

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

# FOUNDATION

MAGAZINE | 2025 EDITION I



## THE GREAT EQUALIZER

An NDSU equine  
program embodies  
care and community

*Page 12*

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When I became NDSU student body president in 2023, I felt like a small fish in the campus leadership pond. NDSU President Dave Cook was the first person to welcome me in, offer me a seat at the table, and instill in me a sense of belonging as a leader on campus. He and his wife, Dr. Kate Cook, saw me as more than just a student — they saw me as an important contributor to the University.

As a leader who worked closely with Dave and Kate, I found them to be remarkably transparent with their team. They consistently sought the perspectives and insights of others, fostering a sense of trust that encouraged honest dialogue.

They showed me that being a leader isn't just about making decisions. It's about building relationships and being there for your team.

With leadership comes challenges, and while I had my own, Dave has had his, too. As a new president in 2022, he faced a campus grappling with very difficult decisions. He navigated



those uncharted waters with integrity, all while remaining accessible to help me with student concerns.

Despite their demanding jobs, Dave and Kate have a strong presence building relationships on campus and across the state. They always prioritize people — a lesson I carry with me even now — and they serve everyone at NDSU with grace and humility.

This edition of the NDSU Foundation Magazine is dedicated to highlighting the profound impact that Dave and Kate have had on NDSU and just a few of their passion areas.

To convey the full scope of their impact would require more than this letter can provide, but I will leave you with this: Leadership, at its core, is about doing right by the people you serve.

Dave and Kate's unwavering dedication and belief in the potential of every member of the NDSU community has shaped countless lives, including my own.

**Kaylee Weigel**  
BS '23, MS '24 Microbiology

*President Cook and me at my graduation in spring 2024. Once a Bison, always a Bison!*

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**ABOUT THE COVER** | Photo by Dorm Studio Photography

Veteran Abbey Kuck is one of many who experience the healing power of equine-assisted services thanks to NDSU's Bison Strides program — a passion area of NDSU First Lady Dr. Kate Cook. Bison Strides provides equine-assisted services and horsemanship training to citizens across the state. It also offers hands-on learning opportunities to NDSU students and students in the broader North Dakota University System.

**Read more about Bison Strides' statewide impact on page 12.**



# In Good Hands

**Amid the challenges confronting higher education nationwide, NDSU President Dave Cook is leading with purpose, integrity, and vision.**

Story by Micaela Gerhardt  
Photos by Justin Eiler

**C**lose collaborators characterize NDSU President Dave Cook as a highly capable leader with a strong sense of humility. Like many born-and-raised Midwesterners (Dave is from Ames, Iowa), he’s not one to sing his own praises.

For example: Asked how his strengths have aligned with campus needs, Dave describes instead how University partners have supported him in areas like fundraising and athletics where he has less expertise.

Dr. Kate Cook, his wife and NDSU first lady, quickly points out that he hasn’t really answered the question.

“I answered the opposite,” he banters, noting the critical role philanthropy plays in higher education funding (the NDSU Foundation raised more than \$69 million for campus in 2024) and the continually evolving landscape of college athletics (nationwide NCAA rulings on student-athlete compensation and the transfer portal have made recruitment even more competitive).

“I have the great benefit of drawing on the support of our campus partners and the broader community,” Dave said. “Together, we have the strength to help us get to where we need to go.”

Dave’s leadership philosophy centers on collaboration and campus involvement. His nearly 25 years in faculty and administrative roles at the University of Kansas and Kate’s background in special education — plus their own college-aged children — fuel their passion for showing up to support NDSU students.

The Cooks regularly eat their meals with students in campus dining centers. They have volunteered on Move-In Day and at campus blood drives, attended concerts and theater productions, cheered on the Bison in sporting

events from volleyball to wrestling, and hosted Friendsgiving for those staying in residence halls over holiday break.

The launch party for NDSU’s art and literary journal, *Northern Eclecta*? Both present. Three Minute Thesis Competition? Kate served as a judge. The student-led *Power to Sell* podcast? Dave guest starred.



teams, the NDSU Leadership Assembly, and the Industry and Workforce Ad Hoc Committee, which is dedicated to fostering industry partnerships and meeting North Dakota’s workforce needs.

**“Hard choices have to be made, and leaders are here to make those hard choices.”**

**Dr. Lisa Montplaisir ’92, ’95**  
Faculty Senate President

**W**hen Dave arrived, NDSU faced a significant budget challenge that required quick and thoughtful action. With a downward trend in enrollment, NDSU had been losing operational revenue from both tuition and state funding.

After eight months assessing options and seeking consultation, Dave announced NDSU Transform, an initiative to build a stronger and more secure foundation for NDSU and the people it serves on campus, across the state, and beyond.

NDSU Transform merged NDSU’s seven academic colleges into five academic colleges in July 2023. It began phasing out 24 academic programs, which included reductions in personnel.

“We have to move forward for the best interest of NDSU,” Dr. Lisa Montplaisir ’92, ’95 said. “That doesn’t discredit the faculty or programs that were cut — I know there are colleagues who are hurting — but it’s a recognition that hard choices have to be made, and leaders are here to make those hard choices.”

Lisa, a professor in biological sciences, earned two bachelor’s degrees and a master’s degree from NDSU. She has served as a full-time faculty member and discipline-based

research educator at NDSU for 25 years; the faculty advisor to the State Board of Higher Education for the past three years; and NDSU faculty senate president since spring 2024.

Raised with the motto, “Do something or don’t complain about it,” Lisa pursued a role in faculty senate leadership to be part of the solution. As a senior faculty member, she wanted to gain a better understanding of the administration’s decisions and help advocate for her fellow faculty and staff.

Shortly after her appointment, Lisa participated in a shared governance summit that included the president and other University leadership. A moderator helped them debrief the previous academic year.

The conversations have been ongoing, and Lisa notes positive outcomes in the appointment of communications professor Carrie Anne Platt as vice provost for faculty affairs and more actionable calls for faculty and staff input.

“It’s hard for me to express how impressed I am with President Cook,” Lisa said. “There are certainly people who would think about the challenges in front of us — and there are many, and they’re big, and they take more than just the current administration and current population of NDSU to address — but with any great challenge comes ways in which people rise to the occasion to find solutions.”

