

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

FOUNDATION

MAGAZINE | 2025 EDITION II

BETTERING *the* **BUILT** **ENVIRONMENT**

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GREAT PLAINS GREENS / Three NDSU alumni are growing produce without soil. Their method of choice? Vertical hydroponics. A climate-controlled 9-by-40-foot shipping container in West Fargo, North Dakota, provides optimal growing conditions where the plants can thrive year-round. / **Dr. Bill Wilson '75** helped his former students Dylan Kallman '22, Lee Vetsch '20, and Jon Wyffels '19 write a successful grant application to kickstart the business. Great Plains Greens now supplies fresh produce to local restaurants, schools, and online customers. **Learn more about Bill's commitment to supporting students — and their career aspirations — on page 16.**

📷 *Kensie Wallner*

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Photo by Breanna Pretz

NDSU informed the holistic approach Kathleen Lechleiter '81, '82 brings to her architecture practice, which encompasses the environment, the residents, the community — and how it feels to be home. Her firm, Twopoint Studio, is restoring and redesigning 36 row homes in Baltimore, Maryland, in partnership with developer ReBUILD Metro.

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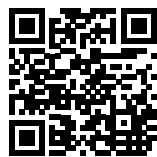
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What does it take to shape the trajectory of a university and its students? How do we ensure an NDSU education remains dynamic and innovative while rooted in purpose?

NDSU was built upon the premise of educating people to serve citizens and key industries in North Dakota, the region, and beyond. Our future as a land-grant institution is tied to the relationships we build in and out of our campus gates.

This was true to my own NDSU journey, both as an undergraduate and graduate student. I attribute my development to the people who were willing to invest in me — those who took my trajectory to new heights by lifting me up. My NDSU experience was a launching point for everything that followed.

Now, in my role as director of industry relations at the NDSU Foundation, I see every day how meaningful relationships shape students' lives in ways that go far beyond the classroom. Through



the generosity of NDSU alumni, donors, and industry partners, NDSU students are not just learning in classrooms; they are applying their knowledge in ways that will leave a lasting impact on our state and world.

As you read the stories in this edition, I encourage you to reflect on the relationships that make NDSU's continued success possible — whether it's a professor sharing his industry connections with his students, an architecture alumna opening doors for members of her community, a coach and players who are building trust and accountability as a team, parents and donors empowering an engineering student to say "yes" to opportunity, or a company inviting students to learn and network in their inspiring corporate headquarters.

Our collective efforts — faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, donors, and industry partners — are what propel NDSU forward on this remarkable trajectory where the possibilities are limitless.

Alyssa Teubner

Alyssa Teubner '13
Director of Industry Relations
NDSU Foundation

Welcoming Marvin, manufacturer of premium windows and doors, to campus (page 26). We shared a day of engagement and learning with CEO Paul Marvin and fifth-generation Marvin family members!

BETTERING *the* BUILT ENVIRONMENT



Architect **Kathleen Lechleiter '81, '82** is shaping safe, stable, and dignified housing in Baltimore neighborhoods.

Story by **Emily Erickson '15**
Photos by **Breanna Pretz**

In an exercise with a third-year housing studio, Kathleen Lechleiter '81, '82, FAIA, asked her students to consider the concept of "home." The students wrote poems about what home means to them, developed imagery and visuals of home, then moved on to create three-dimensional representations.

It was a prompt designed to inspire them to begin in the abstract. Before considering the measurements, materials, and building codes, a great architect understands the environment, the residents, the community — and how it feels to be home.

Kathleen embodies this as a practicing architect. Her passion for empowering communities and educating future generations of

On the wall behind Kathleen are 152 photos — each a home her architecture firm redesigned to restore public housing across Baltimore communities.



architects has brought a colleague and me to Baltimore, Maryland, to experience her approach.

We meet Kathleen at her architecture firm, Twopoint Studio, in the historic Fell’s Point neighborhood. After a 10-minute drive, we arrive in Johnston Square, an east Baltimore neighborhood where row homes make up most of the housing, and park on a residential street. Row homes — narrow, multi-story homes built in a continuous line along a street — are, as Kathleen tells me, “quintessential Baltimore.” (Twopoint itself is housed in a renovated row home-turned-office.)

ReBUILD Metro, a Baltimore developer committed to revitalizing homes without displacing residents, has hired Twopoint to redesign and revitalize 36 properties across two projects in the neighborhood. After

construction is complete, the units will be incorporated back into the community as low-income housing, rentals, and transition properties. Today, Kathleen, my colleague, and I, along with Baltimore-based photographer Breanna Pretz, are touring a few of the neglected and abandoned row homes ready for renovation.

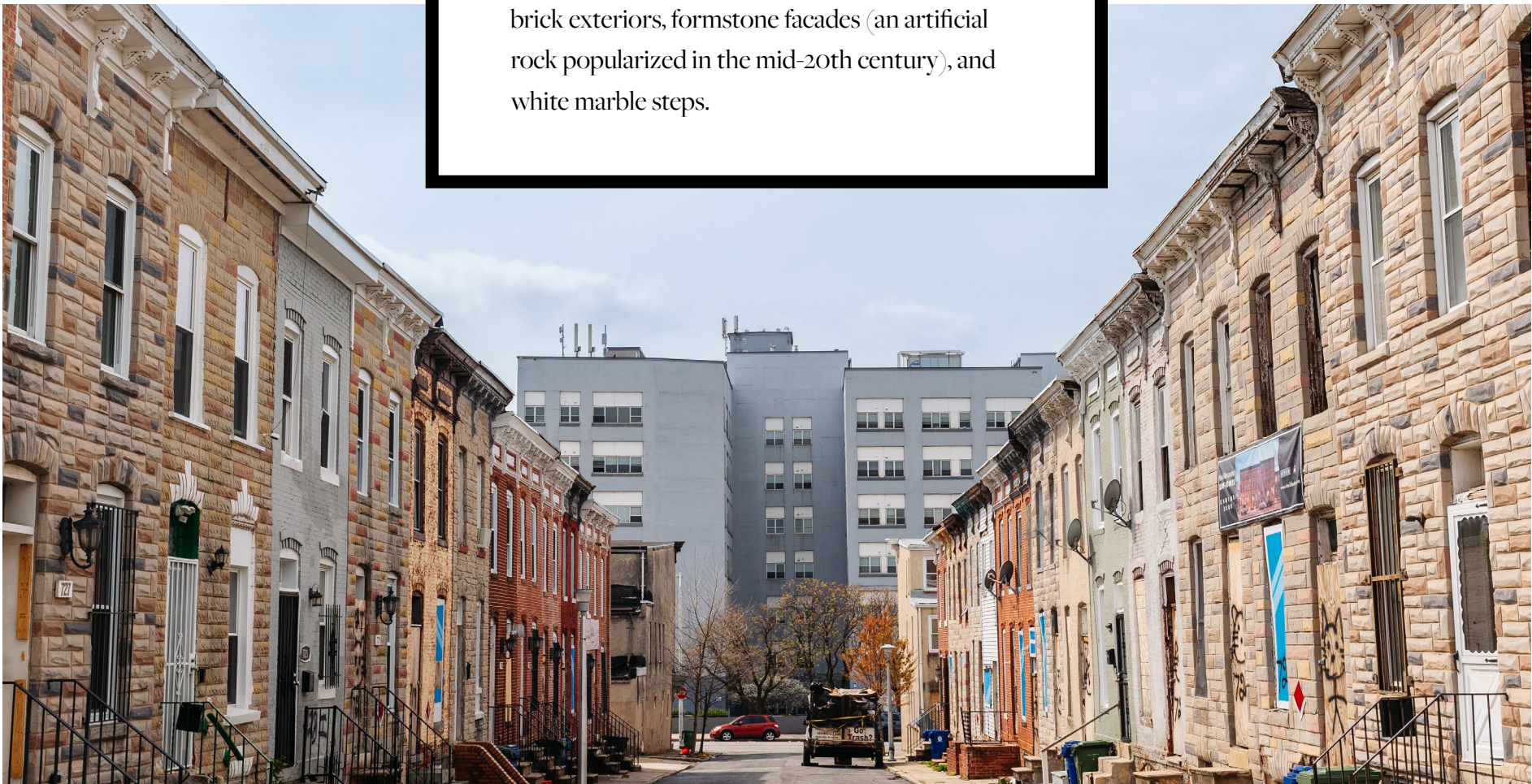
“[ReBUILD Metro’s] focus is

on creating stable communities, and they do this house by house, block by block,” Kathleen explains.

