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**BUSINESS**  
*Journal*



**November 2025**



**Flip the Script** is all about celebrating the real story of Waterloo Schools, a district that is setting the standard for urban education and redefining what is possible. From rising achievement to stronger attendance, our students and staff are proving every day that success starts here. It is time to flip the script and see Waterloo Community School District for what it truly is: a place of growth, achievement, and **infinite possibilities!**



## WATERLOO STUDENTS ARE OUTPERFORMING

### Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP)

	2023-24	2024-25	% Growth
ISASP ELA - All Students	56.97%	58.21%	+1.24%
ISASP Math - All Students	56.02%	57.44%	+1.42%
ISASP Science - All Students	42.08%	51.13%	+9.05%
ISASP ELA - Minority Students	47.50%	48.82%	+1.32%
ISASP Math - Minority Students	46.27%	47.87%	+1.60%
ISASP Science - Minority Students	31.50%	40.24%	+8.74%
ISASP ELA - Students with IEPs	14.52%	16.16%	+1.64%
ISASP Math - Students with IEPs	19.37%	23.04%	+3.67%
ISASP Science - Students with IEPs	6.69%	16.62%	+9.93%
ISASP ELA - ELL Students	13.15%	18.59%	+5.44%
ISASP Math - ELL Students	24.47%	27.83%	+3.36%
ISASP Science - ELL Students	7.33%	13.49%	+6.16%

## STAFF CULTURE IS UNMATCHED

### A LEADER IN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

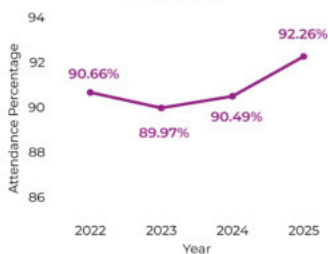
Waterloo Schools.....	87%
Nationwide.....	60-80%
Low-Socioeconomic Status (SES) Schools.....	50-70%

## STUDENT ATTENDANCE IS IMPROVING

Chronic Absenteeism Percentage  
District-Wide



Attendance Rate  
District-Wide





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# 20 UNDER FORTY



**14** HANNAH CRISMAN



**23** JASON KLEIN



**25** EMILY LAMAR

## 2025 HONOREES

The Courier and Cedar Valley Business Journal magazine announce the 20 Under 40 honorees for 2025

### BUSINESS BRIEFS

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### PEOPLE IN BUSINESS

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## CEDAR VALLEY BUSINESS

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### STAFF DIRECTORY

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# PAST 20 UNDER 40 WINNERS

## 2024 winners

Dr. Christopher Aldrich, Andrew Bell, Dr. Staci Boon (Cook), Jarod Creed, Samantha Gutknecht, Kelsey Hahn, Chris Hale, Lexie Heath, Rachael Hoffman, Ashley Johnson, Christopher Klinghammer, Stevan Krickovic, Chris Latta, Shanterra Martin, Dr. Eric Neverman, Selvedina Nuhanovic, Kyle Rasmussen, Alison Schrage, Jesse Spitzner, Dr. Elizabeth Voigt.

## 2023 winners

Brent Bovy, Natalie Dlouhy, Janae Guay, Alexa Hach, Zach Hansen, Simon Harding, Sarah Helleso, Amanda Huisman, Ashlyn Jungwirth, Hannan Luce, Charles Mhoon, Jim Miller, Hanna Nuss, Shantavia Parker, James Perry, Wesley Pilkington, Tony Polastrini, Alicia Rogers, Shar Roorda, Katelyn Tungland.

## 2022 winners

Edita Begic, Erin Bishop, Kingsley Botchway, Tylor (Ty) Burke, Megan Droste, Jordan Dunn, Matthew Gilbert, Cordt Holub, Natalie Hunter, Rebecca McCarty, Mikayla Montgomery, Nilvia Rodriguez, Jamekia Sanders, Abbie Schrader, Ty Smith, Michelle

Sweeney, Eashaan Vajpeyi, Seth Voigt, Qulishia Williams, Josh Wilson.

## 2021 winners

Aaron Broshar, Shay Caley, DaQuan Campbell, Kyle Clabby-Kane, Sarah Conger, Andrea Devore, Tim Dodd, Kade Hoppenworth, Kevin Kann, Amanda Lynch, Ryan McGeough, Kim Newby, Britni Perkins, Adam Scherling, Brandon Schoborg, Abby Sears, Ryan Shaw, Christopher Tims, Abby Wessel, Purvis Williams.

## 2020 winners

Scott Behrends, LaToshia Burrell, Nafissa Cisse-Egbuonye, Jesus Lizarraga-Estrada, Jordan Finger, Kelsey Hammer-Parks, Jordan Hansen, Todd Henningsen, Paul Lee, Joyce Levinston, Megan McKenzie, Andrew Morse, Lindsey Newcomb, Danielle Range, Tara Raymond, Patrick Ritter, Kelli Snyder, Amanda Stack, Ryan Stevenson, Nia Wilder.

## 2019 winners

John Anderson, Kyle Baker, Abby Turpin, Liz DeJode, Zach Everman, Julie Gleason, Katie Hillyer, Melanie Knipp, J'Kalein Madison, Ryan Meyer, Joyce Oaks, Tera O'Hare, Jamie Rath-

jen, Erin Schildroth, Bart Schmitz, Ben Stevens, Ryan Tucker, Oscar Valdivia, Mark Watje, Virginia Wilber

## 2018 winners

Joe Lichty, Kelsey Motley, Lamont Muhammad, Brian Wingert, Carl Ericson, Matt Lamos, Greg Jass, Therese Stevens, Megan Kugler, Michelle Jungers, Adriane Carlson, Trent Hunter, Amanda Weichers, Brent Dahlstrom, Keyaira Phillips, Andy Fuchtmann, Heather Labonte, Emily McClimmon, Ryan Wilson, Russel Karim

## 2017 winners

Dema Kazkaz, Adam Bolander, Keyah Levy, Ras Smith, Brian Aronson, Karin Rowe, Nick Betts, Jim Atty, Jennifer Stevenson, Gina Weekley, Dustin Whitehead, Joy Briscoe, Danielle Morris, Quovadis Marshall, Megan Hannam, Nate Clapham, Amy Wiles, Tara Estep, Lindy Zars, Gabe Berger

## 2016 winners

Laura Folkerts, Heidi Fuchtmann, Brian Gabel, Laura Hand, Emily Hanson, Mark Hubbard, Whitney Jackley, Phil Jones, Jill Krall, Mike Lind, Felicia Smith Nalls, Emily Neuendorf, Ryan Risetter, Paco Rosic, Bridget

Saffold, Brooke Trent, Jordan Ver-noy, Brad Wells, Cary Wieland, Zak Montgomery

## 2015 winners

Joe Bolick, Chris Corkery, Ann Duncan, Sarah Foster, David Hildahl, D.J. Holbach, Jess Krogh, Danny Laudick, Erin Maidan, Traci McCausland, Jill Mejia, Mark Miller, Stephanie Moore, Philip Nash, Kaylene Orr, Clifton Paulsen, Lalaina Rabary, Brad Smith, Katy Susong, Jonathan Walter

## 2014 winners

Amber Youngblut, Brent Johnson, Mike Tyer, Sarah Pauls, Clint Rowe, Annie VanderWerff, Reshonda Young, Matt Rowenhorst, Shaffer Ridgeway, Ashley Haugland, Jesse Tink, Lynn Blythe, Remi Cehic, Meagan Miller, Brad Grieves, Wendy Miller, Sherman Wise, Justin Dams, Jim Moody, Amanda Freet

## 2013 winners

Hillary Annis, Shawna Buckley, Nate Clayberg, Tabatha Cruz, Curtis DeGroote, Scott Dewey, Pat Grassley, Lori Hoffman, Brian Hoyer,

*Please see Winners, Page 7*



## CONGRATULATIONS to Wayne Gaston from Henninger Electric for being a 20 under 40 honoree for 2025

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# 20 UNDER FORTY



**Asa Badaczewska**



**Molly Burdess**



**Shelly Christensen**



**Isaiah Corbin**



**Hannah Crisman**



**Wayne Gaston**



**Emily Lamar**



**Tori Lockard**



**Patrick Luensmann**



**Joana Lwin**



**Samantha Price**



**Lauren Riensch**

## The Courier announces 22nd annual class of 20 Under 40 recipients

**R**ecipients have been named for The Courier's class of 2025 20 Under 40 Awards.

Twenty individuals who are serving their Cedar Valley communities were selected for the 22nd annual honors.