Dave is not alone in this effort. Across campus, leaders stand in his corner, working together to advance his presidential priorities:

- Enhancing enrollment, retention, and student success
- Elevating NDSU’s status as a top-tier R1 research institution
- Investing in the well-being of the people who power NDSU’s mission
- Embracing NDSU’s critical role as a land-grant university to serve our state

NDSU President Dave Cook rolls up his sleeves to tie-dye with Career and Advising Center student employees and staff, August 2022.

**“We can overcome any challenge because we’re committed to working together.”**

**Seinquis Leinen**  
Senior Director of Strategic Enrollment Management



With support from administration, NDSU faculty and staff across departments are working to ensure the University is addressing year-to-year enrollment trends, providing an accessible and high-quality education to current and prospective students, and meeting North Dakota’s workforce needs by retaining graduates in-state.

Under Dave’s leadership, Seinquis Leinen became the senior director of strategic enrollment management in fall 2023. She has served in NDSU’s Office of Admission since 2014 and, in her new role, is increasing communication, consultation, and collaboration across campus.

“When I think of what it means to be a leader, it’s someone who is willing to engage lots of people to make informed decisions, but also take care of people,” Seinquis said. “That’s why I have such a deep appreciation for President Cook and why I enjoy working under his leadership.”

The ability for enrollment management and University leadership to work together and adapt to changes quickly was put to the test in spring 2023, when the Minnesota Office of Higher Education launched the North Star Promise. The North Star Promise provides free college tuition for Minnesota residents whose family adjusted gross income is below \$80,000 at all public Minnesota state colleges and universities and Tribal colleges.

This competitive tuition award package caused both enrollment and workforce concerns at NDSU, where Minnesota residents make up about half of all students enrolled, 40% of whom choose to live and work in North Dakota after graduation (2023 NDSU Career Outcomes Report).

In response, the NDSU Foundation Executive Governing Board approved the Tuition Award Program for NDSU students. The Tuition Award Program currently has enough funding to provide scholarship packages for eligible North Dakota and Minnesota students through the 2026 to 2027 academic year — and it’s a significant reason NDSU stabilized enrollment in fall 2024 for the first time in several years.

“As a campus led by President Cook, we’ve talked a lot about how to optimize our scholarship strategy,” Seinquis said, describing how unrestricted scholarships support the needs of a changing student demographic. “We cannot do what we do without the support of our alumni and friends who give back. I continue to be blown away and am incredibly grateful for their support.”

NDSU students are demonstrating an increasing need for scholarships. In fall 2024, the University’s largest enrollment growth occurred in Pell-eligible first-year students (19% increase) and

Pell-eligible transfer students (54% increase).

Seinquis says NDSU’s recent enrollment stabilization is the result of campuswide efforts to enrich support for students paired with philanthropic investments in scholarship dollars and NDSU’s learning environment — including new facilities like the Peltier Complex, Richard Offerdahl ’65 Engineering Complex, and Challey School of Music addition.

“Bison stick together. They can weather any storm,” Seinquis said. “Our community embodies what it means to be a Bison, and I think we can overcome any challenge because we’re committed to working together.”

With benefactors and the state legislature behind them, Dave and his fellow campus leaders are bravely facing headwinds and paving a way forward for the Herd. Through it all, students remain at the forefront of their work and decision-making.

**“People come here with a dream, and so how do we support them through that?”**

**Becky Bahe**  
Director of the Career and Advising Center



One of Becky Bahe’s earliest memories of Dave’s student-focused approach occurred just months into his role as president.

In August 2022, the Career and Advising Center’s student employees and staff were tie-dyeing T-shirts as part of their fall training day. They spontaneously invited Dave to join them, and when he texted Kate to see if she wanted to come too, she arrived at a moment’s notice. Becky later learned it was the day Kate had moved into the presidential

residence, and she had been in the middle of unloading the car.

“What I love is that they’re regular human beings — Dave was wearing a white button-down shirt and Kate had a baseball cap and her sweats on and they were all in,” Becky said. “And even [later] when they were going through incredibly hard things, they still were present. Their emphasis is this campus and continuing to make NDSU a great place.”

NDSU students invited Dave to guest star on the student-led Power to Sell podcast. He and NDSU First Lady Dr. Kate Cook are committed to showing up for NDSU students.



Becky joined NDSU in 2005 and was promoted to director of the Career and Advising Center in 2020. She was named the inaugural President Dean L. Bresciani Endowed Chair in Leadership in 2024 and currently serves as co-chair of the President’s Council on Retention.

When council members, including Becky, recommended adding professional advising services for students, Dave and NDSU provost Dr. David Bertolini approved the initiative, resulting in 15 new advising staff hired between March and July 2024 and a more centralized reporting structure.

The new advising staff support mostly first- and second-year students. This helps alleviate the advising load for NDSU faculty, whose responsibilities include teaching, research, and service to the University. Faculty advisors continue to guide third- and fourth-year students who are in more specialized degree programs.

“It’s a significant change, and it couldn’t have happened without incredible leadership,” Becky said of NDSU’s reinvestment in student retention. “There were moments

I thought we were stopped in our tracks, but it was truly the president and provost who said, ‘This is happening.’ We wouldn’t be where we are now without their support.”

Similar professional advising models have emerged across the U.S. as it has become more complex to navigate curriculum requirements, course scheduling, and university policies and procedures. Students now come to college with more college credits, making the path toward graduation less standardized than before.

Despite NDSU’s new approach, Becky says the heart of the University’s efforts in the Career and Advising Center remain the same.

“Our goal should always be about retaining students, because people come here with a dream, and so how do we support them through that?” Becky mused. “Students need support. They need information. They need to know people are there in the good times and the bad — but how we go about meeting those needs and developing those relationships changes over time.”

This metaphor applies University wide. The mission is the same, but the

approach is different. Through Dave's leadership, NDSU is adapting to better support the success of its students and graduates and to better meet the needs of an evolving North Dakota.

**"We believe so much in this institution."**

**Dr. Kate Cook**  
NDSU First Lady

In the conference room adjacent to his office in Old Main, Dave answers question after question with consideration and high regard for the entire NDSU community and state of North Dakota.

He lights up when asked to share how Lisa, Seinqis, and Becky have supported his vision and made an impact.

Lisa is passionate, an advocate, and willing to do hard work to find solutions. Seinqis is courageous, receptive, and very competitive. Becky is diligent, caring, and aware of student needs.

