storefronts, DeWater said it created the need for industry standards for device repair. Repair shops needed to build relationships in the industry to

give their businesses credibility. About six years ago, that led to the first conversations around certification, bringing competitors from within the wireless industry together to develop a shared service model.

“Independent shop owners like myself wanted to gain the trust of manufacturers and carriers — that we were legitimate businesses that could be trusted to do a good job for their brand and their customers,” DeWater said. “The beautiful thing about WISE certification is it took the greatest hits from all these companies’ practices and made one document as the basis for running your

repair operation, training your people and doing it properly.”

Michelle James, CTIA vice president, Strategic Industry Programs, said there was good synergy for bringing the WISE certification into an educational setting.

“The wireless industry is committed to training and expanding access to in-demand careers in wireless technology,” James said. “We’re proud to be partnering with MCC and CTIA member, iFixOmaha, to introduce this first-of-its-kind academic training for the repair industry.”

“THE COMMITMENT OF OUR PARTNERS MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR OUR STUDENTS TO BENEFIT FROM VALUABLE TRAINING THAT CAN HELP THEM ENTER A TECHNOLOGY CAREER WITH EXCEPTIONAL GROWTH POTENTIAL, WHILE OFFERING OUR COMMUNITY ACCESS TO LOW-COST DEVICE REPAIR.”



PATH TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

DeWater was fascinated with the iPhone, first released in 2007, referring to the device as “alien technology.” On a visit to Louisiana to see his in-laws in 2010, he and his brother-in-law, Matt Arceneaux, who was also an iPhone fanatic, snuck away to a store to buy their first ones, the iPhone4. Years later, when Matt was in the hospital battling cancer, he dropped his phone from his bed and the earpiece speaker broke.

On the way to a return visit over Christmas, on a whim, DeWater stopped at a phone repair shop in Dallas to see if he could buy a replacement earpiece speaker. After purchasing one, he started taking his phone apart on the counter.

“The workers were looking at me nervously like, ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ I told them I didn’t know what I was doing but was trying to learn so I didn’t break Matt’s phone when I tried to fix it,” DeWater said. “In the end, I was able to fix his earpiece, and he was able to use his phone again.”

It was an obsession they shared until Arceneaux passed in March 2012.

After successfully fixing Arceneaux’s phone, DeWater knew he had discovered a skill with income potential, but he didn’t know how he was going to be able to fit it into his life. He also knew child care and health insurance costs were greater than his income as a musician and understood there was a need for a service he could provide.

In 2011, he turned his basement into a phone repair lab.

“I put an ad out on Craigslist and said I’ll fix your phone. I couldn’t believe it, and I’m not even kidding, it was overnight that people were coming to my house seven days a week. No one else was fixing phones at that time. A lot of people didn’t even know you could fix them,” DeWater said. “Originally, I worked on the software side of the phones, but then I started seeing everyone just needed to fix their broken devices, and that’s where I started to focus. I saw this was something I could train people to do.”

Word of mouth about his service spread quickly. Customers grew from individuals to school districts, law enforcement and businesses. He started meeting people interested in learning his skill set. After fixing the phone of a 15-year-old boy who lived in his neighborhood, he recruited

him to help, teaching him how to repair screens, dock ports and batteries for \$15 per device.

Within months, four to six technicians worked from his home on any given day. It was time to move out of the basement.

DeWater opened his first iFixOmaha store in 2012. A little over a decade and three additional locations later (his fourth store opened in Orchard West in March), his startup has been recognized each of the past six years with awards for best smartphone repair in Omaha.

One of the only things that has limited the company since opening its doors is the availability of a skilled workforce to support its growth.

“Throughout the years, we’ve attempted to scale out of Omaha, and the one thing that always stifles our growth is staffing – having properly skilled technicians,” DeWater said. “Certification is tremendously valuable for this career because it ensures the job candidate has done the prerequisite work to be employed at any of the leading companies in this industry. That means higher starting pay because they’ll come in with state-of-the-art knowledge for fixing today’s smartphones.”

DeWater said completing the MCC Mobile Device Repair Academy will also be the new standard for working at iFixOmaha.

“This program has the potential to turn people into entrepreneurs overnight,” DeWater said. “We’re going to contract students coming out of this program to work for iFixOmaha, but they can also open their own business.”

LOCAL TRAINING FOR REGIONAL GROWTH

DeWater said starting pay for WISE-certified technicians at iFixOmaha is \$18/hour. As a retention tool, technicians often work their way into earning contracts for salaried positions once they establish themselves with an independent shop. Some follow DeWater’s path and open their own businesses.

“The industry and opportunities are growing, especially for independent brands,” DeWater said. “I feel like this certification program is as much of an entrepreneurship course as it is a tech training course.”

“THESE DEVICES DESERVE TO BE IN AS MANY HANDS AS POSSIBLE BECAUSE THEY UNLOCK THE FUTURE FOR OUR CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY. THEY ARE THE GREAT EQUALIZER.”

When DeWater shared his vision for the next chapter of iFixOmaha with MCC project partners, he talked about providing a low-cost repair service on the Fort Omaha Campus. At Reboot Central, there is no charge for labor to make repairs or markup on parts. DeWater said one of the most common phone performance issues is also one of the simplest fixes. When a device slows down and starts to lag, usually after around two years, replacing the battery can extend the life of the phone for two more years.