Kathleen points out exterior features of the homes. The cornices — some ornate, some simple — are the builders’ “calling cards.” The facades vary, she explains; many feature the original brick, while others have been painted. Some are clad in a locally controversial faux

the ROW HOME

Row homes are a quintessential fixture of Baltimore architecture. Half of the city’s 251,000 occupied housing units are categorized as attached single-family dwellings (Baltimore Magazine). Iconic features of row homes include brick exteriors, formstone facades (an artificial rock popularized in the mid-20th century), and white marble steps.



Historic row homes in Baltimore’s Johnston Square neighborhood are being restored as part of a long-term effort to strengthen the city’s neighborhoods block by block.

rock called formstone that exploded in popularity in the mid-20th century.

She draws our attention down. The steps in front of many homes are red brick or gray concrete. But punctuated down the block some feature a traditional material, now a source of local pride: white marble.

Kathleen climbs the steps, finds a combination in her notebook, and unhooks a padlock. The piece of plywood serving as a front door swings open in the wind. The floors creak as we venture through abandoned rooms. The brick fireplace has been dismantled.

“Isn’t it cool? I mean, I think it’s cool,” she laughs as we step over wood, glass, and garbage, delighted at the details, the historic charm, and the possibility of a fresh start.

In approaching projects like these, Kathleen and her team at Twopoint work closely with the developer to design the spaces to best suit residents. The firm partners with various city, state, and occasionally federal agencies to qualify for construction, program, and energy funding. Added collaboration with structural, mechanical, electrical, and civil engineers; historic and sustainability consultants; and landscape architects comprise a project team enabled to meet resident and city needs now and into the future.

“[Twopoint’s] overall practice focuses on healthy and just environments which include safe, stable, and dignified housing,” Kathleen said. “Enter the need to restore, rebuild, and reinvest in these homes and neighborhoods.”

Housing is a passion area for Kathleen; she explains that it is the “greenest” type of construction in terms of carbon footprint, and a need exists for the work — housing vacancy is a particular area of concern in Baltimore due to population decline. In October 2024, the Associated Press reported that more than 13,000 properties sat vacant throughout Baltimore. About two-thirds of Twopoint’s work is housing rehab.

“Something I try to stress to students is that we, as architects, are designing people’s homes. It’s where they celebrate birthdays and do their homework,” she said. “Just because someone might have fewer means, doesn’t mean that they don’t have a right to a place to call home.”

Kathleen leads us through another abandoned home using her iPhone flashlight, her black blazer collecting streaks of dust from the walls and banisters of homes dating back as early as 1900.

She explains how the double-hung windows provide air circulation to cool the structures, and that she will design around the original staircase footprint, regardless of today’s code standards, to follow city historic preservation rules. Outside, in an empty lot, she points out that the property lines fall between the original 12-inch-thick shared walls, and that when a structure is demolished, additional supports need to be added on either side to hold the adjacent houses in place.

The Johnston Square scattered-site housing projects represent a common challenge in Baltimore: renovating old and historic structures to provide housing for today’s families and lifestyles. These specific projects fall under the umbrella of “affordable housing,” which encompasses numerous living situations, including rentals, for-sale properties, workforce housing, and low-income or permanent supportive housing.

Regardless of the home’s specific use, Kathleen incorporates design principles aimed at bettering the residents’ living environments, improving conditions for the community, and investing in the city’s future. She incorporates energy-efficient systems that reduce energy usage and utility bills for the residents — including high-efficiency HVAC units, LED lighting, low-flow plumbing fixtures, and other sustainable features. Toxins, including lead paint, are removed, and low-VOC paints and formaldehyde-free kitchen cabinets are integrated into designs. Hardwood floors are often refinished or luxury vinyl tile is installed to limit health problems related to asthma.

Architecture, though commonly misunderstood as simply designing a residential or commercial building, is a holistic practice. According to the American Institute of Architects (AIA), “Architects play a critical role in designing buildings and communities that use resources wisely, preserve essential ecosystems, promote equity and access,

A photograph of Kathleen Lechleiter, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white button-down shirt. She is looking upwards and to the right, holding a smartphone in her right hand. The background is a dark, textured wall, possibly brick or stone, with some light reflecting off it. The overall mood is contemplative and focused.

“My education at NDSU was instrumental to my approach to design and architecture.

We are problem solvers.

We are inquisitive.

We are seeking out methods to better our built environment.

Aesthetically? Yes, but also sustainably, creatively, compassionately, and responsibly.”

— **Kathleen Lechleiter ’81, ’82**
Baltimore-based architect

Surrounded by crumbling walls and dust, Kathleen stands inside an abandoned home and prepares to turn vacancy into opportunity.

and adapt to changing conditions” — a standard that Kathleen has met and exceeded in her decades-long career.

“My education at NDSU was instrumental in my approach to design and architecture,” Kathleen said. “We are problem solvers. We are inquisitive. We are seeking out methods to better our built environment. Aesthetically? Yes, but also sustainably, creatively, compassionately, and responsibly.”

As an adjunct faculty member and chair of the NDSU School of Design, Architecture, and Art Advisory Board, Kathleen collaborates with leadership in the NDSU College of Arts and Sciences. Together, they develop opportunities for students to receive hands-on experience during their undergraduate careers — ideally outside of the Fargo area.

In the fall semesters of 2023 and 2024, Kathleen hosted fourth-year NDSU architecture students in Baltimore. Students met with organizational collaborators, government representatives, and housing entities, plus toured active projects.

For Kathleen, it was exciting to take the fear out of the unknown for the students and express to them that architecture is “not just about buildings.”

“It was something always in the back of my mind,” she said. “Is there a way to bring students from a predominantly rural area to a more urban area so they can understand: What are some of the issues everybody has in common? What issues are different?”

That drive inspired her and her husband, fellow architect and NDSU alumnus Rolf Haarstad ’82, to establish the Lechleiter Haarstad Architectural Traveling Scholarship for NDSU architecture students, providing them the opportunity to deepen their understanding of how cultural and environmental factors shape the built environment.

Thanks to its well-rounded curriculum, mentorship opportunities, and experiential learning, both Kathleen and Dr. Susan Schaefer Kliman, FAIA, chair of the NDSU Department of Architecture and Interior Design, see NDSU as a leader in architecture programs across the country.

“We’re known throughout the region as a program that turns out graduates who are career ready. We combine the right amount of design theory with the practicality of everyday practice,” Susan said. “We have a responsibility to provide our students with the background and experience to understand how to engage with their communities.”

Throughout Johnston Square, Kathleen casually points out other homes she has designed throughout the past decade. She has become a partner in growth and a character in the history of this community, designing homes and empowering community members.

“Kathleen has devoted her career to bringing community-centered design to create new models for housing that remove the stigma of low-income, foster ownership for those who seek it, and eliminate housing insecurity for thousands facing harsh challenges in her own community of Baltimore,” Susan said. “She practices what she teaches, engaging directly with veterans, families experiencing homelessness, recovering addicts, refugees, and immigrants as well as connecting with businesses, non-profits, and

community organizations to create practical, sustainable, and affordable housing.”

We make our way toward the final home of our tour. House after house on the block greets us with a plywood door and window covers painted blue — an indication that they are owned by ReBUILD Metro — each house number spray-painted in black. Vacant. Vacant. Vacant.

Where a set of stairs once stood, Kathleen reaches up to unhook another padlock, the crumbling formstone around the door revealing original red brick underneath. The makeshift door swings open. Where I expect to see a living room and the iconic long hallway, a surreal scene: exterior walls, a tree growing through the remains of a fireplace, and where a roof should be, a bright blue sky.

Kathleen explains that the aptly named “blue sky” row homes begin as vacant homes that deteriorate over years of neglect. Homes like this one have been cleaned out and are ready for development.

She points out the masonry pockets that once held the floor in place, and that a tree growing through a structure like this happens faster than you’d think — only a few years. Behind us, we hear a voice:

“You getting ready to fix that?”

Two older women are out for a walk, pushing strollers.

“Yes, we are,” Kathleen smiles and introduces herself.

“Well, I’ll be glad,” the neighbor says kindly, after joking and laughing with Kathleen. “We’ve waited.”

She points out her own home — she has lived on this street for more than 40 years.

“Hopefully we’ll have some new neighbors, some nice neighbors.”

Between kickoff meetings, building permits, and construction, this project will take at least a couple of years, but Kathleen is in it for the long haul, for the neighbors, and for the community. 🐾



A “blue sky” row home — open to the elements after years of neglect — awaits transformation into safe, beautiful housing for the Baltimore community.



EVERYTHING A TEAM DOES
IS **PERSONAL**. EVERYTHING
A TEAM DOES IS **PLURAL**.
EVERYTHING A TEAM DOES, IT
DOES **TOGETHER**.

STORY BY MICAELA GERHARDT
PHOTOS BY ZACHARY LUCY

IN HIS THIRD PRACTICE AS BISON FOOTBALL HEAD COACH, Tim Polasek motioned wide receiver Bryce Lance ’25, ’26 over to the sidelines. It was spring ball, a time of intense preparation for the next fall season coinciding with the final weeks of the academic year.