Asked about campus leaders, students, faculty, staff, alumni, and benefactors, Dave spills over with good things to say, but modestly redirects most questions about himself.

Kate deflects attention too. She has been undergoing breast cancer treatment since her diagnosis in September 2023, but is quick to note that the journey is not just about her. She says she and Dave have met many people who have been affected in some way by the disease, including at least one NDSU student battling cancer.

"We don't think we're special because of what we're doing," Dave says. "We just happen to be in the position."

"We believe so much in this institution," Kate adds. "Dave talks about, 'There are hard days,' but the hard work today will make this University better and stronger in the long run."

If his first three years at NDSU are an indicator of what's to come, it's that Dave is committed to tackling new and existing challenges through shared governance and intentionality. 🙌



Dave talks with NDSU students during the Homecoming Ice Cream Social and Pep Fest. His leadership philosophy centers on campus involvement.

# Where Prairie Meets Possibility

On the vast plains of North Dakota, the horizon stretches as far as the eye can see. An equally expansive effort is underway at NDSU: educating students equipped to meet the state's workforce needs.

Story by Kara Lidberg '17 | Illustration by Leah Ecklund



## North Dakota –

anchored by industries like agriculture, engineering, energy, health care, and technology — demands a dynamic workforce. As the state continues to grow, so does its need for skilled professionals, especially with a projected 23% population increase by 2050 (State Data Center).

NDSU has become a pivotal player in the state's workforce development effort. In 2022, NDSU President Dave Cook and the NDSU Foundation Executive Governing Board (EGB) established the Industry and Workforce Ad Hoc Committee to assist the president in catalyzing NDSU's

position as a land-grant institution committed to serving the citizens of North Dakota.

The committee, which was led by EGB Chair and former MDU Resources President/CEO Dave Goodin '83, consisted of 21 members representing various industry sectors and communities across North Dakota. The committee's focus was to provide Dave Cook with recommendations on ways NDSU can continue helping students develop the skills necessary to launch successful careers in the state after graduation.

"President Cook was intentionally seeking industry input in how to lead NDSU in meeting North Dakota's workforce needs," Dave Goodin said. "Instead of speculating, the University prioritized direct input from industry experts."

The committee provided recommendations for strategic

action across three domains: independent initiatives, peer partnerships, and collaborative efforts that require state legislative support.

### What can NDSU do independently?

Dave Cook has latitude to drive change at NDSU, and the committee recommended the expansion of mentorship programs across NDSU's five Colleges.

Mentorship programs at NDSU connect students with established business professionals in the area. This initiative would benefit students and also strengthen ties with industry partners.

"Employers clamor to get early connections with students who could be prospective employees," Dave Goodin said, emphasizing the broader impact that such programs have on state workforce success.

### What can NDSU do in partnership with peers?

As part of the North Dakota University System, NDSU is one of 11 institutions led by the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education (SBHE). Currently, under SBHE policy, NDSU can only offer dual-credit hours to high school students if the courses are unavailable through the state's school of science.

The committee has identified this as an opportunity for change, recommending that Dave Cook partner with the SBHE to update policies that would allow for more dual-credit opportunities at NDSU.

"We need to connect with students as early as possible," Dave Goodin said, "and allow for high school students interested in our programs to take applicable courses

with NDSU professors."

The committee believes this would help high school students build a strong bond with NDSU, encouraging future enrollment.

"You can't always predict behavior," Dave Goodin said, "but you can create early relationships."

### What can NDSU do with state legislative support?

Some initiatives require legislative support, such as the North Dakota Challenge Grant, which matches private philanthropic dollars with public funds.

Since the Challenge Grant's launch in 2013, there has been a variability in funding that is dependent on the legislative cycle. The committee's recommendation to Dave Cook and University leadership is to advocate for consistent funding at each legislative session.

"We have found that the Challenge Grant is extremely valuable in ensuring students receive scholarships and access to a quality education," Dave Goodin said. "This would also benefit the state with a skilled workforce."

Wyatt Warkenthien '24 and Hannah Lingen '17 are NDSU alumni who received support from the Challenge Grant as students. They both exemplify how scholarship support enhances educational experiences, creates job opportunities, and fuels the ongoing and vital cycle of workforce development in North Dakota.

### Meet Wyatt Warkenthien '24 Building a new North Dakota business

Wyatt showcases how strategic involvement in NDSU's extracurriculars paves the way for a successful start to a career — which, for him, means building his own company right here in North Dakota.

Wyatt is a co-founder of Frontier Bioforge, a genetic engineering service provider specializing in optimizing biological fertilizers for

agricultural use. He built the company with fellow NDSU alumni Riley Williamson '18, '24 and Cam Landis '24 and Richard and Linda Offerdahl Faculty Fellow Dr. Barney Geddes, an assistant professor of microbiological sciences at NDSU.

"Biological fertilizers use microbes in the soil to produce nitrogen," Wyatt said. "Then, taking nitrogen out of the air, you can harness the nutrients to boost yields while reducing fertilizer use."

Riley developed a screening platform to identify and engineer microbes for improved efficiency, enhancing their impact on soil health and crop productivity.

"Our focus is on ensuring high-quality biological fertilizers and helping companies optimize their products," Wyatt said. "By reducing fertilizer costs and increasing yields, we aim to boost farmer profits. Ultimately, we want to help feed the world."

The idea for Frontier Bioforge emerged from Wyatt's participation in NDSU's Possibility Fellowship, a one-year entrepreneurial program housed under NDSU's College of Business that provides students with networking and internship opportunities, hands-on learning, and mentorship.

"The Possibility Fellowship was incredibly helpful because it enabled students who had a technical idea to connect with other students who had more of the business acumen," Wyatt, who majored in biotechnology and microbiology, said.

Seeking additional practical experiences, Wyatt joined Pathway Ventures, a program through the NDSU Foundation that enables students to make data-driven investment decisions and manage a real portfolio funded by philanthropy.

"I knew I wanted to learn more about venture capital because eventually, I would be asking investors for funding," he said. "Now I have the experience of what an investor is looking for when I pitch to them."

Wyatt also pursued technical skills outside of his class schedule and was encouraged to seek out an iGEM team at NDSU. Luckily for him, one had just been established the year prior under the advisory of Barney.