“At Reboot Central, we’re going to do battery replacement drives at cost, and 15 minutes later, it will be like a brand-new phone again. I think that’s going to be a very positive impact on the community. We’re going to find a use for devices that people have ruled out,” DeWater said.

Making technology more accessible to all is something he believes in.

“These devices deserve to be in as many hands as possible because they unlock the future for our children and the elderly. They are the great equalizer,” DeWater said.

With the launch of this program, DeWater said growing outside of Omaha is a reachable goal. Under the brand name, Bigfoot Repair, he is concentrating on expanding the company to smaller markets that lack repair providers, geographically located between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River. Its first location is scheduled to open in the second quarter of this year.

“At [a wireless carrier] store out in West Point (Nebraska), they told me they have people coming in every day with broken phones, and they have no solution for them,” DeWater said. “We are going to look for the West Points of the Midwest, build out our stores and hire people from this program to staff them.”

DeWater said his ultimate goal for iFixOmaha is for it to be a legacy brand in the community.

“We’re going to contract as many people as we can to do work for iFixOmaha, but they are also empowered to compete directly with us, and we’re going to engage with that and say, ‘You can start your own business,’” DeWater said. “If I can help students do that, then I’ve done my job here. I want to move iFixOmaha to be known as the company that trains people exclusively at MCC and is building the future technicians of this industry. That’s where my passion is.”



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE MCC MOBILE DEVICE REPAIR ACADEMY OR TO REGISTER, VISIT MCCNEB.EDU/MOBILEREPAIR.

MCC CAREER FORWARD: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO SELF-INVEST, LAUNCH LIVING-WAGE CAREERS

The workforce development initiative helps local employers grow, train and retain talent through continuing education and work-based learning.

Elizabeth Martinez repeatedly sees the “aha! moment” light up the eyes of program participants, when feelings of self-doubt are overridden by the recognition of possibility. It’s a feeling some haven’t experienced in a long time.

Martinez is a career skills coach for students with an interest in getting their commercial driver’s license, an industry with soaring pay due to high demand for drivers. She works with participants in Metropolitan Community College’s Career Forward program, which guides students from education to employment in living-wage careers.

What makes MCC Career Forward different from typical workforce development programs is it connects students to employment opportunities and provides training stipends that give participants the flexibility in their lives to focus on learning and their futures.

Martinez said she recently helped a man who hadn’t participated in the workforce in 20 years build a working résumé.

“There are things he’s done during that time that he could put into that résumé. He thought he had nothing, and we were able to create a great résumé for him,” Martinez said. “We help [Career Forward participants] value what they have done and value themselves.”

Through the 2025-26 academic year, MCC is directing \$9 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to support this workforce development program, which can be a game changer for people who have the ability and desire to upskill, but have life circumstances that don’t always make pursuing opportunities to do so accessible. Offered through MCC Community and Workforce Education, the program aims to extend MCC noncredit and credit programming to 4,500 unemployed/underemployed individuals impacted by COVID-19 in the College’s four-county service area.

With 85% of program completers obtaining jobs paying more than \$19 per hour, the program gives participants the window they need to pursue education and job training, as well as the support services to complete it.

“What really excites me about this program is that it’s using education as a tool and resource to bridge people out of poverty and into sustainable wages,” said Tammy Green, MCC executive director of Community and Workforce Education.

The quick pace of change for the skills needed in today’s employment landscape can impact people whose past education and training makes them vulnerable to the swings of the economy. Career Forward highlights the important role community colleges play in developing the workforce for jobs that are in local demand now and in the future. Employers across the country are challenged by a two-fold shortage: the number of available workers to fill open positions and a skills gap in the workforce.



The national unemployment rate in January 2023 was 3.4%, the lowest since 1969, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many in the small pool of available labor lack the training and resources to pursue in-demand careers. In Nebraska, employers face an even greater challenge because the state unemployment rate (2.6%) is nearly a full percentage point lower than the national average.

Career Forward is a unique approach to maximizing the skills of the regional workforce because it makes education more accessible to individuals and is able to respond to the needs of local employers. MCC faculty and staff get to know students, learn about their employment goals and guide candidates to successful completion. Participants receive workforce support resources and career placement services along the way.

Career Forward provides \$16/hour stipends for students enrolled in the program with focused job training in "H3" careers (high-wage, -demand, -skill), developing the skills and earning certifications needed for entry, often in one year or less. Industries include transportation/CDL, pharmacy tech, construction, automotive, phlebotomy, industrial maintenance, medical services and more. Starting wages within all industries outlined in the program start at \$17 per hour or more.

Dominic Arthur, 37, works as a lube technician for Baxter Toyota Lincoln. At the time of publication, he was just days away from completing his Toyota T-TEN certification. The national certification provides specialized training for careers working at Toyota and Lexus dealerships.

As a lube technician, Arthur holds an entry-level automotive position, but with the completion of his T-TEN certification, he gains the ability to do more sophisticated, technology-driven diagnostics and repairs, which bring better earning opportunities. When he first enrolled in the program, he said he was struggling financially.