In July, the Courier began seeking nominations for the awards, which honor outstanding young leaders in the Cedar Valley who making a difference in their work and personal lives by making the area a better place. A committee sorted through dozens of nominations for this year's recipients.

Presenting sponsors are

the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa, Volunteer Center of Cedar Valley and The Courier.

A special event celebrating 20 Under 40 honorees will take place from 5 to 7:30 p.m. Nov. 13 at Diamond Event Center, 5307 Caraway Lane, Cedar Falls. There will be light appetizers and a cash bar. An awards presentation will take place.

Tickets are \$20 per person, available now online through the Volunteer Center of Cedar Valley at [vccv.org](http://vccv.org). Children 10 and under are free. The deadline for purchasing tickets is Nov. 6. Honorees will receive free tickets. Individuals will

be featured in the November issue of Cedar Valley Business magazine and in The Courier newspaper throughout the upcoming holiday season.

This year's recipients are:

- Asa Badaczewska, owner of Asa Brows Co., a beauty studio in Cedar Falls.

- Molly Burdess, Bradford Companies.

- Shelly Christensen, an events coordinator at University of Northern Iowa.

- Isaiah Corbin, director of development, Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments.

- Hannah Crisman, QA analyst, AgencyBloc.

- Wayne Gaston, owner,

Henninger Electric.

- Kathryn Gilbery, local food access coordinator at the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Energy & Environmental Education.

- Desirae Holmes, Sexual Assault Response Team coordinator for Riverview Center.

- Jason Klein, vice president, chief credit officer at Farmers State Bank.

- Emily Lamar, Juvenile Court Services for Iowa's 1st Judicial District.

- Tori Lockard, president and broker at Lockard Realty.

- Patrick Luensmann, UNI Pappajohn Center.

- Joana Lwin, director





**Kathryn Gilbery**



**Desirae Holmes**



**Jason Klein**



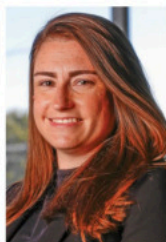
**Jillian Rutledge**



**Hector Salamanca  
Arroyo**



**Amanda Steege**



**Maggie Watkins**



**Aden Zwanziger**



## Winners

### From 5

Nick Jedlicka, Jeff Kurtz, Dan Levi, Kent McCausland, Matthew Miehle, Eric O'Brien, Nicole Recker, Doug Schwab, Katie Slade, Tim Terhune, Angela Weekley.

### 2012 winners

Melissa Barber, Natalie Brown, Paul Cooley, Chad Feldmann, Kevin Fittro, Mason Fromm, Will Frost, Matt Halbur, Nick Hildebrandt, Chris Holahan, Anesa Kajtazovic, Kyle Klingman, Krista McNurlen, Cheryl Meller, ShanQuiesha "Shae" Robinson, Chuck Rowe, Steve Slessor, Nick Taiber, Kim Tierney, Bill Wilson.

### 2011 winners

Joe Barber, Dave Becker, Ryan Bingman, Sarah Meyer-Reyerson, Amy Mohr, Aram Susong, Jordan Alborn, Wade Arnold, Erica Feldick, Lauren Finke, Zach Shimp, Jesse Knight, Heidi DuCharme, Scott Gall, Louis Hagarty, Nadia Korobova, Akela McDonald, Shannon Closson, Mike McGill, Derek Sallis.

### 2010 winners

Agnes Kress, Amy Frost, Amy Wienands, Brad Nelson, Brenda Schares, Brian Eddy, Chad Shipman, Chris Hurlley, Chris Western, Erica Martens, James 'Corye' Johnson, Jason 'Jay' Witham, Jenny Graeser, Lisa Zinkula, Michael Soppe, Ryan Frerichs, Sara Fogdall Miller, Sarah Parsons, Susan Roberts-Dobie, Tara Thomas.

### 2009 winners

Dr. Nick Goetsch, Alan Sweeney, Amber Jedlicka, Allison Parrish, Antonio N. Mays, Brittany Argotsinger, Brooke Burnham, Brad Schweppe, Chassidi Ferguson, Chris Reade, Christy Justice, Crystal Ford, Crystal Buzza, Maggie Burger, Stacey Christensen, Sheri Purdy, Jon Hennings, Joseph Fuller, Dr. Ben Squires, Janelle Darst.

### 2008 winners

Brad Best, Eric Braley, Heather Bremer-Miller, Molly Brown, Aaron Buzza, Kelly Christensen, Andrea Elliott, Angie Fuller, Jessica J. Miller, Michael Muhammad, Marc Riefenrath, Francesca Zogaib, Jennifer Hartman, Kristin Schaefer, Chad Abbas, Tavis Hall, Julieanne Gassman, Dan Dougherty, James "Jamie" Fettekether, Dan Kittle.

### 2007 winners

Emily Girsch, Dr. Matthew Kettman, Christopher Rygh, Ryan Sheridan, Christa Miehle, Niki Litzel, Heather Prendergast, Jenny L. Connolly, Nikki Wilson, Karry Golden, Danielle Rusch, Kelly Knott, Pares Shettigar, Mike Young, Scott J. Sernett, Shelly Smith, Noel C. Anderson, Burton "Bud" Field, Alyssa Bechtold, Randolph Bryan.

### 2006 winners

Tammy Bedard, Dr. Kyle Christison, Beth Cox, David Deeds, Tricia Freeman, Tim Godfrey, Blake Hollis, Jake Huff, Aimee Langlass-Landergott, Matt Loesche, Ryan Madison, Brad Metcalf, Andy Miehle, Dr. Brian Sims, Erik Skovgard, Carolyn Sween, Christy Twait, Deb Weber, Gary Wheat, Jamie Wilson.

### 2005 winners

Sean Abbas, Bill Bradford, Renee Christoffer, Angela Conrad, Matthew Craft, Chris Fereday, Kim Fettekether, Mark Funk, Jennifer Goos, Morgan Hoosman, Brad Leeper, Kyrstal Madlock, Brent Matthias, Jim Mudd Jr., Josh Schmidt, Justin Sell, John Speas, Andrew Van Fleet, Jason Weinberger, Joanne Wzontek.

### 2004 winners

Sarah Albertson, John Bunge, Steve Burrell, Telisa Burt, Bryan Burton, Jim Colloff, Katherine Cota-Uyar, Jeff Danielson, Abraham Funchess, Brad Jacobson, Scott Larson, David LeCompte, Jeff Mickey, Andy Miller, Marcus Newsom, Jack Nooren, Lisa Rivera-Skubal, Matt Rolinger, Sharon Samec, Joe Surma.

### 2003 winners

Stacie Brass, Ben Buckley, Mike Byl, Steve Carignan, Amy Dutton, Jack Emkes, Rachel Ford, Ann Hermann, Ann Kerian, Lake Lambert, Scott Leisinger, Eric Locke, Doug Miller, Maria Murphy, Eric Ritland, Robert Smith, Mike Trachta, Stacy Van Gorp, Mike Walden, Dave Wilson.

### 2002 winners

(21 selected) Troy Boelman, Blake Borwick, Drew Conrad, Barry DeVoll, Bryan Earnest, Theresa Hardy, Quintin Hart, Wade Itzen, Chris McGovern, Beth Meyer, Mason Moore, Mike Newland, Christopher Olmstead, Mike Place, Aimee Shepherd, Lynn M. Smith, Robert L. Smith, Chad Stroschein, Chris Thomas, Cathy Wilson-Sands, John Wood.

of Refugee and Immigrant Youth Organization in Waterloo.

■ Samantha Price, Ritland and Kuiper Landscape Architects.

■ Lauren Riensche, Cedar Falls Ghost Tour.

■ Jillian Rutledge, assistant director, Waterloo Public Library.

■ Hector Salamanca Arroyo, director of resource development, Boys & Girls Clubs of the Cedar Valley.

■ Amanda Steege, development director of the Grundy County Memorial Hospital Foundation.

■ Maggie Watkins, architect with Invision Architecture.

■ Aden Zwanziger, PDCM Insurance.

In its 22-year history, the 20 Under 40 award has become a prestigious honor for its recipients. Approximately 860 individuals have received the award since 2003.