The iGEM competition asks teams to go out in their communities, find a problem, and create a solution using synthetic biology. NDSU teams have explored natural dyes produced by bacteria and a parasite detector for honeybee hives.

Wyatt believes his college experience was shaped by the programs and teams he was involved with and the skills those opportunities taught him.

"I'm a firm believer in the power of experiential learning," Wyatt said. "I have the knowledge from my degree, but the practical application has given me the confidence to build my own company — hopefully, one North Dakota is proud of."

### Meet Hannah Lingen '17 Mentoring North Dakota's future workforce

Hannah demonstrates how connections with industry can lead to career opportunities.

In 2014, Hannah took an intro to industrial and manufacturing engineering class taught by an adjunct professor who worked at Marvin, a window and door manufacturing company. At the next NDSU career fair, she approached the Marvin booth and applied for an internship.

She interned for three years and was hired for a full-time role after graduation. This spring marks 10 years with Marvin, where she currently serves as a process project manager II.

In 2023, NDSU's College of Engineering launched its pilot mentorship program, Industry Connections. The College contacted Marvin, and Marvin shared this opportunity with Hannah, who jumped at the chance to give back to her alma mater.

Industry Connections puts the mentee in charge of what they want to receive from the mentorship.

"The mentees are encouraged to contact you," Hannah said. "I told mine, 'I'm here for you if you need me,' and I'm so happy he was so motivated to connect with me."

Hannah's mentee reached out

and said, "I want an internship," to which she responded, "Send me your resume."

Hannah gave feedback and encouraged him to attend NDSU's career fair. She helped him prep for interviews and, after receiving an offer from one employer and waiting to hear from another, she assisted him in navigating hiring conversations — how to talk about pay, how to ask for time to decide, and then, when the decision is made, how to politely decline the other offer.

"Those things can be difficult for people of all ages, and especially for someone 18 to 22," Hannah said. "It was rewarding to play a role in empowering my mentee to create those skills early in adulthood."

By participating in Industry Connections, Hannah is continuing the cycle of helping others build their own career toolkits. Through Hannah's connections and assistance, her mentee was able to obtain an internship at Marvin.

"I encouraged him to apply elsewhere as well because I didn't want to pressure him to apply somewhere only because I worked there," she said. "But I have had such a great experience with Marvin that I was excited he was interested in a position here."

Hannah's commitment to mentorship extends beyond NDSU — she has also volunteered with Fargo's local chapter of BIO Girls, an organization striving to increase the self-esteem of elementary-aged girls.

"I have received opportunities to learn and grow from others and want to be able to pass that on," she said. "Mentoring, both at NDSU and in the community, is a great way for me to do just that." 🌱

# THE GREAT

# GREAT

# Equalizes

Through NDSU's volunteer-led Bison Strides program, participants and their families are experiencing the healing benefits of equine-assisted services.

STORY BY EMILY ERICKSON '15 \* PHOTOS BY DORM STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY



Teddy Leeman, a Bison Strides adapted horsemanship session participant, rides award-winning Bison Strides quarter horse Cutter with assistance from program director Dr. Erika Berg.

things like crawling, walking, and talking has been “at his own pace.”

He started hippotherapy through Bison Strides physical and occupational therapy sessions that incorporate equine movement, offered in partnership with Beyond Boundaries Therapy & Wellness.

Kelli says that within a few months of hippotherapy sessions, she could see changes in Teddy. His posture got straighter. He could engage his core. He was willing and able to pay attention to and engage with the volunteers. When he got off the horse, Kelli says, he looked stronger and more alert.

And he was happy.

“This [program] is what keeps our family in Fargo,” Kelli says as she waves back to him.

What the Leeman family has access to here is unique. Bison Strides is accredited by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.), meaning it achieves high standards in administration, facilities, and programming for equine-assisted services. As the only Premier Accredited Center in North Dakota, it meets the highest level of quality and safety requirements.

The program is supported by philanthropy and volunteers, including NDSU students and students in the North Dakota University System (NDUS).

Three specially trained NDSU student volunteers support Teddy as he rides around the arena. Two of them secure his bright red sneakers in the stirrups and hold his feet in place. When Teddy is ready to ride, a third leads Cutter around poles and traffic cones.

In time, Teddy lifts both arms like an airplane, leaning left, then right. Eventually, he is riding in two-point position, his seat off the saddle, using the strength in his legs,

Tiny cowboy boots and sneakers kick up dirt as kids between the ages of 4 and 6 walk down the corridor of the NDSU Equine Center. They toss their coats to their parents on the bleachers and patiently wait for volunteers who help ensure their helmets are safely buckled on.

Bison Strides volunteers and staff lead horses from their stalls into the gated arena. Cutter, a 16-year-old palomino quarter horse, is spotted by 7-year-old Teddy, his number one fan. Teddy whoops and hollers, laughing, and bounds into the arena and up a set of portable stairs, accompanied by volunteers.

With help from Dr. Erika Berg, Bison Strides program director and NDSU associate professor of animal sciences, Teddy confidently takes hold of Cutter's white mane, swings his leg over the saddle, and waves to his mom with a toothy grin.

Teddy has a developmental delay, which means he has been slow to reach developmental milestones. According to his mom, Kelli Leeman, that means that Teddy's path to



or challenges from amputations, brain injuries, cerebral palsy, or muscular dystrophy. With varying degrees of support from side walkers and adapted equipment, many riders experience improved balance, posture, and coordination after equine-assisted interventions.

“When a person sits astride a walking horse, their pelvis moves the same way it would if they were walking on their own two feet,” Erika described. “If the neuromuscular system is intact and the muscle strength is there, the horse’s movement gives the muscles and brain a pattern to follow: ‘This is how you can walk.’”

Individuals with learning disabilities may learn through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods while learning to ride a horse. According to PATH Intl., a horse’s response to direction and aids from the rider is natural positive reinforcement for the rider and helps participants build skills and confidence.

Some participants, for example those with an autism spectrum disorder, may instead be looking for sensory input into their body — the “big movement” of being on a horse, Erika says, can help riders pay attention and regulate their bodies.

The Bison Strides military and veterans horsemanship program and equine-assisted learning program focus heavily on the mental and emotional benefits of equine-assisted services. Participants focus on groundwork and relationship-building with horses, including brushing, grooming, and leading, or simply spending time petting or talking to the horses. This dedicated time provides participants opportunities for self-reflection, emotional awareness, and stress relief.