"This was an opportunity to improve myself, and it helped me a lot," said Arthur, who immigrated to the U.S. from Ghana in 2009. "I only did oil changes before, but this will help me grow by doing bigger jobs. It's a great program for someone my age."

Career Forward provides Arthur with mileage reimbursement for driving from Lincoln to Omaha to receive the training. He said the financial support made a significant difference in his ability to complete the program. Finishing was never a matter of effort.

Since working on the training since November 2021, Arthur only missed one class. He wakes up at 5 a.m. every morning to make sure he has enough time for the commute to the South Omaha Campus, arriving by 7:30 a.m. (a half-hour early) Monday through Thursday. After doing his training, he drives back home and dives into his homework, often not going to bed until midnight.

Arthur, the father of a 4-year-old boy, Jeremy, and a 2-year-old girl, Nana Abenaa, said he's proud of what he's been able to accomplish. He said he's looking forward to spending less time on the road, having evenings free to spend with his family, earning greater pay and having a broader skill set for future employment opportunities. "I have to



drive [to Omaha] every day. I have a family, and I have to do my homework. It takes a lot, but I know what I want, and I'm glad I did this," Arthur said.

Lyndsie Gibbs, MCC director of Workforce Career Placement, said the program creates conditions for household earners, who often have to work multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet, to focus on their long-term employment goals.

"When you're doing the best you can just to take care of your basic needs, things like education and planning can take a back seat," Gibbs said. "Those pressing financial responsibilities make it tough to stop working at a job to gain the skills to pursue a better one. The stipend makes it possible to help overcome the loss of income while going through the training program."

The 'special sauce' is no secret.

Green said while the financial incentive to take on the training makes the program appealing to participants, it's the embedded support students receive that really makes the program successful. Green calls this the College's "special sauce" and credits MCC staff who work with Career Forward students during the intake process with finding the right training program recipe.

Historically, about 60% of program participants come into the program needing to brush up on reading, math, writing or the English language.

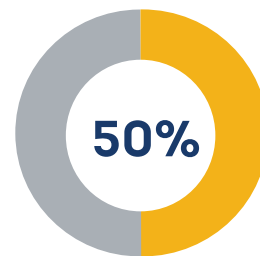
To increase student success, in targeted classes, course content is delivered by two instructors in each classroom — one instructor teaches technical, academic subjects, while the other works with students to enhance basic skills. The result is a workforce development program that outperforms national averages, Green said.

Typical accelerated job training programs experience around a 50% retention rate, Green said. Career Forward participants have an 87% employment rate after completion of the program, with 94% maintaining their employment six months after securing a job.

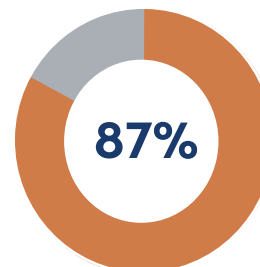
Green said from her experience, the biggest culprit to employee retention is a misalignment between a person's skill set and the job they are tasked to perform.

"When skills don't match the role, that is when you see employees start showing up late for work, becoming disengaged and difficult to work with, but when they match, all of a sudden you have great retention. Our career coaches have mastered that alignment," Green said.

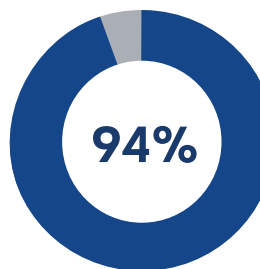
MCC career coaches work with students to connect their learning to real jobs from ready-to-hire partnering businesses. They work with businesses to understand their industry and specific employment needs. Through their exploratory discussions with incoming students during the career placement process, participants determine the job training program that matches their interests.



Average retention rate for other job training programs



Participants employed after they complete the Career Forward program



Participants that maintain their employment after securing a job

"During my one-on-one conversations with students, I tell them about the application process for the CDL industry, but I'm also trying to help them determine if it is the right fit for them. It's a great time to be in the CDL industry. The pay is great, but there's a lot more to it than that," Martinez said. "Your life is on the line, and so are the lives of others, so it's a great responsibility. You can do it for the money, but because we want this to be a lifetime career, we want to make sure it is the right fit rather than just enrolling them into the program."

Once the career training program is determined, program participants develop an individualized employment plan with their career coach and receive work-based learning opportunities, job placement services and guidance from MCC staff in navigating challenges along their journey to employment.

Gibbs said Career Forward also helps participants work through job situations and how to handle them best. A lot of it simply comes down to communication. For example, Gibbs said good employees sometimes quit jobs without communicating with their employers after an unexpected life event happens, assuming flexibility is not available to work around the challenge.

A key to the success of Career Forward is the continued support people who complete the program receive, Gibbs said. MCC career coaches check in once a month for six months after completion to stay connected, discuss goals and talk through challenges.

"When they complete the program, we are great about celebrating success," Gibbs said. "It is so amazing to hear and see when we have made an impact."

Through the 2025-26 academic year, MCC is directing \$9 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to support the Career Forward program.

"Sponsorships help employers train and hire educated, quality employees that they are having a hard time finding, especially in the current economy," Green said. "We partner with businesses, work to understand the skills they need from their employees and provide the training necessary to bring in new employees, or to upskill their incumbent workforce."