20  
UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## ASA BADACZEWSKA

# A story of resilience, grit

META HEMENWAY-FORBES  
For The Courier

**I**t's been a big year for Asa Badaczewska. She welcomed her first child, a son, Barrett. Her husband, U.S. Army soldier Logen Winters, deployed to the Middle East in May, when Barrett was just 3 months old.

"It's a sacrifice, but I'm very proud of him for serving our country with honor and courage," said Badaczewska, 29.

And now, Badaczewska, an entrepreneur

and educator, has been named one of The Courier's 20 Under 40 honorees.

Badaczewska is the owner of Asa Brows, a beauty studio in Cedar Falls specializing in eyebrow threading and permanent makeup. What began as a one-woman shop in 2020 has since grown into a thriving business with a team of specialists.

"When I first started, I was just focused on serving my clients," she said. "But I realized if I wanted to grow I couldn't just

work in the business, I had to work for it. That's when I really started pouring into education, teaching others the skills of threading and permanent makeup, and helping them launch careers of their own."

Her hands-on training approach ensures her students learn more than technique.

"I want them to have confidence. Seeing their progress, their transformations, it's incredibly rewarding," she said.

*Please see Badaczewska, Page 10*



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## MOLLY BURDESS

Breaking  
DOWN  
barriersHOLLY HUDSON HILL  
holly.hill@wcfcourier.com

**D**on't let Molly Burdess's sweet smile fool you.

Fierce, driven and powerhouse are some of the words those who nominated her for 20 Under 40 honors describe her.

As human resources director for Bradford Companies, Burdess is pushing the boundaries and redefining her occupation.

Burdess, from Reinbeck, earned a bachelor's degree in human resources and a master's in business administration, both from Upper Iowa University. She and her husband, Andy, have three children, a son, Mason, 1, and daughters Brooklyn, 8, and Jadyn, 16.

*Please see Burdess, Page 10*



## Badaczewska

From 8

Badaczewska's portfolio has also expanded into real estate. In addition to her brow business, she owns rental properties and commercial space in Cedar Falls. But she isn't just focused on her own success. She regularly hosts events and collaborates with other local entrepreneurs.

"It's important to support and recognize and help grow other small businesses. That's how we all succeed, by pouring into other businesses," she said.

Badaczewska's story began far from the Cedar Valley. She was born in Slovenia. Her father died of brain cancer when she

was just 6 years old. Her mother, Enisa McConeghey, brought her to the United States to join relatives who had emigrated from Bosnia during the war.

"It was really hard on my mom, losing her husband and having a young child to care for," Badaczewska said. "But she paved the way for us, giving us a good foundation."

Her mother remains her greatest role model. "She's been my biggest mentor, instilling in me the value of hard work, positivity and always showing up and bringing your best," she said.

Her mom returns the sentiment. "Asa is a true force among young entrepreneurs under 40. (She's) fearless and full of vision. She built her business

“

*It's important to support and recognize and help grow other small businesses. That's how we all succeed, by pouring into other businesses.”*

**Please see Badaczewska, Page 11**

**Asa Badaczewska, 20 Under 40 winner**

## Burdess

From 9

She previously served as human resources manager at Greater Machining and Manufacturing Co.

Burdess has been with Bradford Companies — which includes Next Generation Wireless, Jiva Salonspa and Wheels Powersports locations — for more than nine years. She has been instrumental in taking NGW from 29 to 126 locations nationwide and growing the company's workforce from 60 employees to more than 400.

"Molly Burdess is a powerhouse in our organization," colleague Briana Parker said. "At just 35, she leads with bold ideas and sharp execution."

"Over the past nine years, (she) has been a key force in driving both the momentum and stability behind Bradford Companies' growth. Her role has evolved far beyond traditional HR — she's become a strategic leader at the heart of our transformation."

"I believe in elevating the HR profession to what it could and should be, whether it's growth, culture or the business as a whole," Burdess said.

"If there is a challenge or an opportunity, I see it, and I can help," she said.

She has carried that passion outside of her office walls.

“

*I believe in elevating the HR profession to what it could and should be, whether it's growth, culture or the business as a whole.”*

**Molly Burdess, 20 Under 40 winner**

She is past president of Cedar Valley Society for Human Resource Management and remains active in the organization.

"It connects human resource professionals with their communities," she said.

Burdess is also a co-founder of DisruptHR.

"It is a Ted Talk-style event designed to inspire and empower," she said. "Our goal is to get business leaders to think differently about all things work."

"There are 15 speakers who get five minutes each — quick but impactful presentations."

Burdess also sits on the executive board of One Cedar Valley.

"It is designed to help overcome barriers

to employment," she said. "There is no one barrier. Everyone's situation is unique, whether the issue is transportation or daycare or whatever it is. We help find resources for them."

"We have a lot of employer support and an impressive success rate."

She is also involved in Hawkeye Community College's Women's Leadership and Empowerment Conference.

"It's all about women coming together and lifting each other up," she said. "It is extremely powerful."

Burdess said there are two people she considers her mentors.

"I've been very fortunate to have people who have shown me what a good leader can and should be, Stacie Halverson at Greater and Bill Bradford," she said.

"There are two things I live by," she said. "The first is curiosity over judgment. If more of us adopted that mentality, the world would be better for everyone."

"The other is leaning into the opportunity, no matter how challenging or uncomfortable. That's what has helped me be successful in my career. I hope to inspire my children to do the same."

In her down time, Burdess likes to read and enjoy time with family and friends.

"I am so grateful to my husband," she said. "He is a true partner, and I wouldn't be able to be doing as much as I am without his support."



## Badaczewska

From 10

with grit, grace and heart. Her honesty, kindness and relentless work ethic set her apart."

Badaczewska graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in psychology, a theater minor and a certificate in industrial and organizational psychology. In 2019, she completed the esthetics program at Capri College, where she found her calling in the beauty industry.

"Being an immigrant, education was always highly valued in my family," she said. "At first I thought I wanted to go into clinical psychology, but I found healing and motivation in beauty, helping people feel confident in their skin."

Being named to the 2025 Class of 20 Under 40 is "very surreal," Badaczewska said.

"I've been so focused on building my team and balancing family life that I don't always stop to take it in," she said. "But when I do, I feel proud and it motivates me to keep pushing forward."

Her nominator, fellow entrepreneur Edita Begic, said Badaczewska represents everything the 20 Under 40 award is meant to celebrate.

"Despite the many roles she holds — business owner, educator, mother and military spouse — she continues to lead with strength, passion and purpose," she said. "Asa's story is one of grit, growth and giving back. She is more than deserving of this recognition."

And Badaczewska's advice for other young entrepreneurs?

"Trust your vision, but be flexible in how you get there," she said.

"It's not always a straight path.

Surround yourself with good people.

... Balancing being a new mom and running multiple businesses without my husband here has taught me about resilience and the importance of leaning on family and friends for support."



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20 UNDER  
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CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## SHELLY CHRISTENSEN

# Finding *the time*

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If the University of Northern Iowa had a Welcome Wagon, it would be Shelly Christensen.

As the college's assistant director of campus visits, Christensen, 36, oversees all tours of the school.

"I roll out the purple carpet and welcome students and families to UNI," she said.

"Choosing a college is a big decision. I get to be a part of their first experience here.

It's very rewarding."

"(Shelly welcomes) more than 10,000 prospective students, family members, school groups and other guests to campus each year," said colleague Terri Crumley, who nominated Christensen for 20 Under 40 honors. "(She) is deeply committed to ensuring that every visitor's experience is meaningful, well-organized and reflective of UNI's warm and student-centered culture. She thoughtfully considers how each detail of a visit — from the first

communication to the final interaction — can leave a positive and lasting impression."

But Christensen's involvement doesn't end there.

"My favorite part is to see these students succeed and graduate," she said.

And Christensen keeps in touch with several students well after graduation.

"We'll talk on the phone and catch up,"

*Please see Christensen, Page 16*





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## ISAIAH CORBIN

# Making an impact

MARIA KUIPER  
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**I**saiah Corbin is often behind the scenes working to enhance the community.

Now, his community is recognizing him with the 20 Under 40 award.

Corbin, 36, is the director of community development at the Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments, or

INRCOG. He works with 58 cities in six counties.

"From housing initiatives, economic development, infrastructure investments, community planning and beyond, Isaiah always puts the residents and communities first," nominator and colleague Nick Fratzke said.

He started with the organization in 2020 as a planner to assist with economic

development and small business loans to help the community during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In his current role, he also oversees the housing department, which works with rehabilitation of housing, improving low-to-moderate income housing, housing needs assessments and community trust funds.