“There are so many therapeutic benefits that come from partnering with horses in different ways,” Erika, who is a PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Therapeutic Riding Instructor, said. “We want [participants] to be able to

a balanced core, and his hands on Cutter’s neck for stability — a far cry from the scared little boy who, a couple of short years ago, was just getting the hang of walking and struggled to go up the platform steps.

In every trip around the arena, Teddy joyfully waves at Kelli in the bleachers, his dimples visible even from a distance. “Mom! Hi, Mom!” Cutter (who Kelli calls her “third son”) continues to move calmly and confidently as he carries Teddy.

### \* BENEFITS BEYOND THE ARENA

Equine-assisted services can yield a wide range of benefits from physical to psychological, like improving participants’ motor skills, self-esteem, sensory input and attention, auditory processing, and more.

Erika, who founded Bison Strides in 2017, points out that equine-assisted services are not for everyone, but for many people can yield extraordinary results.

Studies have shown the myriad physical benefits of equine-assisted services. According to PATH Intl., therapeutic riding can be a great source of exercise for individuals who may otherwise experience limitations



live their life outside the barn with the same skills and strengths that they find with the horses.”

The four different Bison Strides programming options serve individuals from the Fargo-Moorhead community and beyond, including children as young as 4 years old, teens with behavioral or mental health diagnoses, adults with disabilities, and military service members and veterans.

“As a land-grant institution NDSU is committed to serving all of its citizens,” Erika said. “The horse is really the great equalizer.”

### \* A STATEWIDE EFFORT

Through Bison Strides, NDSU and NDUS students from across the state gain hands-on experience through volunteering. The list of volunteers includes undergraduate students in equine science who are earning a minor in equine-assisted services and graduate students who are pursuing degrees in clinical mental health counseling or earning prerequisites for continued education in veterinary medicine, occupational therapy, or physical therapy.

Haley Maro ’25 is one of these volunteers. An NDSU senior studying equine science with minors in human development and equine-assisted services, she teaches therapeutic riding lessons under Erika’s supervision as part of her Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor certification.

Haley knew from a young age that she wanted a career in therapeutic horseback riding. NDSU stood out as the right university for her because of its robust equine science program plus the unique opportunity to work with a specialized program like Bison Strides.

Bison Strides is one of only 14 PATH Intl. Higher Education Members in the country, meaning students receive valuable hands-on experience and research, preparation to become certified instructors, and opportunities to graduate with a degree and practical industry-leading certifications.

For Haley, it’s impactful to see the



participants’ confidence grow during their sessions.

“The fact that they can take ownership and ... not feel like they’re being held back or left out is incredible,” she said. “It’s been so cool to make accommodations for people and get them involved in a really amazing experience.”

Bison Strides is also supported by farmers and ranchers from across the state who lease or donate their horses to the program.

Erika says she is always looking for horses. Bison Strides horses must be at least 6 years old; be able to walk, trot, and canter; and have a symmetrical gait, plus numerous other training and size requirements.

Keith Johnson, a rancher from Sharon, North Dakota, has leased his horses to NDSU’s equine science program for years. In 2019, Erika noticed that one of them had an especially unique, gentle disposition: Cutter. Keith has been a faithful partner of Bison Strides ever since and has now leased a second horse to the program.

For Keith, it’s all about the impact. He says that seeing kids like Teddy have positive experiences with horses is a “bright spot” for him and his wife, Becky ’73 — they receive photos and videos of Cutter and Teddy regularly from Kelli.

“It’s all about the people in that program,” Keith said. “Horses have been my passion my whole life. This is a way that I can contribute.”

### \* DREAMS OF GROWTH

Thanks to philanthropic support and Erika’s focus on outreach, the list of partner organizations and universities grows every year, as does the list of places where the Bison Strides horses visit. The beloved, energetic mini horses, Spark, Tony, Buttons, and Zipper, make regular visits to campus, schools, nursing homes, and community organizations across the Fargo-Moorhead area.

“Bison Strides simply would not exist without tremendous philanthropic support — donors who provide vital financial support, student and community volunteers who show up each week sharing their time and talents, and individuals who contribute in-kind gifts to our program,” Erika said. “Their generosity and belief are what make the transformative work we do possible.”

The program is also growing in terms of philanthropic support, partnerships, and participants. As interest increases, Erika has goals for growth.

She imagines a future for Bison Strides with a dedicated equine-assisted services space close to campus with room for parent/guardian support groups and fully equipped physical and occupational therapy rooms.

Most importantly, she imagines plenty of arena time for even more children, veterans, students, and volunteers to experience the therapeutic power of the horse. 🐾



# HOPE

# PRESCRIBING

When she got pregnant, **Alyssa Hodges** '21, '23, '26 saw many obstacles between her and a college degree. At NDSU, she discovered a community ready to support her in ways she hadn't expected.

Story by Meghan Arbegast '21 | Photos by Kensie Wallner



## A REASON TO SUCCEED

Alyssa gave birth to her daughter, Aubriella, during her freshman year at NDSU. She strives to make the most of her NDSU experience and to be a role model to Aubri.

"I hope when she grows up, she can look back and be like, 'There's nothing I can't do,'" Alyssa said.

The sterile scent and white walls of a hospital setting is something Alyssa Hodges '21, '23, '26 is quite familiar with. In sixth grade, Alyssa was diagnosed with arthritis. The four-hour-long car rides to and from Minneapolis to receive infusions every other week quickly became ingrained in her memory.

It was in those moments when her care team became her heroes and role models, transforming a frightening experience into one filled with compassion and hope.

"Having such empathetic nurses and doctors providing great care to me, it inspired me to want to be a health care provider. I wanted to give back to patients," Alyssa said.

As she neared the end of high school, Alyssa knew in her heart that she wanted to become a doctor — but then she found out she was pregnant. The young mother-to-be worried about the obstacles she would face when she embarked on her NDSU journey. Leaving home was scary and the barriers seemed too hard to climb.

"I was nervous to balance and manage all of the things that were on my plate as a young teen mom. There were so many factors that made me feel nervous," Alyssa said.

She decided to enroll at NDSU to prove not only to herself, but to other young mothers and her future daughter, that you can do anything you set your mind to.