Bryce hustled over and stood beside his new coach in the Nodak Insurance Company Football Performance Complex, where, during the previous two seasons, he had practiced primarily as a member of special teams.

“You’re an All-Conference player — you need to start performing to that level,” Tim said to him. “Don’t wait for next year.”

Bryce was stunned. Earning an All-Conference award would be challenging, even for the most accomplished collegiate athletes in the Missouri Valley. Though Bryce was starting to gain confidence, he was surprised that Tim set the bar so high. Bryce’s current stats didn’t exactly align with Tim’s vision.

“I was like, ‘I have one catch for seven yards. I don’t know what you’re talking about,’” Bryce said incredulously.



NDSU's football team transformed into a book club during weekly team meetings designed to foster leadership skills.

Though Tim didn't know it yet, Bryce had been struggling — to earn his spot, to brush off his mistakes, to take criticism less personally. A wrong move at 6 a.m. could stick with Bryce as he progressed through team breakfasts at the dining center, his business classes in Richard H. Barry Hall, his weight room routines, his wind-down stretches.

"When I'd do something wrong, it felt like the end of the world," Bryce said. "I honestly never had a huge problem with the physical aspect — I knew I could do all the workouts, and I knew I could play football — it was more the mental part. I was my biggest critic for sure."

He hadn't given up on himself, his team, or his coaches, but Bryce felt a little stuck, a little uncertain about how to elevate his game and make greater contributions.

"It's disappointing when you don't play, or you don't get the chances you think you deserve, but I was never one to complain. I just kept working," Bryce said. "I'm super thankful because I had the support of my family saying, 'Your time is coming. Trust the process.'"

So rather than pulling back, Bryce leaned in. He spent the month of May training with his older brother and former Bison quarterback Trey Lance at NFL facilities in Dallas, Texas. Back at NDSU, he started attending the team's optional physical therapy appointments. After

practice, he made sure to get in some extra catches with the quarterbacks. He surrounded himself with high performers and found support with a core group of teammates and friends.

And then, at exactly the right moment, Tim came along and saw his potential. After sharing his expectations with Bryce, Tim turned his attention to then-quarterback Cam Miller '25.

"I said, 'Cam, this guy is good. Start seeing him that way,'" Tim said.

It was a rallying cry. A turning point. And it would have profound implications not just for Bryce, or just for Cam — but for the entire team and its fan base.

Bryce had never been more ready.

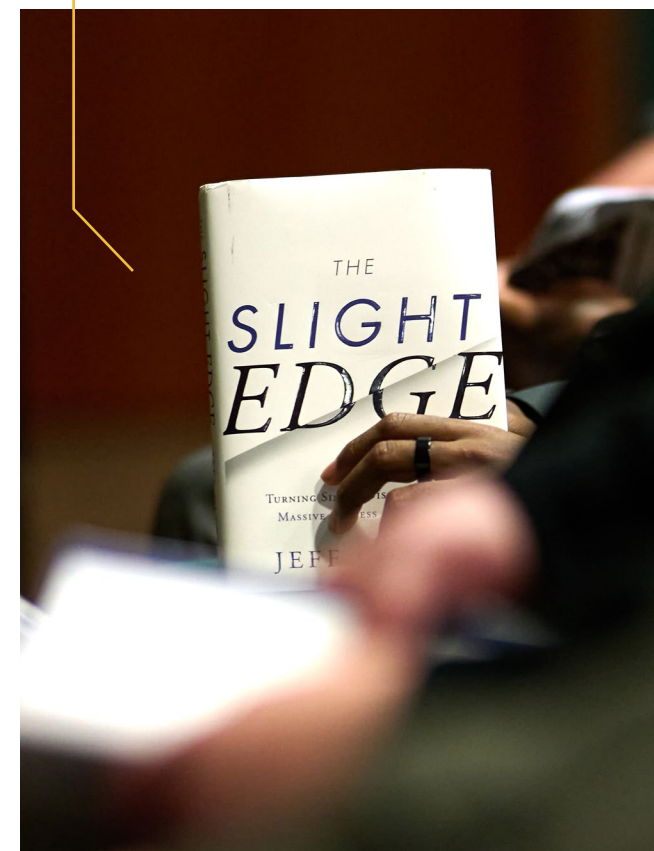
In his fourth Bison football season, Bryce made the starting lineup. Wowed fans with an unbelievable one-handed touchdown catch in the semifinal game against South Dakota State. Helped the Bison win their 10th FCS Championship with a career high of nine catches. And earned his place on the first team in the All-Missouri Valley Football Conference, accomplishing precisely the thing Tim believed he was capable of at the very start.

"Speaking that belief into me was so powerful," Bryce said. "I never stopped working hard, but Coach Polasek gave me another reason to keep going, and I will always be thankful to him for that."



READ LIKE THE BISON

Ahead of the 2025 season, the entire football team read and discussed "The Slight Edge: Turning Simple Disciplines into Massive Success" by Jeff Olson. Head coach Tim Polasek says it's the perfect book to read coming off a championship win because it reminds his team that long-term success, like earning another national title, will be driven by their daily attitude and habits.



SINCE HE BEGAN HIS ROLE AS HEAD COACH IN 2024, Tim has been strategic about maintaining an unshakable team culture, and his No. 1 goal is for each player to reach their full potential athletically, academically, and socially.

"To reach your full potential is really, really difficult. How many of us actually do that?" Tim asked. "Bryce is a really good example of a guy who wants to reach his full potential, who is coachable, who is open to us taking him into those tough, sticky spots where it's difficult, and who works hard at being the best he can be. He represents what's right with all Bison student-athletes."

For Tim, this mindset is where the magic happens. He sees excellence catalyzed by each player's individual commitment to daily habits and decisions that will put the collective team among the top 5% — whether it's in the classroom, a team meeting, the weight room, at practice, or at home.

"The things that help us sustain the Bison legacy will be to show up, improve daily, be mentally tough, compete, and make good decisions for our academics and our football," Tim said. "If we can improve for 15 practices, that keeps us on our trajectory, and that's a scary proposition for the rest of the country."

It's a strategy articulated in Jeff Olson's "The Slight Edge: Turning Simple Disciplines into Massive Success," which all members of the Bison football team read earlier this year.

"The Slight Edge' talks about basic, daily habits that are easy to make up your mind to do, but equally as easy not to do," Tim said. "You wake up with an opportunity and you do the best you can with it. When you stay on track, and you believe in your teammates and believe in your coaches, good things can happen."

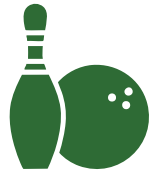
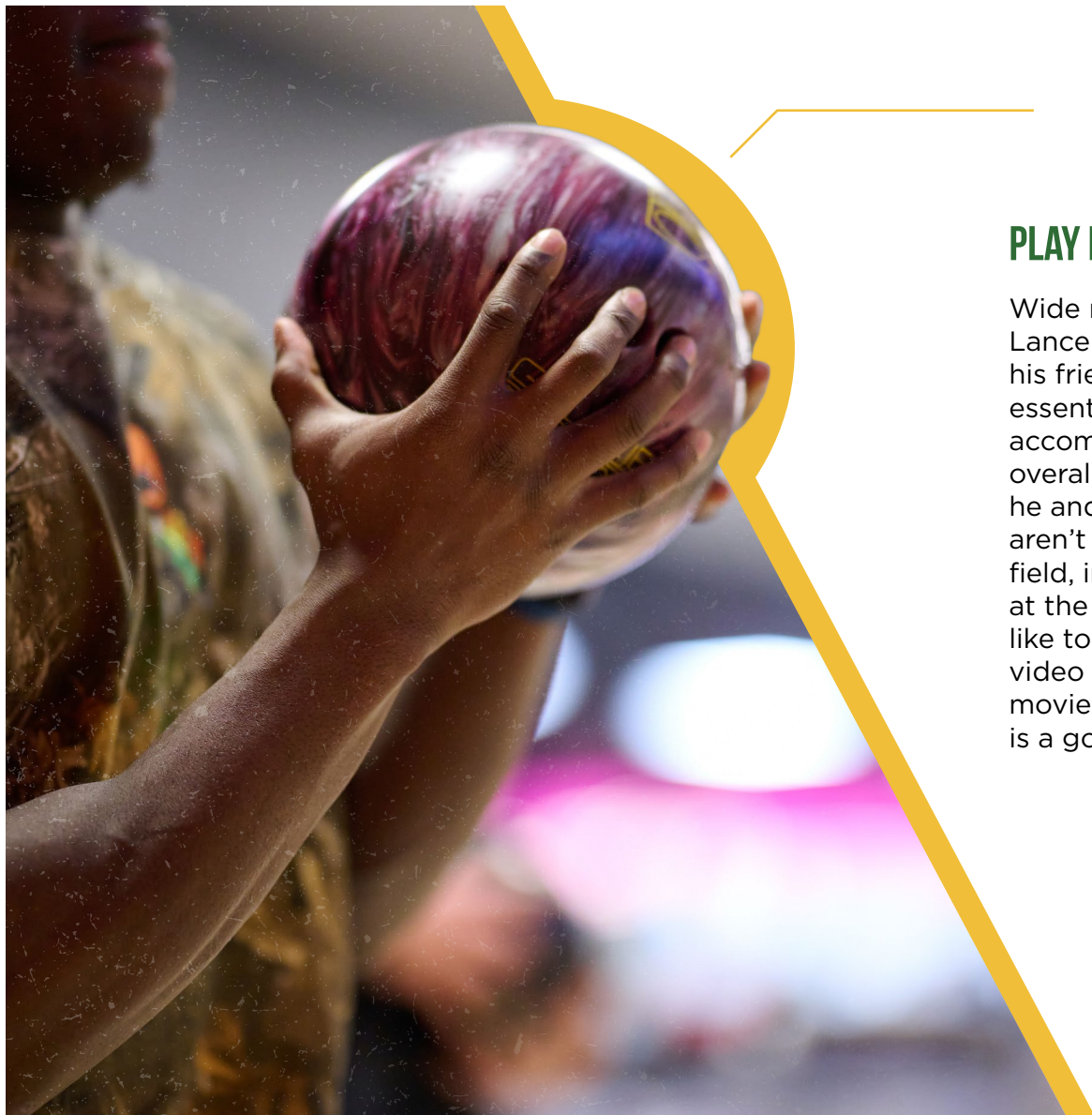
The team discussed the book in breakout groups at requisite weekly meetings that Tim dubbed "Captain's School," a program he designed to equip every member of his team with foundational leadership skills.