*Please see Corbin, Page 18*



20 UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## HANNAH CRISMAN

# A passion for Cedar Falls

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**H**annah Crisman is a huge dork. Or so she says, as the Cedar Falls City Council member gushed over the process of running a city. "I love collaborating with people and working with other people, I love coming up with ideas," Crisman, 35, said. "This is again, such a dorky thing to say, but like, I love infrastructure ... how roads work and how everyone gets their electricity."

*Please see Crisman, Page 19*



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## WAYNE GASTON

# Sparking interest in the trades

JEFF REINITZ  
jeff.reinitz@wcfcourier.com

**W**ayne Gaston has grown a long-time electrical company while giving youths a window to a career in the trades.

"Wayne's leadership is quiet, yet profound. He builds up the people around him, encourages the next generation of tradespeople and sets a powerful example of integrity, generosity and hard work. He is not only a successful entrepreneur, but

a genuinely kind, humble and impactful force in his community," said Jasmine Gaston, his wife and partner in Henninger Electric.

Gaston, 39, of LaPorte City, grew up in Traer and briefly studied automotive mechanics at Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo. He became interested in the electrical field while working at a small cabinet-making shop.

"The shop I was working at brought in an electrician to wire up some equipment, and I got to talking to him. I thought I'd

give it a try and loved it ever since," Gaston said.

Gaston applied to area electrical companies and was hired by Scott's Electric in Waterloo, where he worked for six years before he was hired by Terry Henninger of Henninger Electric of Cedar Falls.

When Henninger was looking to retire in 2013, Gaston bought the company and kept the Henninger name for brand recognition.

*Please see Gaston, Page 22*



## Christensen

From 12

she said. "They call if they're struggling with something or they are missing home, or they'll call if something good happens. They call me their campus mom."

Christensen, from Calmar, graduated from South Winn High School and is herself a UNI graduate, earning her bachelor's degree in public relations in 2011 with minors in marketing and Spanish. She graduated from Iowa State University with a master's degree in 2015.

She married her high school sweetheart, Shane, and the couple has two sons, Owen, 8, and Drew, 4.

"A sense of community was always instilled in me," Christensen said. "I grew up in a small town. You took care of your neighbors."

With a full-time career and young children who are involved in several sports, Christensen finds ways to work "giving back" into her schedule, whether it's participating in the annual Pack the Dome event or filling pallets — both to

“

*My parents really instilled hard work and giving back in me. I want to do that for my kids, as well. They'll remember you showing up."*

**Shelly Christensen, 20 Under 40 winner**

benefit the Northeast Iowa Food Bank — or giving blood every eight weeks at the Red Cross.

She is also a frequent volunteer at her sons' school and daycare.

"I've been a room parent since kindergarten," she said. "I do field trips, I read to the class and other things, as well."

More often than not, Christensen brings her kids along on her volunteering stints.

"I want them to be involved," she said. "My parents really instilled hard work and giving back in me. I want to do that for my kids, as well. They'll remember you showing up."

Another nomination for Christensen came from someone who knows her best, her husband, Shane.

"Not only in her profession, but in the community and at home, she is always putting others first and takes every opportunity she can to teach our boys or remind coworkers, friends, etc. that 'The more we share, the more we have,'" he wrote. "You can see her put these words into action at work where she organized an adopt-a-family project for her office over the holidays and proposed/coordinated volunteering at the food bank for 20-plus co-workers during their staff retreat."

"As moms we struggle to find the time to dedicate large chunks of time to causes," Christensen said. "But there are little things I can do — an hour here, an hour there. Do the small things. Sometimes they make the biggest impact."



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# Corbin

From 13

Corbin also works within small communities on various projects.

"It's not in your national news, in your face, but it's a service that, I think, is most valuable for community members because it has the biggest impact," he said. "INRCOG, often, we're kind of usually in the back, diligently working away to improve our community, so we don't necessarily always get the credit, but we play a really, really important role.

"There's a lot of things INRCOG does that people don't see or don't even understand what we do, but it has a deep impact on their life," he continued.

Some of the larger projects he and his team have worked on include Waterloo Fiber, the Cedar Falls whitewater course and the Gilbertville Fire Station.

He grew up in the small northwest Iowa town of Kingsley. When living there, he said he had many "second moms and second dads" that helped him as a child, along with coaches and community members.

"I've always wanted to give back what I received from a lot of people that have kind of guided me along the way," he said. "I think that is one of the things that has really helped ground me in my values of community and service and kind of led me into local government."

He then went to Wartburg College, graduating with a degree in political science in 2012. During his time there, a service trip to New Orleans about five years after Hurricane Katrina cemented his passion of helping communities.

"When I signed up for the trip, I thought there would be, you know, a lot of stuff taken care of those five years after the hurricane," he said. "When I got to New Orleans, I found out that there was so much work to still be done ... so that really opened my eyes and really made me interested in community service and kind of shed light on the needs of people."

After graduating from Wartburg, he received his masters in public policy from the University of Northern Iowa in 2014.

He then worked at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, leading a program to assist low-to-moderate income,

minority and first generation students transition to college life and became the director of the college's volunteer program. After that, he became the volunteer services manager at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids.

Along with working in local government, Corbin is a leader on the mats for the wrestling team at Don Bosco Schools in Gilbertville. He is the assistant high school wrestling coach and also coaches pee-wee wrestling for younger children.

His wife, Hannah, is the district's K-12 assistant principal. Corbin said he credits a lot of his success to her.

"She was my first kiss, we got married in college really young, and so she's been a huge support in my life," he said. "She's one of those people that have helped guide me along the way, support me, encourage me. She's had a huge impact on my life."

The couple have four children – Tessa, 12; Harrison, 11; Lucy, 8; and Davis, 4.

"Corbin is a leader both in his role at INRCOG, but also in his community," Fratzke said. "(He) is the epitome of the type of role model that the next generation will benefit from."



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## Crisman

From 14

The local government-obsessed 20 Under 40 winner left Cedar Falls as soon as she could after graduating from Cedar Falls High School in 2008 and the University of Northern Iowa in 2016 with a degree in public relations. She then moved to Los Angeles to work as a quality assurance analyst for large companies and then to Salt Lake City for a similar job.

She then came back to be closer to family and eventually started her own. She and her husband Matt have a 19-month-old son, Freddie.

Before her role as a councilmember, she was the president of the College Hill Partnership and a member on the city's planning and zoning commission.

She is also on a committee for the Cedar Falls Community Foundation, a member of the Cedar Falls Rotary Club and a board member for the Stone Soul Picnic.

She believes Cedar Falls is doing so well that many residents do not notice anything happening – which she says is a good thing.

"The real gem about being a resident of Cedar Falls is just how everything is kind of happening below the surface all the time," she said. "All this progress is happening and changes are happening and you don't see it."

Community involvement interested her as she started her own family and became aware of issues such as road safety when walking her dog or her baby. Something she says not a lot of younger people pay attention to.

"A lot of city things, from city council to rotary, people are old and, not to be morbid, but people will die and it's like, will all of these things just be gone?" she said. "It's like, no, you have to stay engaged as a young person."

She said Cedar Falls is made up of a lot of younger people, but things younger people like to do are not always available.

"You should see yourself in your

*Please see Crisman, Page 22*

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## KATHRYN GILBERY

# Feeding the community

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**K**athryn Gilbery works to fill unused plots of land with gardens, while also making sure the food insecure have grocery bags filled with healthy produce.

Gilbery, 32, dedicates her life to ensuring everyone has the opportunity to access nutritious and affordable fruits and vegetables.

With Black Hawk County having 13% of its population – or 17,000 people – being

food insecure, Gilbert has a lot on her plate as the food access coordinator at the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Energy and Environmental Education.

She was the program's first AmeriCorps VISTA member in 2015, which helps organizations to alleviate poverty locally, and has continued the work since.

She started community gardens in the Highland Neighborhood and behind Central Christian Church on Kimball Avenue. A gardener can rent a 20-by-20-foot plot for a small cost per year – which

goes toward water and tools – and is used by people with small yards, or no greenspace at all where they live.

This year, 70 families are gardening in the lots.

"Everybody here has access to all this food that they wouldn't have had if they weren't gardening," she said. "It's kind of the old give a man a fish versus teach a man to fish."

Gilbery also started Veggie Vouchers.