Green said the program is an asset to the community because of its ability to create economic impact while transforming lives in the process.

"We cannot have innovation and grow as a society without people being skilled and educated," Green said. "In all my years in K-12, postsecondary education and human services, there has never been an opportunity like this to move people from low-wage jobs into sustainable careers."

Martinez said witnessing the change in the individuals she serves from the day they come into the program to the day she makes her last check-in call is the best part of her job.

"When people come into this program, they are living paycheck to paycheck, just barely making it, and they move into jobs where they make anywhere from \$17 to \$28 an hour," Martinez said. "Their life has drastically changed, and it's so gratifying to see that happen."

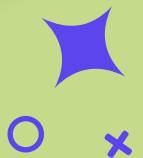
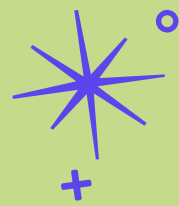
Innovating the workforce, transforming lives

In addition to the difference Career Forward can make in the lives of families, Green said the program also provides solutions for the business community through customized sponsorship programs with more than 300 participating area companies. As one of the College's "earn and learn" models, sponsorships allow employers to hire students early in their educational journeys and pay for their ongoing training at MCC. The program offers matching dollars so small employers can hire workers with this model like larger employers have been able to do.

For more information on Career Forward, call 531-MCC-7000 or email careerforward@mccneb.edu.

Spreading the love

After major health event, this MCC staffer finds new purpose, right mix for self-care products





Diedra Williams endured three surgeries in seven months, a brush with death and a battle with self in between. The traumatic experience left behind an uncomfortable wound. In the months that followed, Williams created a product that focuses on healing, a product that would eventually become a business.

This is the story of how Williams, an education specialist at MCC North Express, developed her own line of body butter products — thick, vividly colorful, aromatic, deep moisturizing lotions — that now grace the shelves at Hy-Vee. More than that, it is a story of resilience and perseverance, traits Williams models for the College's adult education students.

Like the products she makes for her growing customer base, Williams is focused on taking care of herself. The limited liability company she created, The Agape Experience, is a reminder to do just that. "Agape" is a Greek word for unconditional love — something Williams said

she needs to be intentional to direct toward herself while enjoying her second lease on life.

Since dropping out of high school, she has always held two jobs. When she went back to school at MCC when she was 30, she continued to work multiple jobs while taking classes at night — she still does today. Self-care was never really a priority.

Her always-on-the-go approach caught up with her following a hysterectomy procedure she underwent in November 2019.

"I was a workaholic, and I didn't take the six weeks off my doctor told me to after the hysterectomy. I only took three," Williams said.

On Jan. 5, 2020, a chain reaction of events inside her body woke her from her sleep at 2:30 a.m. She was unable to take a full breath and laid there struggling to breathe, waiting and praying for the moment to pass. It only got worse.

"I heard a voice say, 'If you don't get up from here right now, you are going to die.' I still tried to lie back down, but it didn't improve, so I got up and went to the hospital. They started doing a bunch of tests and found that my white blood cell count was super low," Williams said.

Upon hearing about the abnormality, Williams' focus remained on work. She asked the doctor if he could prescribe something so she would be able to go back to work the next day. His response brought with it the gravity of the situation.

"We're going to need to open you up, and you're going to need to call your next of kin," the doctor said.

Williams, 46, said when her doctor told her they would need to do exploratory surgery, it stirred a feeling inside she hasn't experienced often in a life that has been on a steady trajectory of achievement. Williams came to MCC as a student in 2007, a work-study in the adult education department in 2008 and became an employee in the same department the following year.

"I got scared, and I don't get scared easily," Williams said.

She called her mom sobbing to come to the hospital. By the time she got there, Williams was undergoing an eight-hour surgery. Waking up filled with pain, she realized her mom was at her bedside.

"I didn't know what was going on. My mom told me, 'D, you've been on life support for a week,'" Williams recounted.

Williams had a ruptured appendix when she came into the hospital. She had been trying to power through the pain she had been experiencing, continuing to go to work. Going untreated for days, she went into septic shock, a life-threatening condition.

"The doctor told me I didn't have any healing properties left in my body when I came into the hospital that night," Williams said. "He said if I had not come to the hospital, he would have given me 48 hours at the most before I would have been dead."

The weeks that followed were excruciating. She was hospitalized for the next month, often feeling disoriented "in a constant state of pain, mentally and physically," Williams said.

Before coming home, she had to learn how to walk again, but that wasn't the hardest part.

"I was such a strong-willed person. All the pain and everything, I could have dealt with that, but now I was completely dependent," she said.

Things didn't go well when she got home. Complications from surgery continued, and the pain was debilitating. She was losing weight quickly. Home health aides came three times a week to treat her wounds, trying to encourage her to put on enough weight to gain the strength



Williams said realizing her goals wouldn't have ever happened without her first step back to school at MCC. She said the turning point in her education came from working with her advisor.



Instead of giving up, Williams registered for a third time and worked with her instructor, Mary Piernicky, to get a tutor. She visited the math center on a nearly nightly basis on the Fort Omaha Campus. She got the help she needed to pass.