Captain's School, held throughout the winter months, kicked off before the sun had risen. Most players arrived at the Sanford Health Athletic Complex (SHAC) in warm, comfy clothes — a notebook and "The Slight Edge" in hand.

"It's not a fashion show," Bryce said, grinning. "You just have to show up."

After hearing from a rotating ensemble of guest speakers ranging from sleep experts to financial advisors to coaches who shared their insights and advice, NDSU's football team transformed into a book club. The players scattered into breakout groups that compete together throughout the year, earning points for academic achievements, meeting weight room goals, attendance at practices and team meetings, and hours of community service.

Some groups kicked back by the lockers, others in conference rooms. Bryce's group, who chose the team name "Fourth and Volunteers," met in what looked like a makeshift kitchen with a microwave and stainless-steel refrigerator on one side and a whiteboard on the other.



PLAY LIKE THE BISON

Wide receiver Bryce Lance '25, '26 says his friendships are an essential part of his accomplishments and overall happiness. When he and his teammates aren't on the football field, in the classroom, or at the weight room, they like to bowl, golf, play video games, and watch movies (Bryce's favorite is a good rom-com).



On a blustery March morning, defensive ends coach Carlton Littlejohn '17 led the Fourth and Volunteers through a conversation on chapters 13-15, asking everyone to start by naming their heroes. *My dad, my mom, my grandpa, my sister, God*, the players said, one by one.

Bryce named his older brother, Trey, who kicked off his college career as starting quarterback for the Bison and became the first freshman to win the FCS Walter Payton Award before entering the NFL draft in 2021.

"He paved the way for where I want to go," Bryce said.

The Fourth and Volunteers then talked about the qualities of givers versus takers, described some of their own daily non-negotiables, and discussed

the importance of personal reflection. They shared stories and struggles; the conversations felt vulnerable and deeply sincere.

"It just really puts into perspective how people come from all different walks of life, from all over the country, to come play this sport in North Dakota, and then you build relationships with them," Bryce said. "Those connections are almost always more rewarding than any play I could make in a game, because I know these are friends I'll have for life."

THESE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS with teammates, coaches, and fans are a big part of what motivated Bryce to spend one more year at NDSU. He's earning his MBA in business administration and closing out his last year of eligibility

with the Bison, even though he had the opportunity to negotiate a bigger paycheck through the transfer portal.

"Money is great, but there are always going to be opportunities for money. I think the opportunity that I have here, to finish out my college career with my best friends, is something that's way more valuable," Bryce said.

There are, of course, the aches and pains of grueling practices and the adrenaline of all 12 regular-season games. The hours clocked in the weight room, the early mornings at the SHAC. The rewards of making it to the championship game, the feeling of looking out at the crowd as the team holds up another national title.

And then there are moments like this.



Bryce says, "You have to have people when you're doing college athletics ... it's really hard to do alone." Building those relationships happens at practice — and sometimes at the bowling alley, where the Bison trade cleats for faux leather bowling shoes and protein shakes for pepperoni pizza.

Two weeks before the official start of the 2025 football season, Bryce and a handful of his teammates met at West Acres Bowl, trading cleats for faux leather bowling shoes, protein shakes for pepperoni pizza.

When Bryce's friend and fellow wide receiver Jackson Williams '27, clearly in his own tier of bowling proficiency, hit a strike with his signature pink-and-purple galaxy bowling ball, it warranted a touchdown-worthy celebration.

"It's intense," Bryce joked. "It's competitive."

It's reminiscent of what Hua Hsu wrote in his memoir, "Stay True," a meditation on a college friendship that shaped his identity and outlook.

"The true account would be necessarily joyful ... It would be an account of love and duty ... It would be filled with dreams ... and an eagerness to dream again," Hsu wrote.

He could have been describing what it takes to make a team when you look back in the rearview — moment by moment, player by player, game by game. The practices at the crack of dawn. The conversations in the makeshift kitchen. The struggles. The triumphs. The occasional evenings at the bowling alley.

"It would be boring, because you simply had to be there," Hsu concluded. "It would be poetry and not history." 🐾



“As a mentor, Bill is really consistent, caring, and wants to plug students into the industry,” Dylan Kallman ’22, co-founder of Great Plains Greens, said. “It’s a real relationship — he helps build your career path, but also your character.”

The ‘Master Connector’

Story by Micaela Gerhardt
Photos by Kensie Wallner

Dr. Bill Wilson ’75, one of the world’s most influential agricultural economists, leverages his international network to create connections between students and the industry.

With a 24/7 news cycle, it can be difficult to keep up with the latest developments. But NDSU students enrolled in Introduction to Commodity Trading with Dr. Bill Wilson ’75 have an incentive to stay informed.

Every Tuesday, class begins with Bill giving a five-minute summary of a recent development that impacts world commodity markets — say U.S. tariffs on key trading partners, droughts on the Danube River, or attacks on commercial ships in the Black or Red Sea. Then, he calls on students randomly, asks them to stand up, and fires off questions about world news and its impact on commodity markets. They have one minute to answer and demonstrate that they’re conversant.

“I’ve found it to be a very teachable moment,” Bill said. “At the end of the semester, the students thrive on it. Not all of them thrive at the same rate, especially early on, but I’m trying to teach and elevate everybody.”

Bill, who has earned a reputation as one of the most influential agricultural economists in the world, is the CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading and a University Distinguished Professor at NDSU, where he has been a professor for 45 years.

Throughout his career, Bill has taught more than 2,200 undergraduate students and advised more than 70 graduate students, many of whom have earned C-suite positions in large agribusinesses, commodity companies, railroads, and food and

beverage companies in the U.S. and abroad.

“I think for any senior professor, the real benefit — what keeps you going — is how well your students do,” Bill said, “and I have a ton of them who’ve done well.”

In addition to teaching, Bill is a highly active researcher, consultant, and board member for public and private agricultural companies who seek his expertise in commodity marketing, risk and strategy, agricultural technology, and transportation and logistics. Currently, he serves as the board chair of NCH Capital, one of the largest private equity funds invested in Russian/Ukrainian agriculture, as well as local firms AMITY and 701-X.

“People reach out to him from all over the world,” former student

Dylan, now an alumnus, continues to meet with Bill regularly — on this occasion, at Youngblood Coffee Roasters in downtown Fargo. Dylan credits Bill for making connections that led to five of the six internships he had as an NDSU student and says Bill continues to expand his professional network post-grad.



“For any senior professor, what keeps you going is how well your students do, and I have a ton of them who’ve done well.”

— Dr. Bill Wilson ’75
CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading

Mike Ricks ’84 said. “I mean, who gets asked by a Russian exchange to come and help them design a futures contract? A professor at North Dakota State University in Fargo.”

Mike is the first graduate student Bill ever advised. He says Bill has leveraged his international network to connect students to the industry since his earliest years as a professor. In fact, Bill helped secure the interview that led to Mike’s first job out of college: a position with Continental Grain Company, which was later acquired by Cargill.