*Please see Gilbery, Page 22*





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## DESIRAE HOLMES

# Helping survivors heal

META HEMENWAY-FORBES  
For The Courier

**W**hen 28-year-old Desirae Holmes learned she had been named to The Courier's 2025 20 Under 40 list, her first reaction was disbelief.

"I was kind of in shock," Holmes said. "But also incredibly humbled and honored. It was really affirming that I am making a difference in the things I'm doing. It means a lot to be recognized by the community."

That difference has been felt deeply by survivors of sexual assault across

Northeast Iowa, where Holmes serves as the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) coordinator for Riverview Center. In her role, she helps facilitate trauma-informed responses across 14 Iowa counties and two in Illinois, bringing together law enforcement, prosecutors, health care providers and advocates to strengthen community collaboration.

"It's really about working together to take that burden off survivors," Holmes explained. "We look at trends and figure out how we can better respond to their needs. Survivors shouldn't have to carry

that weight alone."

Holmes grew up in Knoxville, graduating from Knoxville High School in 2015. She earned a bachelor's degree in social work with a minor in criminology from the University of Northern Iowa in 2019.

She knew early on that her life's work would involve helping others.

"I think I've always wanted to be a counselor or therapist. I got that idea in middle school," Holmes said. "My high

*Please see Holmes, Page 24*

## Crisman

From 19

community," she said. "I'd love to find a way to encourage more people, especially young people, to participate in (the community). It doesn't have to be your whole life."

Another way she hopes to see young women more engaged in the community is by establishing a club geared toward

younger women. The idea came to her and her friend, Sally Kleiss Timmer, when looking at old houses in the area and came upon the Cedar Falls Women's Club.

The two connected after meeting in a board meeting and found they loved Victorian houses and baking.

"I want a fun space where women can come and connect and make friends, where more people can have the experience like I had with Sally," she said. "I have this vision of setting up a space

where women can feel safe and have fun."

Kleiss Timmer is the one who nominated Crisman for the award.

"She has a passion for Cedar Falls that is contagious and is willing to do the work to continue to make our city a great place to live and work for all," she said in the nomination.

"I think it was really kind of her to think of me for this," Crisman said about Kleiss Timmer. "It's sort of an infamous list among people from here."

## Gaston

From 15

From there, he added commercial work and was able to expand the three-person shop to a 13-employee operation.

"One of the things we strive for with our business is to provide a place of employment for our guys and gals where they feel like they make a difference in the community, helping other people, and where they can count on a steady work flow and be home for the family in the evenings," Gaston said. "That's a big part of what made our business grow."

The company handles new construction

as well as residential and commercial remodeling and repairs. Henninger Electric recently updated the exterior lighting for the University of Northern Iowa's 99-year-old campanile.

"The big thing is you can see the reward. Who are we helping and what did I accomplish today? I think the trades give you that," Gaston said. "We thrive on that day to day, knowing we made a difference."

Other projects include the renovations at Shell Rock High School, Dysart Middle School and the UnityPoint-Allen Hospital Center for Sleep in Waterloo.

As part of his job, Gaston takes a role in offering internships to promote the trades

to young people looking for a career.

"Day to day, they get to experience working with their hands and seeing the job from start to finish," Gaston said. "In the trades, you get an immediate taste of the work. By the time you're turned out and have your full credentials, you are debt-free and usually making average income for the trades, it's only going to improve from there."

Away from work, Gaston is active in coaching little league and his church, where he is a member of the board of trustees.

Gaston is married to his wife, Jasmine, a LaPorte City native. They have three children, Wesley, Savanna and Alyson.

## Gilbery

From 20

The CEEE partners with local clinics and nonprofits by providing \$5 vouchers to distribute to clients in need of fresh foods. The vouchers can be redeemed at farmers markets or stands. She said they distribute about \$20,000 annually, with \$20 to \$30 going to about 800 families.

Veggie Vouchers is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, along with investing \$150,000 in the farming community.

"It's not going to solve their food insecurity, we would need a much larger budget to do that, but at least it gets them to the farmers market," Gilbery said. "If they had stayed away from the farmers market because of a perception that the prices would be expensive, or that it wouldn't have the foods that they want to

eat, at least they can ... meet a farmer and see that prices are actually affordable."

Gilbery grew up in Moorhead, Minn., on the border of North Dakota as a farmer's daughter. She always liked agriculture and food, but did not see it becoming part of her professional career. After graduating from Drake University in Des Moines with a degree in health science, she began medical school to hopefully work in the public health sector.

She then learned about AmeriCorps and moved to Cedar Falls on a whim after accepting the position. She used her public health education to create programs that strengthen the community.

Along with increasing access to healthy food, people are growing foods native to their cultures. She said the majority of the farmers are immigrant families, along with residents in the Highland

Neighborhood and some church goers.

"I feel like there aren't really that many places where different cultures today, like come together in one location and also are all kind of experiencing a common bond," she said. "They can talk to each other about what they're growing, or the weeds in the garden or the pests that they're seeing and realize that they have things in common."

Her nominator for the 20 Under 40 award, Alicia Soppe, said this is Gilbery's trademark.

"(She) is a trusted leader in Waterloo who has strengthened local food systems, expanded access to healthy food and built partnerships that make neighborhoods more connected and resilient," Soppe wrote. "Her long-standing dedication, collaborative spirit and steady leadership have made a lasting difference in the Cedar Valley."





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## JASON KLEIN

# An asset to the community

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**J**ason Klein is a problem solver. Whether it's for commercial loans and customers at Farmers State Bank, or for women experiencing homelessness and unemployment, he is there to crunch numbers.

Klein, 37, is the vice president and chief credit officer at Farmers State Bank in Waterloo.

He originally thought he was going

to be a math teacher after loving it at East High – until he took statistics with calculus at Wartburg College. He ended up graduating in 2010 with a degree in business administration and then received a masters of business administration at the University of Northern Iowa.

Although he is not a teacher to students, he still found himself in a classroom by teaching financial literacy skills to women who utilized House of Hope's services. He is now on the organization's

board of directors.

House of Hope provides programs to single-mother families and women aging out of foster care with transitional housing and support to achieve security, independence and permanent housing.

"I think part of my role was coming in as a banker to solidify what they were working on, it's not just some person who's telling me this, there's this guy from the

*Please see Klein, Page 24*

# Holmes

From 21

school counselor talked to me about social work because there are so many different opportunities within that degree. I liked the idea that I could help people in so many ways. I never changed my major."

Holmes began her career at Riverview Center as a sexual assault advocate, providing direct support to survivors for more than five years before transitioning to her current leadership role. She also gained experience as a social work intern at UnityPoint Health-Allen Hospital. The work, Holmes admits, can be heavy.

"There are times you have to check in with yourself and make sure you're taking care of yourself so you can keep doing this work," she said.

But the moments of connection remind her why she chose this path.

"Sometimes it's as small as helping a survivor make an appointment they've been putting off, or taking a teen survivor to get their driver's permit," she said. "It's not about me telling survivors what they should do. It's about listening to what they need."

Gwen Bramlet-Hecker, executive director at Riverview Center, nominated Holmes for the 20 Under 40 award.

"Rarely have I met someone who has made the level of individual,

organizational and community impact in their work as has Desirae Holmes," she said. ... "Survivors are able to live better lives because of Desi's advocacy."

Bramlet-Hecker described Holmes as a leader who champions survivors' strength while navigating difficult systems such as forensic exams, criminal justice processes and state reporting protocols. Survivors often describe feeling "seen and heard" for the first time when working with Holmes, Bramlet-Hecker said.

Holmes also played a pivotal role in reviving the Cedar Valley Victim Resource Coalition, a network of professionals dedicated to preventing violence and strengthening support systems for survivors. She served as its chairperson for four years and now holds the role of treasurer.

"Knowing we are all stronger when we work together, Desi has strengthened the supports available to those who live in the Cedar Valley because of her ability to bring parties together in the shared mission of helping others," Bramlet-Hecker said.

Holmes' commitment to youth and survivor advocacy has already been recognized. In 2023, she received the YWCA Women of Persimmon Youth Advocate Award, an honor she said left her speechless.

"I couldn't believe it. I didn't even know I won until I was at the event," Holmes

said. "It's so humbling to experience this kind of recognition. I don't do the work to be acknowledged. I've always practiced gratitude, and I'm grateful to do this work."

Her favorite quote, attributed to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., reflects her philosophy: "If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way."

Holmes draws strength from her family, especially her mother, Vanessa Dietz, whom she calls her biggest mentor.