"I'll never forget, [Mrs. Piernicky] shook something in me when she told the class that some of us would not get our degrees because we couldn't pass math. She said she would go above and beyond to help us get there, and she did, but she wasn't going to give us anything. We had to earn it," Williams said.

"When I passed her class, I was crying. She told me, 'You deserve to cry. I'm proud of you.'"

It took four years to earn her associate from MCC, but she finished it in 2011. She earned her bachelor's in criminal investigation in 2014 and her master's degree in organizational leadership and executive coaching in 2018, both from Bellevue University.

Williams became a College for Kids instructor at MCC in October 2018, created and taught a Life Coaching class with Community and Workforce Education in 2019 and continues to work as an education specialist for the department.

Williams said realizing her goals wouldn't have ever happened without her first step back to school at MCC. She said the turning point in her education came from working with her advisor.

"For the first time in my life, I was getting As because I understood what my learning style was," Williams said. "I couldn't have gone on to get a four-year degree without MCC because I was behind from being out of school for so long. Everyone at MCC was so hands-on and patient with me. They guided me, gave me accountability, and my instructors and advisors gave me the belief that I could do this. When I went on to the four-year university, I missed Metro because it was like a family."

Staying on course

It's been a long journey back to good health for Williams, and it's not over, but it's been an enjoyable ride. The lessons learned along the way have been too hard to let go of now.

What started with pain became a new purpose. Williams said after undergoing her last surgery, her skin was in "terrible" condition.

"I couldn't put on any lotions or lubricants, or anything, so it was almost six or seven months of no lotion, and that's a big deal for a woman. We like to feel soft," she said. "I had hyperpigmentation, and regular lotion wasn't working."

She started looking up natural remedies and came across essential oils.

"I started experimenting with essential oils. Peppermint helps with pain, and my stomach was sore and tender. Lavender helps to calm your body. I learned shea butter helps with hyperpigmentation and scars. I learned about aromatherapy and started using citrus. I started making different mixes of this stuff. My skin



started looking better, and I started feeling better," Williams said.

She created a mix for her daughter, who has eczema. Some of her mom's friends from church put in a few orders. The circle continued to widen.

"It grew into The Agape Experience, which started from my pain," Williams said.

Williams draws from the resiliency reserves she cultivated on the road from associate to master's degree when she needs to. She relies heavily on the belief in her abilities that she built at MCC every day in her entrepreneurial life, especially when she was trying to take her product from an online marketplace into a retail storefront.

"I reached out to Hy-Vee for over a year. I finally went to another store, gave my presentation, and the woman said, 'We would love to have your products in our store,'" Williams said.

Her products debuted at Hy-Vee in October 2022, and if they sold well enough, they would earn a place on the shelves in two months. They performed well through the Christmas holiday and are now stocked in the cosmetics section at the Peony Park location.

In February, Williams was processing her third order for Hy-Vee. In-store demand for the products required taking down her online

site. She is in the process of developing a new website (myagapeexperience.org) and expanding her brand.

Williams knows in order to evolve her business, she has to take care of herself first.

"I really believe in self-care and self-love, and that is what my products are all about," Williams said. "We have to make sure we give it to ourselves so we can be there for our families and children like we need to be."



"I really believe in self-care and self-love, and that is what my products are all about," Williams said. "We have to make sure we give it to ourselves so we can be there for our families and children like we need to be."



"During my senior year of high school, I was unsure about attending college at all. I met with my guidance counselor, and she encouraged me to apply to Metropolitan Community College. She highlighted the variety of courses offered, the flexible scheduling and the many scholarship opportunities. After going through all the benefits and perks, it sounded like exactly what I needed, so I went for it and have no regrets.

The great diversity in programs and classes offered, reasonable tuition and attentive staff make MCC a fantastic college option. It's a place where people from all walks of life can get a quality education on their terms.

By attending MCC, I've been able to develop my knowledge and skills on a topic I'm passionate about, as well as make meaningful connections with various staff and others through networking opportunities. I've been able to apply some of what I learned to my current job and feel equally prepared for my future endeavors."

— **Lauren Gucwa**
Associate in Applied Science,
Information Technology, 2022



"When considering my options for college, I was attracted to Metropolitan Community College because of its academic reputation, as well as people I know and respect that have attended MCC before me. MCC has lived up to its reputation even more than I expected. I have found opportunities for personal growth and development, not only academically, but also beyond the classroom.

Most professors I've learned from have given us real-world experience outside of academia. Because of their teaching styles, I felt more prepared to step into the real world. The professors for all of the classes in my major were helpful, understanding, knowledgeable and, most importantly, they were always prompt to help us with any questions we may have had, despite the majority of our classes being online or hybrid."

— **Oksana Struemke**
Associate in Applied Science,
Legal Studies – Paralegal, 2022



FACES of MCC



Dual Enrollment: A free trial for careers

SARPY COUNTY STUDENTS GET A GLIMPSE OF COLLEGE TUITION FREE.



From the moment he received his first paycheck from Papillon Foreign Motors, Noah Svendson knew he'd stay in the automotive technology industry.

"I got a pretty big paycheck, and I thought, 'Yeah, this is going to work,'" Svendson said.

He knew there was potential in this line of work, but he'd need to finish high school first. However, like other students at his school, Svendson wanted to fast-track his postsecondary education to get a head start in his career.