At Cargill, a multinational food corporation, Mike managed the wheat, soybean, and corn desks and spent

five years gaining valuable market insights in Geneva, Switzerland. This allowed him to see the world of commodity marketing from many different angles. Today, Mike serves as Cargill’s vice president of trading and merchandising.

“With his contacts in the industry, Bill is able to open the door and give his students the opportunity to land very good jobs,” Mike said. “He takes it personally and works hard at making those connections.”

It’s a sentiment that echoes across generations of students. Ashley Ritteman ’10 grew up in Rugby, North Dakota, and developed an interest in international business after spending a semester abroad in Singapore. Knowing she wanted to return to her North Dakota roots, Ashley decided to pursue

a master’s degree in agribusiness and applied economics at NDSU.

Bill served as Ashley’s thesis advisor. He ensured she had the grant support needed to conduct her thesis on a personal passion area: expanding global trade for North Dakota businesses. This thesis led to the launch of Valor Victoria in 2016, an inland supply chain company that has exceeded \$1 million in revenue, placing it among the top 1.9% of women-owned businesses (Forbes). Ashley is its co-founder and CEO, and her husband, Thomas Ritteman ’08, ’10 — another of Bill’s former students — is its chief analyst.

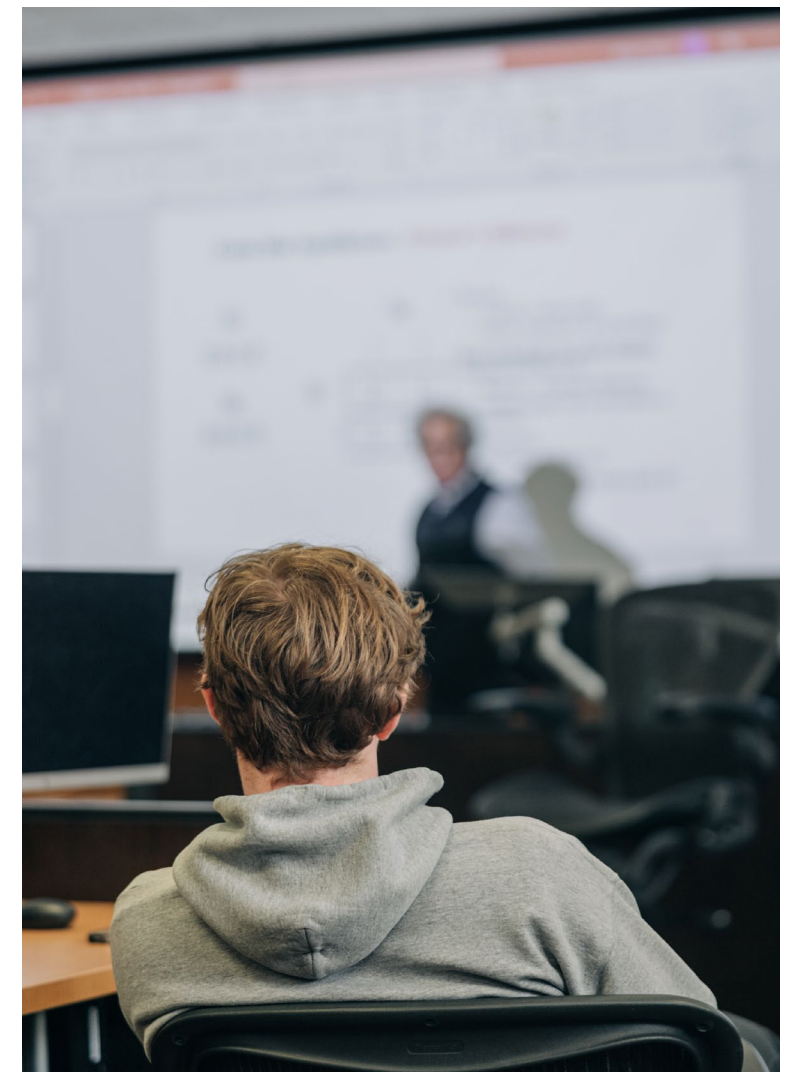
Ashley says Bill possesses a wealth of valuable business information from his experience as a board member and consultant. From navigating

tariffs to scaling a business to the influence of geopolitical factors, Bill remains the businessperson Ashley turns to whenever she needs advice.

“I always felt that coming from a small, rural town in North Dakota, I didn’t have the social capital to springboard onto a larger stage,” Ashley said. “But Bill is a master connector, and that was so valuable for a student like me who wanted to do really big things but remain in North Dakota.”

This is where Bill’s story begins too: a North Dakota kid with the drive to make an impact. Inspired by his mother, who was an accountant, Bill developed an interest in economics. In 1971, he enrolled at NDSU, the university just down the road from where he grew up.

During his junior year in college, Bill was



“Bill is a master connector, and that was so valuable for a student like me who wanted to do really big things but remain in North Dakota.”

— Ashley Ritteman '10
Co-founder and CEO of Valor Victoria



Bill, the CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading and a University Distinguished Professor, has taught agribusiness and applied economics at NDSU for 45 years.

accepted into a study abroad program in India, which sparked his curiosity about world affairs. He had never been out of the country before, never been on an airplane.

“It was 1974. We had Nixon, Watergate, Vietnam. We favored Pakistan in the India-Pakistan war. We opposed India’s development of nuclear power,” Bill said, recalling the unique geopolitical circumstances during his semester abroad. “I matured a lot during that time — I learned about our country because I was in another country.”

After earning his undergraduate degree in economics from NDSU the following year, Bill went to the University of Manitoba, where he earned a Ph.D. in agricultural economics and continued to study through an international lens.

He was hired as a professor at NDSU in 1980. At that time, commodity markets were relatively stable — there was little risk and limited opportunities. If the price of wheat changed 10 cents in a year, it was notable. His classroom came equipped with a blackboard and chalk.

Today, things are different.

The geopolitical landscape is highly unpredictable, making markets more volatile. The price of wheat might fluctuate by 40 cents before 9 a.m. And Bill teaches in the Commodity Trading Room, where NDSU students in agribusiness and applied economics have access to the most cutting-edge technology in the industry, making market news instantaneously available.

The NDSU Commodity Trading Room opened its doors in 2012. Inside, students are invited to explore financial data, news, research, and analytics around the clock.

“You didn’t just have to use textbooks and theory. You could be like, ‘Alright, let’s pull corn prices, go create a data set, run a regression, then upload that data, run a Monte Carlo simulator, and run the distribution,’” former student Dylan Kallman ’22 said.

Dylan says he spent more hours in the Commodity Trading Room than in his own apartment — often clocking 10 hours on Saturday and 10 more on Sunday. With 24/7 access to

11 Bloomberg terminals (now there are 12), he was able to develop skills and gain confidence with industry tools.

The gift and privilege of this access became clear when Dylan talked with a friend at another university who was sharing one Bloomberg terminal with all the other students in his program — using it required making a reservation weeks in advance.

“When I got to a job interview, they didn’t have to wonder, ‘Is he entry level? Could he figure it out?’ because I could go into detail,” Dylan, a corporate development and merger and acquisition analyst at Ulteig and co-founder of Great Plains Greens, said. “That room is absolutely critical. The more hours students spend in it, the greater their career opportunity will be.”

The Commodity Trading Room was driven by Bill’s vision — though at first, he had to be persuaded. It took a group of former students serving alongside him on the Minneapolis Grain Exchange to convince Bill to abandon his

blackboard teaching methods.

“They said, ‘The world of commodity trading and marketing is becoming electronic, and if you’re going to train people to work in this profession, you’ve got to expose them to it,’” Bill remembers.

He began meeting with campus leadership, peers at other universities, and industry members. Rick Dusek ’88, a former student and the executive vice president of ag retail, distribution, and transportation at CHS, was a partner in early conversations.

“That was a distinct change in NDSU’s approach to and connection with industry, because Bill reached out and said, ‘Tell me what we need to do to prepare students better,’” Rick said. “It was a key, transformational moment for NDSU and the industry, quite frankly.”

Rick says that when NDSU graduates come to CHS with trading room experience, they require less training and have greater opportunity to jumpstart their careers.

“When I was young, it took me a couple years of training before I got my first big risk management job,” Rick said. “Now, if somebody

comes in and really understands the marketplace and knows how to use the technology, it could be a matter of months.”

Experiencing how the Commodity Trading Room improved student and industry outcomes led to even greater collaboration between NDSU and CHS, the nation’s leading farmer-owned cooperative. In 2016, the company established the CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading. Bill was named its inaugural holder.

“It’s an honor and a responsibility,” Bill said. “I’m not only representing the University; I’m representing the industry. What does industry want? More students, better training, and better technology, so that guides everything I do.”