"My mom had me at 19 and was mostly a single mom. She really broke cycles of generational trauma and worked extremely hard to give me stability," Holmes said. "She went to college later in life. She's humble and hardworking, and that was instilled in me."

Holmes also credits Bramlet-Hecker for professional mentorship.

"She has so much wisdom and knowledge, especially about trauma responses. She's someone I can always go to with questions," Holmes said.

At home, Holmes is supported by her husband, Will, and their two daughters, Zayla, 9, and Yuna, 5.

"They inspire me every day," Holmes said. "Family keeps me grounded."

As a young professional making a difference, Holmes has simple advice for others: "Don't compare yourself to others. Try new things even if they're hard and scary. Give it your best, learn along the way and do good things."

# Klein

From 23

bank that's also saying the same stuff," he said. "It's to just cement that in a mother's mind, like, hey, these are the right ideas. I am on the right path."

He taught women how to budget, how to get a car or house loan, how to read a credit report and learn what creditors are paying attention to in hopes to create permanent solutions.

"There's a problem in the Cedar Valley with homelessness with young mothers, single mothers, and they don't just solve that problem with giving them somewhere to stay," he said. "They're homeless because

they don't have a job. So they give them skills to find a job and keep a job, or they have trouble getting to their job because they don't have a car, so they show them how to buy a car."

"It's creative problem solving," he continued. "Not just like filling holes, but changing lives."

On the board of directors, he keeps track of the organization's financial decisions, including the new Empowerment Center. The nearly \$5 million project provides space for programs such as wellness activities, education, career and life skills education, financial mentoring, family support, children's programming and childcare. He calls that another creative solution.

"Jason is a combination of professional

excellence, community engagement and unwavering integrity," Karin Rowe, the executive director of House of Hope, who nominated Klein said. "He balances his demanding career with his dedication to his family and his service to others, a true leader in every sense of the word."

He volunteers in non-fiscal roles, as well. He is a coach for Hudson Schools' baseball and soccer teams, which his sons play on. He has three sons, Will, 11; Noah, 8; and Owen, 2; with his wife Molly.

He's been a lifelong Cedar Valley resident.

"To be considered a leader in the community is very cool for someone who, you know, came from here," he said. "I've seen this in the paper for many years, so to be on that list is super cool."





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## EMILY LAMAR

# A desire to help others

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**E**mily Lamar's experiences growing up have shaped her career in working to make the world a better place.

"I've always had a passion for helping immigrants and families and youth. Being adopted, I'm so grateful for every opportunity that I have been given, and I feel a responsibility for being a good steward," said Lamar, who was adopted out

of South Korea at 11 months old and grew up in Waterloo.

"Sometimes there is so much negativity when it comes to adoption, so I'm always trying to put forth positive adoption narratives. We turn into great, productive people in our communities and pass on the love we were given," she said.

Today, Lamar, 37, works at Juvenile Court Services for Iowa's 1st Judicial District.

It's a position that allows her to channel

her interests while working alongside others who are dedicating their lives to helping others.

"Her dedication to serving children, families and her community has left a lasting impact across the region," said Dianah Vajpeyi, who was one of the people who nominated Lamar for 20 Under 40 honors.

A graduate of Waterloo West High

*Please see Lamar, Page 27*

20 UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## TORI LOCKARD

# Building ON A legacy

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**T**ori Lockard sits at the conference room table surrounded by large photographs of multi-million dollar development projects in which she has had a hand.

At 32, she is president and broker of Lockard Realty Inc. and a member of the latest generation in a family business her paternal grandfather, Wendell Lockard, started in concrete and construction.

"I knew I wanted to do this since I was 10 years old," she said.

Lockard grew up in Cedar Falls with seven siblings.

"I'm right in the middle," she said.

*Please see Lockard, Page 27*



# Lamar

From 25

School, Lamar majored in art at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, concentrating on oil painting and earning her bachelor of fine arts degree in 2011. The knowledge helped her later in designing materials as she took on marketing jobs.

"I didn't know my art degree would take me here," Lamar said.

At Powers Manufacturing in Waterloo, Lamar worked her way up to marketing and social media specialist at the athletic uniform company. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she worked to secure copper-lined facemasks for all 150 employees and acquired an extra 150 masks for the community.

Lamar also was communications director for RIVA, the Des Moines-based

nonprofit Refugee and Immigration Voices in Action.

"I think it's so important to help support individuals and immigrants, especially when they are trying to navigate a sometimes difficult society where they may not fit in right away, and helping people know there is a place for them no matter what," Lamar said.

Later as a recruiter and then branch manager for the Advance Services employment agency, Lamar made a point of focusing on immigrant communities.

"I continued my efforts with helping refugees and immigrants. We made a big effort to connect our refugees and immigrants with certain manufacturers and get certain programs up and running," Lamar said. "There is such a need right now."

She was also a data specialist for Child Care Resource and Referral of Northeast

Iowa, a division of Exceptional Persons, Inc. that pairs families with child care providers. Some of her work focused on the child care shortage and bringing attention to the need for child care.

Outside of work, Lamar has contributed to Tate's Army, dedicated to promoting lawn mower safety, Cedar Valley Kids, Relay for Life, the Try Pie teen employment program, Wigs for Kids, Locks of Love and Unleashed. As avid hikers, Lamar and her husband also help with recreational trail cleanup with Cedar Valley Association of Soft Trails and collect needed items for the Cedar Bend Humane Society.

"Recently, I became mother, and having my daughter, it has become even more vital and important to me to become a role model for her and the people around me. It's so important to give back," Lamar said.

Lamar is married to her husband, Josh, and they have a 2-year-old daughter, Luna.

# Lockard

From 26

She started working in the family business while still in high school.

She graduated from Cedar Falls High School and later the University of Northern Iowa with a degree in business administration with an emphasis in finance.

After a stint at Veridian Credit Union, Lockard got her real estate license and began working alongside her father, Chairman and CEO Ken Lockard.

"I love everything about it," she said. "It is so fulfilling. Something good happens every day, and that keeps me coming back. And I'm making my dad proud."

It is clear Lockard inherited more than her business savvy from family members.

The Lockard family has a long tradition of community service, and Tori has carried that on.

She served on the North Star Community board of directors for six years and currently sits on the board of the Black Hawk County YMCA.

"They are both amazing organizations," Lockard said. "They do incredible things there."

Lockard has also served on the board of Cedar Rapids Ball Club Inc., which owns the Waterloo Bucks.

"They didn't have any women on the board and no one under 40," Lockard said. "They wanted a new perspective. They are a lot of fun to work with."

She is a former Sunday school teacher and a current member of Nazareth Lutheran Church.

Lockard said her maternal grandmother, Doris Miller, had a big impact on her.

"She worked from the time she was 20, and that wasn't very common then," she said. "She worked in real estate, she was a travel agent, and she always gave me the best advice."

She also credits her mother, Amy, with setting a wonderful example.

"She is the first person to ask if she can help," she said. "She is an incredibly talented writer, so creative and smart. And she never looks for recognition."

But it is her father she sees as her true mentor.

"He has done so much for the community," she said. "He was a founding member of the Cedar Valley Alliance, which is now Grow Cedar Valley."

"He is always challenging me to get

outside my comfort zone," Lockard said. "He pushed me to get out there and meet people and give back to the community. He taught me to be a good, honest person. He is incredibly ethical, calculated and smart. There isn't a person out there that doesn't like him. He makes everyone feel important and like they are worth his time."

That is the same advice she gives to others.

"Meet as many people as you can," she said. "Everybody should get involved. Give back what you receive."

"I love my community," she said. "I am so appreciative to live here."

"Tori has committed her talents to making the Cedar Valley the best place to work and to live," said colleague Baylea Hill, who nominated Lockard for 20 Under 40 honors. "She shows her dedication to this every day in everything she does. Her clients sing her praises, and she can always be relied upon to go the extra mile, whether it is for business or for friends or family. Whenever anything needs to be done, everybody thinks of Tori first. Somehow, she manages to juggle all the demands of her work, her community and her life, and does so always with a positive attitude and productive work ethic."

20 UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## PATRICK LUENSMANN

# Serving with purpose

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Patrick Luensmann walks into the coffee shop sporting tennis shoes, jeans and a sweatshirt with JPEC on it.

"John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center," he explains. "It has nothing to do with pizza."