Just three weeks into her first semester at NDSU, Alyssa gave birth to her daughter, Aubriella (Aubri). She remembers going into labor the

night before she was set to take an exam in her anthropology class. After frantically sending an email to her anthropology professor, Travis Kitch '03, on her way to the hospital, his response, "Welcome to parenthood," was a comforting reassurance that everything was going to be OK.

Following Aubri's birth, Alyssa determined she didn't just want to attend NDSU; she wanted to get the most out of her college experience. She got involved in various student organizations, including Bison Ambassadors, Blue Key Honor Society, and Phi Lambda Sigma. She also became an ambassador for the College of Health and Human Sciences.

Through her on-campus involvement, she discovered a community ready to support her in ways she hadn't expected. Several of Alyssa's professors in her undergraduate program frequently checked in with her, making sure she had the resources to be successful both in and out of the classroom.

As she progressed through her undergraduate degree in biological sciences and started her master's in public health, Alyssa's support network grew across departments and colleges.

**Rx** for Mentors  
Who Uplift You

In the first year of her master's program, Alyssa met her biggest role model, Dr. Mark Strand, in his Public Health 705: Global Health class.

It was 2021, and many students were still attending classes remotely due to the pandemic. Mark, a professor of pharmacy practice, encouraged all students living in the Fargo-Moorhead area to attend class in person. Alyssa took him up on the offer.

Right away, Mark says, he could tell Alyssa had a strong passion and drive.

“She immediately stood out as somebody who was very smart, a fast thinker, and very personable,” Mark said.

It was clear to Mark that Alyssa was a student who wanted to get the most out of her degree. Mark, who serves as a senior scientist in NDSU’s Center for Collaboration & Advancement in Pharmacy (CAP Center), often extends research opportunities to his students. Soon after Alyssa started attending his class in person, Mark presented her with the opportunity to become a graduate research assistant with NDSU’s Opioid and Naloxone Education (ONE) Program.

The ONE Program, which started on campus in 2018, proactively helps communities across the state by providing resources to pharmacists and patients to educate them about opioid misuse and accidental overdoses as soon as a patient picks up their prescription from their local pharmacy.

Through a collaboration with public health units across

North Dakota, the program also provides access to naloxone, a lifesaving medicine that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Boxes with all the tools needed to safely provide naloxone to someone experiencing an overdose have been placed in various locations across the state. Training on how to administer naloxone is offered by local public health professionals.

Mark, who pioneered the program with fellow NDSU professor of pharmacy practice Heidi Eukel, says the program grew from the goal of ensuring predisposed individuals don’t go down a path of opioid misuse.

“We created the ONE Program to introduce safe opioid approaches for every patient in North Dakota who receives an opioid prescription. There’s a screening for their risk profile and services and support to those patients based on their risk. The work is a combination of public health and pharmacy,” Mark said.

## **R<sub>x</sub>** for Research that **Makes an Impact**

For Alyssa, Mark’s invitation to get involved in the ONE Program was more than a resume booster, it was a chance to make an impact on something that

mattered to her.

“It felt very big to me, and that I would be doing meaningful work,” Alyssa said. “My stepbrother passed away last year. He had struggled with substance misuse, so I felt like I could contribute to something I really cared about.”

Throughout her three years with the ONE Program, Alyssa has authored papers published in peer-reviewed journals, given presentations on medication safety all over the country, attended conferences where she has presented ONE Program research, and received various awards for her work.

Mark says that Alyssa is always up for a challenge, no matter how timely and data heavy it may be. When Mark needed one of the program’s graduate research assistants to help merge two data sets consisting of 30,000 patients, he recalls Alyssa was the only one who wanted to take it on without any hesitation.

“What more could you ask?” Mark said with a gleam of pride in his eyes. “She’s just highly motivated, super confident, and willing to give it her best try. That’s just an example of the kind of person she is.”

Alyssa has enjoyed every minute of her contribution to the ongoing work in the program, including working alongside faculty and attending events.

“I’ve grown a lot as a person and as a professional,” she said. “I’ve been able to

have conversations with external stakeholders, and I’ve had a lot of great mentorships and real-life experience here.”

Watching the program grow over the years has been rewarding for Alyssa. From what started as a pilot program with \$10,000 in funding, the ONE Program has now expanded to pharmacies in West Virginia, Idaho, and a pilot in Minnesota.

“The ONE Program has such a good reputation,” Alyssa said. “I think it has helped destigmatize conversations on opioid use disorder, shown the resources we have in our community, and made providers more cognizant about how many opioids they’re giving.”

## **R<sub>x</sub>** for Finding a Career You Love

Alyssa’s involvement in the ONE Program has provided more than just valuable skills and mentors — it’s introduced her to the career she wants to enter. While her original plan was to pursue medical school, Alyssa says the opportunities provided by Mark and the ONE Program have opened her eyes to the important roles pharmacists have in health care.

It was during the annual North Dakota Pharmacy Association conference in the spring of 2022 that Alyssa remembers reconsidering her future career path.

“I was shocked to hear pharmacists can do a lot of things providers can,” Alyssa said. “I learned so much about how pharmacists are providing care, how accessible they are, and all about the great benefits of pharmacy.”

Following the conference, Alyssa knew she had found her passion. She got a job at a pharmacy and applied to NDSU’s Doctor of Pharmacy program.

“I love NDSU, and the support that I’d already established here was really important,” she said.

Aubri, who is now 7, has watched her mom graduate from NDSU two times already. Alyssa is looking forward to her daughter watching her graduate for a third time in 2026, when she earns her Doctor of Pharmacy.

“Aubri recognizes the hard work and sees it pay off. I hope when she grows up, she can look back and be like, ‘There’s nothing I can’t do,’” Alyssa said. “There’s definitely that sense of pride, but more importantly trying to ensure I express to her that the reason why I’m even doing it — a big part of it is for her and for us.”

Mark says he knows Alyssa will go out and make an impact.

“I’m just so proud of her,” he said. “I know she’s going to have an amazing future. I tell her frequently that she’ll go way beyond where I have because of her drive and her desire.”

Alyssa, who currently works at Family HealthCare in Fargo, wants to continue working in a family health setting following graduation, with the goal of utilizing both her pharmacy and public health degrees to work with underserved populations and to expand her advocacy work.