Funds from the NDSU Center for Trading and Risk increase access to education and help meet workforce needs. The endowment generates stipends for four to six graduate students annually, including two with a focus in agricultural technology, and five additional \$15,000 scholarships.

“That’s a big number, but what is the goal? The goal is to recruit the smartest people there are, who really

want to work in these fields, and give them good training, because when they go out to be leaders, they’re going to be stars,” Bill said.

Long before Bill became an NDSU student, and later, a professor, campus was his playground. In the 1960s, Bill and his three brothers learned to skateboard by practicing on the small slope in front of the NDSU Library.

The world today is different than the one that existed then. It’s different from 1974, when Bill spent a semester abroad in India, and from 1975, when he graduated from NDSU with his degree in economics.

It’s different from 1980, when Bill earned his Ph.D. and accepted a teaching position at NDSU, and from 1987, when he went on sabbatical at Stanford University. Different from the 2010s, when he was named a University Distinguished Professor, mobilized efforts to establish the Commodity Trading Room, and became the inaugural CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading. But one thing remains constant.

On a recent return flight to Fargo from the snow-dusted mountains of Sun Valley, Idaho, where Bill enjoys skiing, the man sitting beside him turned to him and asked, “You’re Dr. Wilson, aren’t you?”

He explained that Bill had been his professor, and later his son’s professor.

For Bill, this exchange illustrates the impact of his life’s work.

“One of the reasons I keep teaching,” Bill says, “is that not a week goes by without somebody saying to me, ‘You were my professor.’ Not a week. That is the reward: having an impression on your students who remember you.” 🐻

Success: A TEAM PROJECT

With support from the community and her family, Caryn Marty '26 is empowered to say “yes” to all the possibilities NDSU has to offer.

Story by Sarah Coomber | Photos by Kensie Wallner

She didn't know it at the time, but Caryn Marty '26 launched her engineering career in her family's farmyard near Chokio, Minnesota, 100 miles south of Fargo.

The oldest of four siblings born over five years, Caryn recalls playtimes spent sorting through pieces of scrap wood, metal, and other spare parts, which she, her brothers, and sister used to build forts.

Those early experiences set Caryn on a path toward an outstanding four years at NDSU. Now a senior preparing to graduate with a degree in industrial engineering and management, she has built an impressive list of accomplishments, including:

- Earning a teaching assistantship in her first year at NDSU
- Working as a supply chain intern at Doosan Bobcat in West Fargo, North Dakota
- Serving as president of the NDSU chapter of the Society of Women Engineers

Caryn says these opportunities came about in part due to her habit of saying “yes.”

But she will be the first to tell you that success is a team project — and hers includes family and friends in her hometown, plus the Bison Herd: classmates, sorority housemates, professors who believe in her, and scholarship donors who help make college more accessible.

“There’s definitely that family atmosphere here at NDSU, like everybody knows everybody,” she said. “And if you don’t know someone, that’s OK, because they’re going to include you like you’ve been part of their family for years.”

Gravitating toward NDSU

In high school, Caryn discovered her love of math and began imagining a career in engineering. But she also loved her economics class, which happened to be taught by her mom, Anita Marty '04.

Researching career possibilities for her daughter, Anita came across industrial engineering, a field that combines business and math. Caryn describes it as a broad discipline that involves analyzing data and systems to make operations more efficient. It is part

of fields as diverse as health care, manufacturing, and supply chain management.

Before long, Caryn started testing the waters, job shadowing an industrial engineer at Superior Industries in Morris, Minnesota. She still lights up describing her supervisor’s work routine.

“He was on the production floor, measuring things, analyzing things,” she recalled. “But he was also up in the office, using spreadsheets. I was like, this is great, this is perfect.”

Her question soon became, *How do I pursue this path? And where?*

After visiting a couple of other campuses, Caryn and Anita toured NDSU.

With just 30 classmates at Chokio-Alberta High School, Caryn was hesitant to launch into a university with 12,000 students, but Anita encouraged her to take a look. Another Chokio student, Darby (Beyer) Straus '20, had studied industrial engineering at NDSU and told Anita that once she got into her major, the campus didn't feel so big.

As Caryn and Anita toured the industrial engineering and management program, they saw pictures of Darby in a hallway



Caryn's team includes her mom, Anita Marty '04 (top right), scholarship donors like Emmy Vareberg '93 (bottom right), family, friends, and the Bison Herd.



photo collage and in pamphlets promoting the department. They learned Darby had served as her class's commencement speaker.

Everyone seemed to know and care about Darby, who now works as a senior actuarial analyst at Optum, a health care company in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

It made a big impression.

As they left for home, Caryn told her mom, “That’s the place I want to be.”

Building momentum

Since arriving at NDSU, Caryn has embraced life on campus.

“You only get one life,” she said, “so I think it’s important to say ‘yes’ when opportunities arise. Why not?”

That helps explain why Caryn is the president of the NDSU chapter of the Society of Women Engineers and served on the 2024 to 2025 Homecoming Court; why

she is vice president of Saddle and Sirloin and plays intramural basketball; why she is a Kappa Delta sorority member and works as a supply chain intern on the petrochemicals team at Doosan Bobcat.

While it’s easy to focus on Caryn’s successes and wide-ranging interests, her path through NDSU hasn’t been a straight shot from point A to point B.

She describes one course where she spent 20 to 30 study hours per test and still struggled to get through the semester. *“I’d never been so happy to pass a class in my life!”*

And she reveals that there were jobs she applied for and didn’t get — and the NDSU College of Engineering Ambassadors program she tried for and didn’t get accepted to ... until later.

“If you don’t put yourself out there, you’re never going to know,” she said. “So you have to allow yourself to fail, otherwise you’ll never succeed.”

Consider Caryn’s teaching assistantship for Mechanical Engineering 212.

She started as a TA the second semester of her freshman year and, since then, has helped more than 600 NDSU students learn engineering software.

But during the first semester of her freshman year, she fought her way through that exact class, spending most of it completely flummoxed. Evening after evening, Caryn and her lab partner peppered the professor, Dr. Ali Amiri, with questions.

Finally, she found her footing. And by the end of the semester, Ali invited Caryn to apply to teach that lab.

Of course, she said yes.

External forces

Caryn brought plenty of energy and ability to NDSU, but she recognized getting an education would require outside help.

Her mom encouraged her to apply for scholarships, because she knew the difference they could make. When Anita was at NDSU in the early 2000s, her parents weren’t able to help her financially, so she worked 40 hours a week to pay for school.

Anita’s on-campus work

introduced her to friends and gave her real-world experiences, like managing the Memorial Union information desk and overseeing check cashing, the copy shop, and ticket sales.

But working kept her from participating in student organizations. Plus, she was dating her now-husband, Jake, who was farming in Chokio, so most weekends she went home to see him.

“I look back now, and I wish I would have taken more of the opportunities that Caryn has,” Anita reflected. “But for me, my life was in a different spot.”

The difference between her and her mom’s NDSU experiences isn’t lost on Caryn.

“I think it makes her a little bit wistful,” Caryn reflected. “But also, I think it makes her really happy that I get to do things that she never got to.”

Anita agrees.

“Caryn went to NDSU and it’s like for the first time in her life, she got to be who she wanted to be and do what she wanted to do. And with that, she just really blossomed.”

Today Caryn’s two jobs — her teaching assistantship and her internship at Doosan Bobcat — are giving her engineering experience. And her scholarships are freeing up her time for leadership positions in campus organizations, which tend to meet in the evenings.

“If I didn’t have the scholarships I do, I think I’d have to pick up a third job for nights and weekends,” she said, adding that every scholarship makes an impact.

“It may not seem like \$500 here, \$1,000 there is going to make that much of a difference in a student’s life,” she said, “but that’s 100 hours they can spend focusing on what really moves them forward.”

One hundred hours. Those hours give students like Caryn time to learn, put coursework into practice, develop leadership skills,

and build connections.

But there’s something else that makes those scholarships so valuable: “Knowing that someone has chosen you to support does wonders for continuing when the schoolwork gets hard,” Caryn said.

“I’m from a tiny town that most people have never heard of, and I have people who have never met me choosing to give me money because they want to support NDSU, they want to support students, and they want to make a difference — and they have. It’s given me a lot to be grateful for.”

Encouraging student potential

Last spring, Caryn was selected as the student speaker for Evening of Distinction, an annual event that honors recipients of the NDSU Foundation Alumni Awards. During the event, she sat beside her mom, who she describes as her No. 1 supporter, and Emmy Vareberg ’93, one of her scholarship donors and member of the NDSU College of Engineering Advisory and Advancement Board.