The University of Northern Iowa JPEC supports entrepreneurs throughout the state. It is a centralized hub where they can find resources, explore programs, collaborate with peers and the community and develop new or existing

business ventures.

At 36, Luensmann is the director of the center.

"(Patrick) has revolutionized access to entrepreneurial resources in Iowa, empowering countless aspiring business owners," said Randy Pilkington in nominating Luensmann for 20 Under 40 honors. "His vision created Iowa SourceLink ([www.iasourcelink.com](http://www.iasourcelink.com)), a statewide online database detailing 400 resource providers across all 99 Iowa counties. This initiative, which Patrick developed and has managed for the past decade, has directly supported over

19,000 entrepreneurs and attracted more than 59,000 unique users, significantly contributing to Iowa's emergence as a more entrepreneurial state."

Luensmann is also credited with organizing the Cedar Valley Entrepreneurial Roundtable, a forum he hosts that brings together nearly 20 economic development and small business providers.

"These discussions have directly led to new workshops and programming, addressing critical unmet needs for Cedar Valley entrepreneurs," Pilkington said.

*Please see Luensmann, Page 30*





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## JOANA LWIN

# Found in translation

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**J**oana Lwin is only 26 years old but has been doing things like paying bills and setting up medical appointments since the fifth grade.

She became her family's interpreter after immigrating from Thailand in 2009.

Lwin was born and lived in a refugee camp after her parents escaped the civil war in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. She lived in the Mae La camp for 10 years. The United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees began placing most of the refugees there in the U.S.

"My parents at that point had been in the refugee camp for more than 10 years and were just looking for a better opportunity for our future," she said. "It's limited resources, limited education, so you can't get ahead or you can't really have a bright future in that refugee camp. It was survival in the camp, just basically every day you're looking for food to eat."

Along with her parents and three siblings, they relocated to Chicago. Her

father was later recruited by Tyson's in Waterloo while the rest of the family stayed in Illinois. The whole family moved here in 2012.

As she began middle school at Sacred Heart, she also took on the role as the third parent of the household. Her parents only spoke Kayaw, a dialect of the Karenni language spoken by an ethnic group in Myanmar. As she learned English, she became their translator.

*Please see Lwin, Page 30*

## Luensmann

From 28

Luensmann is also involved with Startup Weekends where new business ideas are explored, vetted and pitched to local investors, and through his work with JPEC's R.J. McElroy Student Business Incubator, approximately 30 student ventures are launched each year.

The center is also offering its expertise to the Cedar Falls High School CAPS program, which pairs students with businesses in the community where they get hands-on experience in any number of professions.

"We're getting them projects and getting them out into the community," Luensmann said.

Gordon Young, of Waterloo, is one of the center's success stories.

"He came to me with a business plan in 2010 for Young G's Barbeque Sauce," Luensmann said. "Now he's selling in stores. He's one of the first who has gone

“

*These discussions  
have directly led to  
new workshops and  
programming, addressing  
critical unmet needs for  
Cedar Valley entrepreneurs.”*

**Randy Pilkington, on Luensmann**

on to be successful.”

Savannah Warren, owner of the Savvy Bean in downtown Waterloo also benefitted from the center's support with everything from paperwork to packaging.

Luensmann studied economics and finance at the UNI and earned his MBA

from the University of Iowa.

He has worked at UNI since 2010, starting as a part-time business counselor. He became director of the JPEC nearly two years ago.

Luensmann and his wife, Katelyn, have three sons, ages 4, 5 and 7.

Most his time outside of work centers around them — coaching T-ball, chaperoning fieldtrips, etc. — although he does pursue other interests.

"I'm a nerd and an avid technology aficionado," he said. "I enjoy building computers and playing video games."

So it is not surprising that Luensmann is also co-owner of The Grid, at 100 E. Second St., in downtown Cedar Falls, which offers high-tech virtual racing experiences.

Luensmann's advice for his students is simple.

"Be positive, kind and collaborative humans," he said. "Do good and support each other — and have fun in all aspects of your life."

"Graduate, and stay local," he added.

## Lwin

From 29

She learned how to read bills and write checks, scheduled medical appointments and took her siblings to parent-teacher conferences.

"Sometimes I did have to miss out on school to go help and translate for their appointments and stuff like that, drive them to a place," she said. "I was having to have a lot of the responsibility on my shoulder as a refugee kid."

At the time, she did not realize the toll being a child while doing adult tasks was taking on her.

"A lot of the time you're thinking about keep going, keep going and going, and not so much about how it affects you," she said. "You just never really have the time to care for yourself and you start thinking about everybody's needs instead of yours."

"Looking back, being put in that position, it does teach me how to be stronger, resilient," she continued.

Lwin graduated from West High in

2018. She then went to the University of Northern Iowa for social work and graduated in 2022.

The decision to go into social work was not difficult for her.

"I always knew that I wanted to help new families, I always wanted to help my community in some way," she said. "Growing up, we only had our case worker for 90 days, but she made a lot of huge impact, positive impact, on our experience here in the United States when we first arrived. So I always have seen her as, like, a role model."

She also participated in the Youth Navigator program in Waterloo Schools, which helped her prepare for college and get a part-time job.

Those inspirations are why she and other West High alumni founded the Refugee and Immigrant Youth Organization. RIYO provides education and leadership skills, and a place for students to have a safe space with other kids who understand each other.

"As a young kid, you don't really think about how much responsibility is put on you until you are older," she said. "I see

younger students doing the same, like, that's a lot, you know, I used to do that and there's a lot that you're doing and having on your plate. Where's the time for yourself?"

Her nominator for The Courier's 20 Under 40 award said Lwin has a special ability to bring people together.

"She listens closely to students and families ... and she works tirelessly to remove barriers to education and leadership," Alicia Soppe said. "Her dedication, insight and collaborative approach have strengthened the Waterloo community and inspired the next generation of leaders."

Continuing to be humble into her actual adult years, Lwin said she never expected to win anything. She said the only person who knew she won was Soppe, and had not told her family.

Her husband, Mi Reh, also does not know she won the award. The two have a 16-month-old son named Levi.

"I never expect to win anything, you know, for doing what I already love doing and serving my purpose," she said. "Go for your passion and give back."





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## SAMANTHA PRICE

Giving by  
DESIGNJEFF REINITZ  
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A class to help her mother with gardening has led to Samantha Price's career in helping others enjoy the outdoors.

Price was in high school when she signed up for horticultural lessons.

"My mom really loved plants, and I thought this would be fun. Maybe I can help her with the garden. We did a project, and it was a residential landscape design, and I absolutely loved it. It was eye opening," said Price, 39.

*Please see Price, Page 33*



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## LAUREN RIENSCHÉ

# Spirited community support

HOLLY HUDSON HILL  
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**W**hen meeting Lauren Riensche, one realizes she is passionate about, well, just about everything.

She is passionate about the family farm she grew up on in Jesup that goes back six generations.

She is passionate about the guy who lived on a farm four miles from hers – her husband, Luke Gosse.

She is passionate about her chosen profession, marketing.

"I've been interested in marketing since the ninth grade," she said. "I can tell you the actual day. It was the first day of freshman year. I just find it so interesting."

And she is passionate about agriculture and technology and melding the two.

"I tell people I am bilingual in agriculture and technology," she said.

She has put that to good use.

Riensche, 32, earned a bachelor of arts degree in sociology and economics from the University of Chicago.

"That probably seems like an odd combination, but they are two sides of the

same coin. They play off one another."

Riensche worked in marketing in Atlanta, then Boston for Indigo Ag, which focuses on sustainable agriculture solutions. She is now marketing lead and portfolio manager, head of marketing communications for Certis Biologicals, a leading manufacturer and distributor of biopesticides.

"I'm lucky to work in the industry," she said. "I have skin in the game."

Riensche also has a side gig.

*Please see Riensche, Page 33*



## Price

From 31

That interest in design led to a degree in landscape architecture from Iowa State University and a career where Price has a role in developing some of the community's favorite places.

"I love the outdoors, so having the ability to get other people interested in the outdoors is very important to me," said Price, a Parkersburg native who has worked with Ritland and Kuiper Landscape Architects since 2009.

Since then she has had a hand in the recent renovation of Seerley Park and River Place Plaza in Cedar Falls and Lincoln Park, Gates Park and Lost Island Theme Park, all in Waterloo.

"Samantha's dedication and passion for the beautification of the Cedar Valley and beyond goes mostly unnoticed by the majority of the people enjoying the projects she has committed countless hours to through the years," said Mark

Kuiper, who nominated her for the 20 Under 40 award.