“I definitely want to stay involved,” she said. “I want to have a strong voice and keep shaping pharmacy for the future.” 🐼



## **Meet Dr. Teresa Conner, Dean of the College of Health and Human Sciences**

### **What brought you to NDSU?**

I was excited to see an R1 research university with a strong history of educating health care, health and human science, and exercise and nutrition science professionals. The opportunity to engage Extension and leverage the assets of a land-grant institution in improving the lives and health of North Dakotans is unique and powerful.

### **Why is NDSU’s R1 research status important to your College?**

As the creators of new knowledge, we’re the ones defining the future. We’re developing unique approaches to education, how we work in the community, and the problems we solve.

### **What is your College currently investigating?**

We’re excited to imagine and implement the education that our students will need to work in this technology-driven economy. I look forward to engaging our partners in this process and empowering faculty, staff, and students to dream big.

### **What is your vision for the future?**

We’re thinking about how virtual technologies, robotics, digital health, and artificial intelligence can influence the quality of and access to health care and human services. We’re also examining the ways we can leverage these technologies to meet current and future workforce needs.



### **MENTORSHIP MATTERS**

Dr. Mark Strand, professor of pharmacy practice, recognized Alyssa’s potential from the get-go and has been her greatest mentor. He keeps toys in his desk for Aubri to play with when she accompanies her mom to campus.

# A WRESTLING MATCH LASTS SEVEN MINUTES, BUT FACING ADVERSITY IS PART OF A LIFETIME.

Story by Micaela Gerhardt | Photos by Libby Leonard '26

Enter the McCormick Wrestling Room and it's the heat you'll feel first — a thick humidity hanging in the air. On the mat, NDSU wrestlers are paired off and running drills, sweating it out, and preparing for a tense upcoming dual against the highly favored, No. 10 nationally ranked University of Minnesota.

The Bison are a young team, and for one wrestler, Drew Blackburn-Forst '27, the dual includes a bout against Olympic gold medalist, three-time All-American, and two-time NCAA Division I champion Gable Steveson — the No. 1 wrestler nationally in his 285-pound weight class.

"The No. 1 heavyweight in the country," NDSU wrestling head coach Obenson (Obe) Blanc emphasized. "I've got a sophomore that's got to deal with that mentally."

It's a burden or an opportunity — depending upon how you frame it. The match will be a struggle, but that's what wrestling is, Obe says: the ability to face adversity. Every odd may be stacked against you, but you need to

show up with a mindset that puts you in position to win.

"There's training for conditioning, there's training for how to eat properly, but there's not a ton of training on how to deal with, 'Hey, I'm wrestling the best guy in the world, and I don't believe I have a shot ... How do I process that?'" Obe said. "You need someone to help you understand it doesn't matter if you're wrestling the best guy in the world or the very worst. Your job is to focus on yourself and on the processes that lead to the win ... [but] seven minutes feels like a lifetime trying to do that."

Obe's coaching philosophy is rooted in a quiet confidence in his athletes and their ability to persevere through the fight, whether it's on the mat or off.

"It's supposed to be hard," is the mantra Obe repeats in the practice room as he runs the team through a leg attack defense drill, an area where they've struggled in recent bouts. "It's supposed to be hard."

His voice is muffled by a whirring fan that does little to displace the heat, but the words carry through.

Around him, the wrestlers find their stance and lock in. They are students, too. But here, in this room, for these two hours, their most urgent priority — regardless of any personal struggles, homework, or upcoming exams — is how to defeat the opponent standing before them.

There is nothing to hide behind, and everything to win or lose.

On the night of the dual, Michael '10, '12 and Madison '14 Quamme find their usual mat-side seats under the fluorescent lights of the Scheels Center. When they arrive, the stands are empty, but by 6 p.m. NDSU wrestling will have broken a record with 1,529 fans in attendance.

"You'll see us front and center, and I'm obnoxious," Michael joked about his expressive cheering style. "I'm well aware of that, but I always try to create a home advantage."

The Quammes are season ticket holders, and though Michael works in St. Cloud, Minnesota, he commutes back to Fargo often. Being an active part of the wrestling and greater NDSU communities is a big reason he and Madison are committed to staying engaged with Fargo.

"The people that we've met from going to school here, that we've met being involved here, it's home to us," Michael, who was part of the wrestling team during NDSU's transition to Division I athletics, said. "We want to be there [at the matches] to support something we care about."

"There have been many universities that have cut their wrestling programs because it's not a big moneymaker," Madison added. "We feel very strongly that

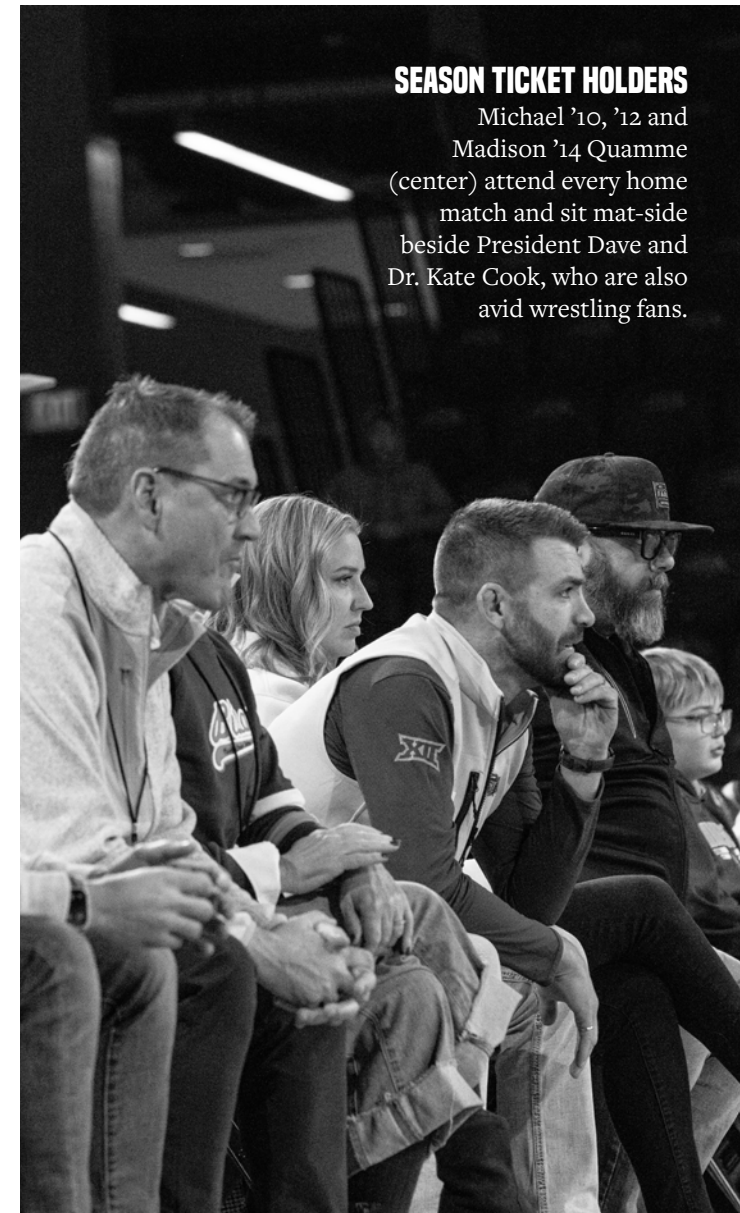
those are the types of things that if you support it, you need to pour into it, too."