Emmy, an industrial engineer, and her husband, Troy ’90, an electrical engineer, created the Vareberg Engineering Scholarship Endowment dedicated to women entering the engineering field. They remember how scholarships helped them when they were NDSU students.

“We know firsthand how transformative an engineering education was for us,” said Emmy, who with Troy owns two Fargo-based companies, Vareberg Engineering and Blue Comply. “This was an opportunity to pay it forward when we had the financial ability to do so.”

Spending time with Caryn has helped make Emmy and Troy’s scholarship donation feel personal.

“It may not seem like \$1,000 is going to make that much of a difference in a student’s life, but that’s 100 hours they can spend focusing on what really moves them forward.”

— CARYN MARTY ’26

Industrial engineering and management student

Help students make the most of their time at NDSU by supporting the NDSU Opportunity and Excellence Scholarship Fund!



Visit NDSUFoundation.com/donate/opportunity-and-excellence

“It’s been humbling to hear how it has affected her life,” Emmy said. “It’s been a powerful reminder of why we choose to give.”

For Anita, the event was a special opportunity to connect with accomplished alumni and NDSU supporters like Emmy who recognize Caryn’s potential. And Caryn says meeting the Varebergs and other scholarship donors has expanded her sense of belonging in the Bison community.

She intends to pay it forward. Her experiences as a TA have inspired Caryn to pursue a doctorate in STEM education so she can become a professor who encourages future generations of engineers — ideally at NDSU.

“I want to be a mentor,” Caryn said. “I want to be known as someone who will always encourage students to say ‘yes’ to all the opportunities they have.” 🌱



STRONGER TOGETHER

Marvin's partnership with NDSU is a testament to the power of community, innovation, and the belief that anything is possible.

Story by Bethany Hardwig '27



Avery Hodell '24, '25 chats with Marvin CEO Paul Marvin and senior vice president of human resources Val Johnson during their NDSU tour. (Photos by Kensie Wallner)

On a surprisingly snowy day in March 2024, leadership from Marvin, the 113-year-old manufacturer of premium windows and doors, traveled from the company's headquarters in Warroad, Minnesota, to NDSU. CEO Paul Marvin and senior vice president of human resources Val Johnson arrived on campus to commemorate Marvin's premier partnership with the NDSU College of Engineering.

This partnership was catalyzed by Marvin's investment in the Richard Offerdahl '65 Engineering Complex, which will open its doors in fall 2026. As part of their visit, Paul and Val were invited to tour NDSU's existing engineering spaces, meet with campus leadership, and learn more about opportunities to partner with the NDSU College of Business.

As Paul and Val were guided through the materials processing lab, Paul approached every student he encountered. I followed along, taking photos and listening while Paul asked each student their name, major, year in school, and what they enjoyed most about their area of study. From there, the conversations wandered in various directions, covering their hometowns, what inspired the work they were doing, and their future goals — both personal and professional.

After learning about each student, Paul would share some insight, opportunity, or connection to Marvin, ask the student if they had employment lined up after graduation, and share that Marvin was hiring and would be lucky to

have them. It was not a sales pitch, but a genuine extension of care and opportunity.

Witnessing these interactions, I was struck by Paul and Val's energy: wise, thoughtful, conscientious, intentional, and people-centered. From that point on, my curiosity about Marvin only grew.

This story is recent, but Marvin's partnership with NDSU began more than 30 years ago when Marvin opened its first manufacturing facility in the Fargo area. Under the pillars of invest, engage, and employ, Marvin has fostered a unique and purposeful relationship with NDSU and its students ever since.

"We've long valued the reciprocal relationship between Marvin and NDSU, where students, the community, and our company collaboratively thrive," Paul said. "Innovation is critical to our long-term commitments and success, and graduates of NDSU arrive at Marvin with core competencies and the curiosity needed to create impact in modern manufacturing careers."

Marvin employees have given guest lectures in NDSU classes, participated in mentorship programs through the College of Engineering and College of Business, guest-starred on the student-led Power to Sell podcast, and judged fourth-year architecture students' studio designs. The company frequently participates in NDSU's career expos and hires NDSU students for its summer internship program.

"Marvin's collaboration with NDSU has been 30 years in the making. Along the way, it's developed into a deeply meaningful and mutually beneficial partnership," Chris Barta, Marvin's vice president of fiberglass operations who also serves on the NDSU College of Engineering Advisory and Advancement Board, said.

"Over the years, we've welcomed hundreds of interns from the College of Engineering, many of whom joined Marvin in full-time roles," Chris added. "In fact, we have more than 150 NDSU alumni on our teams today. The early relationship that took root decades ago between Marvin and NDSU has led us to this important milestone in our partnership."

Marvin is also engaged in other areas of NDSU. Chris Stith, Marvin's vice president of human resources, serves on the NDSU College of Business Advisory Board. The company has identified academic programs where they could create connections and recruit more talent, including human resources, finance, supply chain management, and sales. Across disciplines, Marvin sees students and young professionals as an essential part of the company's future.

"We're embracing this moment to imagine what's possible alongside these students," Val said. "They arrive with fresh eyes, fearless ideas, and a way of seeing the world that challenges and inspires us. The real opportunity is inviting the students to help shape the next chapter of the Marvin story."

Eager to create even more opportunities for the next generation of leaders, Marvin hosted a sales competition, the Frozen Showdown, at its headquarters in Warroad. In February 2025, students from NDSU and the University of Minnesota Duluth, along with campus and NDSU Foundation partners like me, were invited to experience Marvin and the Warroad community firsthand while gaining educational and networking opportunities.

One of the most valuable experiences our students had was the chance to connect with a wide range of Marvin employees, who were, in equal parts, committed, knowledgeable, passionate, intentional, and inviting.

From tours of Marvin's headquarters, showroom, and hometown of Warroad to pre-competition preparation and the judges panel, each interaction between students and members of the Marvin team offered a glimpse into the company's values, its culture, and the quality of life in Warroad.

"Marvin is such a unique company with how much they genuinely care and want to do good," Amanda Waletski '25, a finance and business administration graduate who participated in the Frozen Showdown, said. "The sales competition felt so personable and specifically tailored to [us] students."

Marvin debuted the newly renovated north wing of its headquarters facility in February 2024, just one year before our arrival for the Frozen Showdown. Blending modern, intentional design with deep respect for tradition, every detail paints a picture of Marvin’s future while honoring a story about its history.

The company’s legacy of innovation and leadership is rooted in its founder, George G. Marvin, whose community-focused vision evolved into a thriving nationwide business thanks to an ongoing commitment to quality and a belief in putting people first.

Today, Marvin is a global leader in window and door manufacturing, and George’s values continue to ring true. At Marvin, thinking differently isn’t just about products — it’s about people, and the recognition that progress happens when unique perspectives come together to solve challenges in new and creative ways.

Whether it’s integrating sustainable materials, reimagining workspaces to foster collaboration, or investing in talent that brings fresh insights, Marvin is committed to evolving with intention.

Marvin’s Warroad headquarters is more than just an office — it’s a hub for ideas. With open spaces, natural light, and a seamless connection to Warroad’s remarkable landscape, Marvin has created an environment that promotes creativity and well-being.

This philosophy is evident in Marvin’s sprawling manufacturing spaces as well. By blending safety and efficiency with deep-rooted values, the company has created an environment where employees can elevate their work, challenge assumptions, and drive the business forward. The manufacturing floor is more than a plant — it’s a testament to Marvin’s belief that when people are given the space to innovate, great things happen.

At the NDSU Foundation, one of the things our president and CEO, John Glover, consistently reminds the team is that our north star is support to campus. When we have the opportunity to collaborate with industry partners like Marvin to support student success — in the classroom and in their careers — we are delivering on our mission. Together, we answer the call to help prepare NDSU students for whatever the future holds, whether that be in research, industry, or simply the way they make people feel.

Marvin’s intentionality and thoughtfulness toward its employees, guests, and the Warroad community are equally evident in its partnership with NDSU. The company is actively collaborating with the University and Foundation to ask and explore essential questions that will shape the future of both education and industry.

What do students need in order to learn and thrive in college so that they can meet their career goals? How do we best invest in, support, and prepare them for their futures?

As NDSU President Dave Cook often emphasizes, and genuinely believes, “Industry partnerships are the future of higher education.” The University’s partnership with Marvin is a strong example of why that’s such a positive and promising direction. 🍷



Marvin hosted NDSU students at their company headquarters in Warroad, Minnesota. In addition to the sales competition, they invited students on immersive tours of Marvin and the greater Warroad community. (Photos by Bethany Hardwig '27)

THE FROZEN SHOWDOWN

At Marvin’s inaugural sales competition, NDSU students sharpen their skills in active listening, product knowledge, and persuasive communication.