Svendson is one of several Papillion-La Vista South High School students who took advantage of Metropolitan Community College's dual enrollment program, while participating in one of the College's career academies. MCC is currently offering tuition free college courses to Nebraska high school students through the 2024-25 academic year. By pairing that benefit with a yearlong MCC Career Academy, students can explore a career field while earning up to 37 college credit hours – at no cost to them or their families.

This program gives high schoolers a taste of what college is like in small doses without the tuition cost commitment. Since the start of the 2022-23 academic year, more than 6,400 Nebraska high school students have taken advantage of earning college credits while in high school through the College's dual enrollment programs.

Like Svendson, John Shafer was interested in making a living in a career where he could work with his hands.

"I hate the idea of an office job. I hate the idea of having to go to school for four more years. Being able to get out of the school environment as quickly as possible was my kind of goal, but I still want to be able to be successful and make a good amount of money," Shafer said.

Influenced by the time he and his father updated their basement's electrical system, Shafer signed up for the electrical program at MCC.

Since the start of the 2022-23 academic year, more than

6,400

Nebraska high school students have taken advantage of earning college credits while in high school through MCC dual enrollment programs.

"I really want to be able to start my own business someday. I'm going to get good at this trade and just take in what I learn when I start my apprenticeship. I don't think the grind will ever stop. But I think that's a good thing," Shafer said.

Students interested in four-year universities can also benefit from dual enrollment programs. Participants can complete their general education-required classes such as English, math and science, as well as introductory classes in their career of interest. Upon completion, students can walk away with a certification or transferrable credits to universities. Some even graduate high school having earned an associate degree.

Shanga Kadir, a dual enrollment student in the business program, said the courses helped her stay on track with her goals after relocating to Nebraska her senior year. Before moving to Papillion, Kadir was enrolled in a similar program at her high school in Georgia.

She said the biggest difference between the two was the class sizes.

"My old dual enrollment classes had like 30 to 40 people in it minimum, but [at MCC] my class only has 10 or 12 kids," Kadir said.

Kadir encourages other students to take advantage of this opportunity and get a glimpse of the careers they're curious about. The dual enrollment program has helped students like her explore their interests and narrow down their fields of study. She said this will ultimately save her thousands of dollars and reduce the time she'd spend at a university.

While the thought of taking college courses during high school may be intimidating to some, MCC offers a network of support, from success navigators to instructors, available to help students succeed. For Kadir, her English composition professor, Amy Rector, was instrumental in her positive experience at MCC.

She says her patience and accessibility guided her through the quarter.

"[Rector] is hands down the best professor I've ever had in my life. She never disregards anybody's feelings. She's almost like a second mom in a way. She's an amazing lady," Kadir said.

The support from the mentors in the program goes a long way for students like Piper Holland, who said her high school experience has been shaped by the pandemic, which has been challenging.

For her, being able to come to MCC for dual enrollment courses gives her a much-needed break from the daily high school routine.

"At the beginning of my sophomore year, I was struggling with actually going to school and wanting to do my work. I feel like when I started my junior year, and I was able to go to MCC, it definitely made it a lot easier for me to want to go to school," Holland said.

Holland is planning to study criminal psychology and is interested in pursuing a career in public safety. She plans to transfer her credits from MCC to a four-year college like Wartburg, Wayne State or the University of Nebraska.

Holland understands why some of her peers would shy away from this program, but she hopes her experience can encourage other students to give dual enrollment classes a chance.

"I think a lot of students think that it's going to be a lot harder than it actually is. But I just think you don't realize how different it really is until you're in it," Holland said.

While every student in dual enrollment has different objectives, timelines and circumstances, Svendson, Shafer, Kadir and Holland all agree they feel good about their plans after high school with the head start they now have before graduating.



To learn more about MCC dual enrollment programs or for enrollment questions, contact secondarypartnerships@mccneb.edu or call 531-MCC-2213.

Lights, camera, action!



MCC Elkhorn Valley Campus is an access point for affordable filmmaking, connection to movie-minded peers.

Nebraska may not be the “Hollywood of the Heartland,” but what some local creatives and digital natives are finding is the local film community can be more at Metropolitan Community College.

It takes a lot of creativity, ingenuity and goodwill to produce a movie without a big studio or blockbuster budget, but access to the high-dollar equipment and software needed to shoot and edit a quality production is available at MCC for a fraction of the price of purchasing devices or attending film school.

Audrey McCann, an independent performer whose career began in Chicago doing stand-up comedy, was impressed with the quality of the studio and equipment on the Elkhorn Valley Campus when she took the Moving Images Lab class there last summer.

“It’s pretty much better than anything you’re going to find at really high-caliber four-year universities, or even some art schools,” McCann said, referencing the studio available to MCC video/audio communications arts students. “You’re not typically going to have studio space that is so readily available, but because [MCC] is small enough, you can email the night before, and you can have the studio the next day. There’s no barrier to entry.”

After graduating from Omaha Westside in 2017, McCann attended Loyola University Chicago, studying political science and creative writing. A highlight of her time in Chicago was earning stage time at the Laugh Factory, which she credited to being around the industry.

“If you want to be a performer, be around performance,” McCann said. “I got that stage time because I was there.”