In 2024, Michael, Madison, former teammates, and friends established the Geoff Martin Wrestling Endowment to provide NDSU wrestlers with greater access to mental and performance health resources. The endowment is named in honor of Michael's late friend and former Bison wrestling teammate, Geoff Martin '14, who struggled with mental health but always maintained his sense of humor and love for the sport.

"We all know college is hard. Sports are hard. College and sports are *really* hard," Michael said. "And then you do get into the male aspect of it and the wrestling aspect of it where you're supposed to be able to just outwork whatever problems you have — it doesn't have to be that way. The more resources you have to do the best you can, the better."

## SEASON TICKET HOLDERS

Michael '10, '12 and Madison '14 Quamme (center) attend every home match and sit mat-side beside President Dave and Dr. Kate Cook, who are also avid wrestling fans.



# THE SEVEN-MINUTE STRUGGLE

Heavyweights Gable Steveson (left) and Drew Blackburn-Forst '27 (right) face off in the final dual.



The Geoff Martin Wrestling Endowment offers NDSU wrestling coaches the flexibility to use funds for mental and performance health according to team needs. It's part of a larger effort across all NDSU athletic departments to enhance the mental health resources available for student-athletes.

The support comes during a critical period of stabilizing and rebuilding for the NDSU wrestling team. Obe, who served

four previous seasons at NDSU, was promoted to head coach in May 2023. He's only the fourth head coach in the history of the wrestling program, following in the footsteps of long-tenured coaches including the late Bucky Maughan '68, who led the Bison for 47 seasons.

Obe and his coaching staff, who were hired between 2023 and 2024, are cultivating a team comprised of many

freshmen, redshirt freshmen, and transfer students. While they certainly want to win, Obe says his overarching goal as a coach is more about fostering good husbands, fathers, and community members. Mental resilience is a key component for fulfillment and success, both on an individual level and as a team.

“Life’s not going to get easier for you because you want it to. You have to get better. You have to get tougher. You have to grow,” Obe tells his wrestlers. “For me, it’s like, how do I teach these kids to have a spirit of perseverance and continue to grind through the issue to come out on the other side? Don’t seek easy. Seek to get better.”

In its dual against the University of Minnesota, NDSU wrestling turns up scoreless — the first time since 2009, and only the fourth time in its Division I era. When Drew Blackburn-Forst runs into the arena for the final heavyweight matchup against Gable Steveson, the scoreboard is 0-34, and the crowd is eager to see what the famous Gopher adversary has up his sleeve.

But it’s Drew, with his blond mullet, focused gaze, and high energy, that is the most striking. You can’t look past his courage — a sophomore up against a 24-year-old Olympic gold medalist, running into the packed arena, head held high. To be on the mat at all is heroic.

The bout ends in under two minutes, but as it turns out, that can feel like a lifetime too. And the team will have to grapple with this loss and come back prepared to focus on the next practice, the next match, the next opportunity to earn the right to win.

“It’s about the fight and effort we bring,” Obe said.

The feeling lingering in the Scheels Center after the meet is one of acceptance, but there’s an energy in the air too, the result of an outpouring of fans filling the stadium seats; of NDSU wrestling alumni who gathered and were honored during the meet; of the legacy and memory of the late Bucky Maughan, whose photo is projected on the jumbotron; of young wrestling club kids who look to the collegiate wrestlers as their idols, the people they want to be someday.

Those who grow up and choose to be Bison will become part of a tradition of excellence that pertains even more to their character than it does the number on the scoreboard. Obe and his staff, alumni and donors like Michael and Madison, legacy team members like Bucky and Geoff, the greater NDSU community, the student-athletes themselves — all are making sure of it. 🐾

### IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE HARD

Head coach Obenson Blanc frequently reminds his team that wrestling, like life, does not get easier. If it feels easier, it’s because they’ve grown. “Don’t seek ease. Seek to get better,” he says.



# 2025 AWARD RECIPIENTS

Congratulations to the 2025 NDSU Foundation Alumni Award recipients who exemplify excellence in their professional accomplishments, volunteerism, and philanthropy! This year’s honorees include exceptional alumni and partners whose impact spans business, government, finance, science, and agriculture.



### MICHAEL HOWE

BS '10 Mass Communication and Broadcast Journalism  
Horizon Award



### DR. KELLY SWANSON

BS '97 Animal and Range Sciences  
Henry L. Bolley Academic Achievement Award



### DOUG DUNCAN

BS '80, MS '82 Agricultural Economics  
Alumni Achievement Award



### JIM HAMBRICK

BS '87 Business Administration, MS '88 Accounting  
Distinguished Service Award

### PARTNER IN EXCELLENCE AWARD



Scan the QR code or visit [NDSUFoundation.com/awards](https://NDSUFoundation.com/awards) to learn more about the impact of this year’s honorees.

McGovern Alumni Center  
North Dakota State University  
PO Box 5144  
Fargo, ND 58105



**Bison Strides** provides programming for people of all ages, including veterans, active-duty military personnel, and those with disabilities or behavioral or mental health diagnoses.

“As a land-grant institution NDSU is committed to serving all of its citizens,” program director Dr. Erika Berg said. “The horse is really the great equalizer.”