Story by Kara Lidberg '17

Sunlight filters through expansive windows at the Marvin headquarters in Warroad, Minnesota, as 24 students from NDSU and the University of Minnesota Duluth — dressed in their business best — file into the building. There’s an air of anticipation. They are here to participate in Marvin’s inaugural Frozen Showdown, a role-playing competition where they will practice making a pitch and closing a sale with Marvin products.

This is no ordinary sales competition. The Frozen Showdown is a representation of a top employer’s commitment to ensuring successful career trajectories for university students.

Marvin, a family-owned and -led manufacturer of premium windows and doors, is a premier partner of the NDSU College of Engineering. The Frozen Showdown is an example of its growing partnership with other academic colleges at NDSU, furthering its reach and connection with students in varying degree programs.

“By participating in a real-life sales experience, we hope to support more NDSU students in developing the skills they’ll need to be successful after graduation,” Chris Stith, Marvin’s vice president of human resources and NDSU College of Business Advisory Board member, said. “If students are

willing to step outside their comfort zones and stretch themselves, they’re going to grow.”

The Marvin team has built in plenty of opportunities for the students to live, work, and play while in Warroad. The students’ two-day itinerary includes tours of Marvin’s product workshop, Warroad Heritage Center Museum, and the greater Warroad community; a Q&A with Marvin CEO Paul Marvin; and ice skating along the River Bend Skate Path on the Warroad River.

“I hope students get a real sense of Marvin’s culture and our commitment to staying engaged in the communities where we operate,” Chris said. “We believe vibrant communities and vibrant workforces go hand in hand — you can’t have one without the other.”

Marvin is one of 20 companies that partner with the NDSU Center for Professional Selling and Sales Technology (Sales Center) to provide students with hands-on learning experiences. The Frozen Showdown exemplifies Marvin’s unique partnership with NDSU — the company generously offered to host students at its headquarters and provided funds for their travel.

“This is a unique offering for

NDSU students that, presently, no other company partner can claim,” Eric Gjerdevig, executive director of the NDSU Sales Center, said.

With support from industry partnerships and NDSU alumni across the country, Eric has fostered a thriving community in the Sales Center. This dedicated academic unit and professional hub in the NDSU College of Business offers a minor and certificate in sales. Enrollment in the Sales Center has increased from 49 to 155 students in the past three years alone.

Leading up to the Frozen Showdown, Eric met with students weekly to fine-tune strategy and build momentum. He brought in local professionals to help students sharpen their role-playing skills through practice pitches. Marvin also lent support, providing product and company details to ensure students felt prepared.

“Participation in a sales competition is not a requirement,” Eric said. “These students are giving an above-and-beyond commitment, and my hope is that they feel empowered to hit the ground running after graduation and achieve more over the span of their careers.”

With corporate partners like Marvin, NDSU students can apply what they have learned in the classroom to a

real-life scenario.

Linnea Axtman '26, one of the NDSU students competing in the Frozen Showdown, is majoring in business administration and minoring in agribusiness and hospitality and tourism management. In addition to her degrees, Linnea is pursuing a certificate in professional selling at NDSU.

"I think experiential learning is what makes a college education special," Linnea said. "You can learn about sales principles in class, but you need to be able to put what you learn into practice and develop a muscle memory to make it stick."

Round 1: The Pitch

Linnea has 12 minutes to present her sales pitch to a Marvin team member posing as "Sam Smith," the owner of Dream Homes Inc., a fictional residential building company transitioning into building high-end lake homes in the area.

Her goal? Persuade "Sam" that installing Marvin windows and doors is the best choice for Dream Homes and its clients and, next, to secure a meeting with a homeowner.

Entering her designated competition room — three judges waiting for her, one acting as "Sam" — Linnea is a little

nervous, but mostly excited.

"You never know what's going to happen, but we have put in the practice, and I feel prepared," Linnea said. "At its core, this pitch is simply a conversation and a chance to practice my listening skills."

Linnea shares a brief history of Marvin — a company that's been innovating and serving customers for more than 113 years — and introduces three of the main selling points she has identified in Marvin products: innovative technology and quality, endless options for customization, and an industry-leading warranty.

"Sam" is highly talkative and introduces objections — like concerns regarding the price point — but Linnea always comes back to value.

"I felt a little crunched for time," Linnea said. "We're taught to ask open-ended questions, but I had to adapt and choose which questions were going to be most effective and redirect his answers to keep the pitch moving forward."

In her mock pitch, she shares that while Marvin products cost more than Dream Homes' current supplier, the company's clients would receive a higher-quality product. The current supplier's products are vinyl and have a much shorter life span than Marvin's offerings.

Unlike vinyl windows and doors — made from thermoplastic materials that expand and contract with changing weather — Marvin's fiberglass products remain stable, maintaining their structure regardless of temperature. Notably, Marvin's Ultrex® fiberglass is eight times stronger than vinyl.

After highlighting the value Marvin windows would bring to "Sam" and his company's projects, Linnea acknowledges his concern that switching window suppliers can be a hassle. However, she presents a thought-provoking question: If Dream Homes is constructing high-end homes, why wouldn't the company want to use high-quality windows?

She encourages "Sam" that this decision should be about the overall quality of the project and the longevity it offers to homeowners. This is a long-term investment.

The judges name Linnea as a finalist in the competition, and she moves on to the second round. She has secured a meeting with "Mr. Miller," a Dream Homes client building a lake home in Brainerd.

Round 2: The Meeting

The next morning, Linnea and the eight other finalists are led upstairs while the rest of the Frozen Showdown attendees watch them interact with "Mr. Miller" — played by Chris — via a conference room camera.

"It's powerful to give students the opportunity to take what they have learned in a classroom setting, synthesize it, and apply it to a real-life sales experience, especially under pressure," Chris said. "I love giving back and supporting students. For me, that's what playing 'Mr. Miller' is about."

Linnea Axtman '26, a Frozen Showdown finalist, delivers her sales pitch to a Marvin employee posing as "Sam Smith," owner of fictional Dream Homes Inc., in round one of the competition.

(Photos by Bethany Hardwig '27)

Again, Linnea has 12 minutes to present her sales pitch. Her goal this round is to secure "Mr. Miller's" trust in Marvin as a project partner and convince him to move forward with utilizing Marvin fiberglass windows.

She speaks with a calm confidence and maintains composure and a conversational tone, even as "Mr. Miller" introduces unexpected disruptions, like stalling to search for his glasses in his bag's many pockets or interrupting the flow of the meeting by attempting to make a phone call.

"You can try to plan as much as you want, but being able to think on your feet and adapt, that's the fun part," Linnea said.

"Mr. Miller" has objections as well, which include the price point of the windows. Without missing a beat, Linnea confidently says, "We don't sell on price; we sell on value," promising better overall quality for his family's dream home, a longer-lasting product, and the capability to customize design and size — a popular reason homeowners choose Marvin products.

There is a brief pause in the conversation — "Mr. Miller" is clearly impacted by her words. He nods and says that he, too, values quality. Linnea inquires, "Are we good to move forward?" He says yes.

Linnea stands, thanking her newest client for his time and trust in her and Marvin to create his dream home. She walks downstairs and is met with applause and encouraging words from Eric, her mentor and professor, and the other students.

One by one, the finalists finish their sales pitches. The room that was once quiet and attentive to the viewing screen quickly fills with conversation. Linnea and her teammates' faces are a tapestry of

MARVIN 

triumph, relief, and maybe a touch of uncertainty as everyone waits for the judges to deliberate.

Linnea is awarded third place — an impressive achievement in her first-ever university-level sales competition.

The competition may be over, but its impact lingers. Convinced that the technical skills will come with time, Linnea reflects that the Frozen Showdown has been a chance to hone her interpersonal skills.

"Being responsible for a sales pitch and feeling confident talking to people — that's what this experience provides," she said. "The real-world practice, networking opportunities, and confidence building will stick with me when I leave."

She wants to keep her career options open, but she says that experiential learning opportunities help her determine if a specific career path is right for her.

"This competition pushed me out of my comfort zone and emphasized the importance of asking thoughtful questions," Linnea said. "This helped me tailor my presentation to focus on what the customer would value most."

Her takeaways from the inaugural Frozen Showdown are profound — the challenges she faced helped build her confidence, refine her sales skills, and experience the impact of a company that puts its values into action.

"Marvin invests in their people, they invest in their community, and they invested in us by providing this opportunity," Linnea said. "They set the bar high as an employer."

As the students prepare to fly home, their minds race with possibilities. They leave Warroad not just as competitors but as future professionals and, hopefully, with a clearer vision of the career trajectories that lie ahead. 🌟



HOLISTIC ARCHITECTURE

Streaks of dust from
crumbling walls collect
on her black blazer as
NDSU alumna Kathleen
Lechleiter '81, '82 leads a
tour of vacant row homes
in Baltimore, Maryland.