**“If you want to be a performer,
be around performance.”**

She came to MCC to strengthen her video editing skills, but like her time in Chicago, she also wanted to be around a network of people with similar interests. McCann said the greatest value of taking the class at MCC was the access she and other students had to director and MCC adjunct instructor, Maverick Knox, creator of Anarchy Film Studios, an independent film studio based in Lincoln.

From the Elkhorn Valley Campus, Knox helps students learn the processes and technical skills that help turn their ideas into finished projects — reels for résumés that are hard to come by in isolation and are necessary to get hired in the industry.

Knox connects students to a filmmaking community that organically supports one another through a barter system of production

services. Vast combinations of skills are needed to transform a concept in the mind into a product complete with screenwriting, directing, producing, lighting, sound, movie editing, special effects, makeup, costume and set design.

McCann said that when she signed up for the Moving Images Lab class, Knox gave her the technical assistance and the encouragement she needed to complete a project she had been having a hard time finishing.

McCann, who also performed in theater before becoming more interested in the medium of film during the pandemic, was working independently on an art house film project. Using Adobe Premiere Pro, a professional video editing software, McCann was having issues compressing video files as efficiently as the program is designed to complete the task.



"I really needed more skills, and now I know how to edit. Maverick taught me that in class," McCann said. "I can convert the files so much faster now just from him sitting down with me and talking me through it."

Knox encouraged her to submit her project to film festivals, and it won multiple awards. In addition to the confidence gained from completing her project and the recognition it received, the class also gave her some valuable skills that are needed in almost every office environment.

"Once you know your way around the Adobe Suite, those are such employable skills. Being proficient with Adobe [products] gets me through the door [with employers]," McCann said.

McCann isn't necessarily looking for a traditional career right now. Like many committed to the craft before they "make it" in the industry, she does temporary work and gigs to fund her creative pursuits and pay bills. One of her funding vehicles is selling portraits on Instagram that she makes using Adobe photo editing products. She sold hundreds of them to help pay for an independent film project she set out on after gaining the confidence in Knox's class to pursue it.

Dipping into savings to buy a 2008 Toyota Prius hybrid, she went on the road for six weeks to shoot a documentary, "All-American Camp Girl." Staying at campsites when the spare bedrooms and couches of relatives and friends were not available, she went across the country with one question.

"I asked people if they believed in miracles, and they do," McCann said.

From a food server facing eviction who received a \$400 tip for a cup of coffee to families who fulfilled dreams by immigrating to America, people across the country shared stories of their personal miracles. And McCann went on the adventure of her lifetime — a big payoff for a less than \$300 investment in taking a class at MCC.

"I think Maverick and some of the friends I made in the class really forced me to take myself a little more seriously. I was able to finish something that I started, and that really boosts your confidence," McCann said.

A production network of the usual suspects

When the editing process is finished on “F,” a feature-length horror film Knox directed, it will be the fulfillment of an idea 16-year-old Landon Fiscus, a junior at Benson High School, dreamed up when he was 9 and turned into a 63-page script. Several MCC students who took classes with Knox volunteered their skills for the movie, including McCann, as well as Brandon Fiscus, Landon’s father, who teaches a noncredit special effects class at MCC.

“F” is a slasher with nods to 1980s cult classics, “The Breakfast Club” and “Monster Squad,” the latter Landon’s favorite movie growing up. “F” is a bit bloodier, though. The Fiscus family knows how to create a good batch of synthetic blood the old-fashioned way — Karo syrup and food coloring. For a good scar, the family recipe is Vaseline and cornstarch.

“That’s still the recipe to this day to make good blood, but now I know a couple of other ways to tweak it for certain effects,” said Brandon Fiscus, creator of independent film company Crow Show Productions. “Does it need to spray, or does it need to run? That kind of thing — and how to make it clean itself up a lot easier.”

Knox developed a TV series called “Son of Ares” based on the lesser-known gods of mythology, which he hopes to sell to a production company this year. He also enjoys horror and post-apocalyptic films, but before meeting the Fiscus family, he could really only shoot scenes for those genres around Halloween, when supplies were available in stores.

For a dystopian short film created while completing his master’s degree in fine arts at the University of Central Arkansas, he wanted to extend it into a longer film after moving back to Nebraska. It involved characters being tracked by the government through embedded microchips. Knox needed someone who could create the effect of inserting and removing the chip from someone’s skin in a nonmedical setting.

Enter stage left Brandon Fiscus, whose reputation preceded him. He came highly recommended for this kind of need by a member of Knox’s crew. “Brandon was like, ‘Oh yeah, I totally know how to do that.’ It turned out we lived right by each other. I saw him again working on a project on someone else’s set, and he helped me on several more of my projects,” Knox said.

After developing a good working relationship together, Brandon Fiscus asked Knox if he’d be interested in directing his son’s film, “F.”

“I’d never been asked to direct someone else’s work before, which is really the end goal. I don’t want to just do my own stuff. I’d like to get paid to direct other people’s work,” Knox said. “I’m super grateful they gave me the opportunity to lead their production.”

It’s been a key learning experience. The movie is set in the local high school of a fictional town called Timberton. They originally hoped to shoot some of the scenes at Omaha Benson High School, but the pandemic eliminated access to the building. This is where problem-solving and a different kind of creative thinking come in during low-budget filmmaking.





“I didn’t have this growing up, a group of people saying, ‘Oh, you want to learn? Let’s go make a movie.’ I want that for him and his future. He’s got so much more time ahead of him, and he’s way ahead of me.”

A friend of Brandon’s had a connection who owned a property with an abandoned schoolhouse on it in Nehawka, Nebraska, a town about 40 minutes south of Omaha via U.S. Highway 75.

“We took a tour of the place, and we loved it, and [the owner] said we could film there,” Landon Fiscus said.

The schoolhouse was far from glamorous. It was summer, and there was no air conditioning, but the location would work for two key scenes in the film — a pep rally and a school dance. They hoped to have 100 extras to fill the bleachers and the floor of the gymnasium. A fraction of the volunteers they recruited showed up. More problem-solving was needed.

“All of us had to double-dip and do different roles. I was special effects coordinator, a cameraman and an actor,” Brandon Fiscus said. “We had to get creative to make it look like we had a full gym.”

Morale was down and there was doubt on the set on the prospects of being able to make the scenes work with a shortage of actors. Maximizing costumes and repeating some characters in the editing process, as well as tweaking where they were positioned during the takes, was the fix.

“I felt like it was necessary for morale that I had to get back home and edit that scene to show that we could still make it work,” Brandon Fiscus said. “When I pieced it all together, it looks like one full gym, and because of the costumes, you can’t tell that we replaced some of the characters. This kind of learning on the film was a big deal.”

In addition to the experience “F” is giving them, it’s also been a good way for Brandon and Landon to spend time.

“I didn’t have this growing up, a group of people saying, ‘Oh, you want to learn? Let’s go make a movie.’ I want that for him and his future. He’s got so much more time ahead of him, and he’s way ahead of me,” said Brandon Fiscus.

Brandon Fiscus will finish his bachelor’s in digital cinematography this spring, allowing more time to complete the editing work for “F,” the most time-consuming part of the production process. Landon Fiscus has a feeling it won’t be their last collaboration.

“We don’t have a typical father-son relationship. He’s still my dad, but we’re also work buddies,” Landon said. “I swear, like four or five times a week, he’ll call me out of my room and be like, ‘Yo, Landon! Guess what?’ And he doesn’t even have to say it. He’s got another movie idea.”

For more information on the MCC Video/Audio Communications Arts program, visit mccneb.edu/Art-Design-and-Communication. Information on future special effects courses can be found in the Community and Workforce Education Course Catalog available at mccneb.edu/CE.



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visit mccneb.edu/Golf.



FIRST STEP ON THE LADDER



Field Club Elementary kindergartners, on the road to college readiness, create a school chant and thank you notes for MCC.

Field Club Elementary School in Omaha makes no excuses about college readiness. They talk about it all the time by design, starting in kindergarten.

Each class of the K-5 school adopts an area college. Fridays are special days at Field Club – college days, where students dress in T-shirts from their adopted school, learn about its offerings and do a college chant. Seeds get planted early that college is where they will go after high school to learn how to be the teachers, doctors, police officers, artists and builders they want to be when they grow up.

Metropolitan Community College was fortunate enough to be selected by Melody Mehser's kindergarten class about 10 years ago when Field Club became a No Excuses University school, the first in Nebraska. No Excuses University is a member organization that works with a network of participating and approved schools in 14 states. The organization hosts workshops and

conferences for educators with a focus on college readiness for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

"A lot of times students who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds haven't heard that college language before, or it's not something they have as a long-term plan," Mehser said. "We are making that language available to them and have a goal and a dream to achieve, whether that be at a two-year college, a four-year university or through an apprenticeship. It's become a culture at our school over the years that [the students] are enriched in."

Mehser's class adopted MCC because, at the time, her brother was earning his culinary degree from the College and a member of the competition team, Culinary Team Nebraska. "He had nothing but good things to say about MCC," Mehser said.



After several years of wear, the 2022-23 school year called for some new threads for Mehser's class. She needed 25 new T-shirts. MCC restocked her supply and got a big surprise in return from an exuberant class: hand-crafted thank you cards, vibrantly colored with the lessons they are learning about the path to college depicted on the cards.

The young artists' drawings of ladders represent each rung to climb to higher education. Right now, they are on the first step in elementary school. For many, Norris Middle School will be the second, Omaha South High School the third and college the fourth rung (we hope MCC).

There's a good amount of growing room in those T-shirts for the kindergarteners, and Mehser knew how to integrate the oversizing into the college lessons.

"When they said, 'These are big on us,' I said, 'Yeah, that's right, they are big, but when you go to college, you're going to be that big.' You could see the twinkle in their eye because they love the idea of growing up," Mehser said. "They were talking about the shirts and how big they are going to be all day."

Another great outcome of this relationship with Field Club is MCC, which has never had a fight song, now has an unofficial one, compliments of Mehser's kindergarten class:

M-E-T-R-O;
Let's go, Met-ro!
M-E-T-R-O;
Let's go, Met-ro!
M-E-T-R-O;
Let's go, Met-ro!
Gooooooooo Met-ro!

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