One of Price's favorite projects is Place to Play Playground in Cedar Falls, the first all-inclusive playground in the Cedar Valley.

"Everything is accessible, so a child in a wheelchair, a child that has limited mobility, can play next to a child that doesn't have those restrictions," Price said. "It really opened our eyes in terms of how we want to design in the future."

The park was so popular that shortly after it was completed, the city had to build additional parking to accommodate the influx of visitors.

"If you look at the license plates on a Saturday, you might find seven different counties there," Price said.

In her role at Ritland and Kuiper, Price works with student interns, passing her knowledge to future generations. Through the Iowa Living Roadways Community Visioning Program, the interns assist rural communities with transportation-related enhancements.

Away from work, Price is a member of Main Street Waterloo where she is the design chair and volunteers with the Parkersburg Chamber of Commerce, Friends of Butler County Conservation, 100+ Women Who Care and Dike-New Hartford PTO.

"It's important to help your community. I grew up in a household where the door was always open. If you needed a meal, my mom was 'come on in.' If you didn't have some place to go for Christmas or Thanksgiving, our table was big enough," Price said.

She is also a board member of the new nonprofit Power of Many, which raises money for several charitable causes, including children who are aging out of the foster care system.

"This seems to be a very under-served group of people. They are leaving the foster system, and they still don't have permanent homes," she said.

Price is married to her husband, Chad, and has two children Harper, 11, and Halle, 8.

## Rienschke

From 32

After returning to Iowa during COVID, being idle while cooped up in the house didn't sit well with her.

"I needed something else to do," she said. "I thought about what I like to do when I am in other cities. I love to learn about the history, the architecture, the culture. And I like to go on ghost tours. I thought, 'I can do that.'"

That is how Cedar Falls Ghost Tour was born.

Rienschke collected stories from locals, researched them and put together a script.

She is now in her fifth year of the growing business, which now includes an hour-long tour in the downtown district, a gourmet dinner, a book club and a paranormal investigation – each of which sells out nearly every year. The tour, which runs weekends throughout October, has brought in more than 3,000 visitors from more than 60 communities to Cedar Falls.

Rienschke has used her success to benefit



*Read, travel, try new things.  
Build that muscle of  
staying curious."*

**Lauren Rienschke, 20 Under 40 winner**

the community. Through her ghost tour business, she has shined a light on partner businesses, such as The Nook, A.D. Apothecary, The Spire (which caters the dinner) and historic sites like the Cedar Falls Woman's Club and the Black Hawk Hotel.

She donates a portion of the proceeds to the Cedar Falls Historical Society, who helps with her research, and the Odd Fellows Lodge #233, which has become an integral part of her tour.

"This organization puts all their funds back into the community, whether its

sending a kid to band camp or wherever a need arises," Rienschke said. "Their building needs some love. I said, 'Let me be selfish for you.'"

Due in part to her generosity, the lodge has been able to make great progress on its current restoration project, including new windows, a front entryway, stair rail and work in the kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms.

She has used her connections to become involved in the community on a number of levels.

She serves on the board of directors and promotions committee for Community Main Street, supporting initiatives such as Earth Day Cleanup and Holiday Hoopla and developing the MAGIC Grant, which offers downtown businesses funds to support marketing efforts.

Rienschke has also hosted a Marketing 101 course for downtown businesses and consults pro bono with owners.

Rienschke credits much of her success to her natural curiosity.

"Read, travel, try new things," she advises. "Build that muscle of staying curious."

20  
UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## JILLIAN RUTLEDGE

# Sharing her knowledge

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**J**illian Rutledge's thirst for knowledge has led her to a life of helping others.

"I have a lot of varied interests and consider myself to be a lifelong learner, so I think that's where libraries came in. It gave me the opportunity to learn a lot about a lot of different things," said Rutledge, 39, the assistant director at the Waterloo Public Library.

Growing up in Lisbon, Iowa, Rutledge

came to the Cedar Valley to study at the University of Northern Iowa.

"I had considered a few other options, visited a few other schools, but they felt too big or too small, so UNI was that perfect Goldilocks moment where I fell in love with the Cedar Valley and all it has to offer. It felt like home the first time I came, so I just never left," Rutledge said.

After earning her bachelor's degree, she continued her education at the University of Iowa where she earned her Master's degree in library and information science

while working at the Cedar Falls and Waverly libraries and eventually landing a position at the Waterloo library in 2019.

"Jillian is the kind of leader who brings heart, strategy and a sense of purpose to every initiative she touches," said Kenna Bodenham, who nominated Rutledge for the 20 Under 40 Award.

Under Rutledge, the library became a passport acceptance facility, allowing people to apply for passports.

*Please see Rutledge, Page 36*



20 UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## HECTOR SALAMANCA ARROYO

Ready for  
DUTY

PAT KINNEY  
For The Courier

**H**ector Salamanca Arroyo was a year and half old when his family left Puebla, Mexico, for Iowa.

He grew up in Des Moines and attended Dowling Catholic High School, Des Moines Area Community College and graduated from Drake University. He worked in the sheriff's department of the county and city of Denver, Colo., the largest sheriff's department in the state.

He became a naturalized U.S. citizen while on deployment with the Colorado National Guard in Djibouti, on the Horn

*Please see Salamanca Arroyo, Page 36*

## Rutledge

From 34

"We felt it was important to be an acceptance facility at the library, because we have extended hours beyond what the courthouse and post office do," she said.

The library's "Library of Things" is also popular, allowing people to check out and try out everything from tools to ukuleles. It also recently added color-blindness correction glasses.

"I think that's the great thing about libraries: They are the connector for people to anything. People walk in the door, and as long as we can connect them with the information and resources they need, we

consider it a good day," she said.

Away from the library, Rutledge is active in the Exchange Club, where she is a past president, serves with the Waterloo Schools Foundation and volunteers with Main Street Waterloo.

In her spare time, Rutledge had been a life-long soccer player, but in 2017 she became concerned that continuing to play endangered her ACL.

Instead, she decided to take up something "safer" — roller derby — and joined the Cedar Valley Pushup Brawlers.

"It's been so incredible. I've met so many people who I never would have from all different walks of life, and we've become really good friends," said Rutledge, who serves as vice president of the group.

“

*We felt it was important to be an acceptance facility at the library, because we have extended hours beyond what the courthouse and post office do.”*

**Jillian Rutledge, 20 Under 40 winner**

## Salamanca Arroyo

From 35

of Africa at the mouth of the Red Sea near Somalia, part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

After earning a graduate degree at the University of Northern Iowa, he worked at UNI's Center for Urban Education in conjunction with its federal "TRIO" educational outreach to disadvantaged and first-generation college-bound students.

"Several of my students were able to get full rides (scholarships) to the colleges of their choice," Arroyo said. "So it was pretty fulfilling work.

Now he's at the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Cedar Valley as director of resource development.

At the clubs he's worked with youths from a wide variety of economic and social backgrounds, ethnicities and family situations. He'd like to see more cross-cultural interaction in a community as diverse as Waterloo.

To that end, he's seeking a seat on the Waterloo City Council. He's running for the Ward 5 seat unopposed. Incumbent Ray Feuss is not seeking re-election. Barring a substantial write-in for any unannounced candidate, Arroyo would be the first Latino council member in the city's history.

In a city that has had a Latino population for decades, his election would be "historic

in nature," he said, "and at the same time, I feel, from my experiences, there is a grappling of history in the city of Waterloo, where other ethnic groups may not get the same recognition for deeper conversation or more nuanced conversation."

He added, "In speaking with the folks from the Karenni (Burmese) community, in speaking with folks from the Asian and African-Congolese communities as well, there appears to be this perception, in my opinion, that Waterloo talks about being a diverse city, but when you start looking into it, what does that actually mean? For the folks from those communities, and from what I've seen, it's more of a publicity point rather than a true investment in resources that will empower or enable new immigrant communities to succeed, necessarily."

For them, "just following something as simple as a garbage (pickup) schedule is difficult to find because it's not in their language. You see it all the time. Waterloo is home to different ethnic and cultural minorities as well as the different languages. But everything's still predominantly English. That's a missed opportunity, really, to include our new neighbors in the makeup of the city, especially with the declining and aging population."

While he's proud of his Mexican heritage, "To me, the United States has given me opportunities we never thought

were possible," he said. "Having served in the military with folks that are from all different stripes and ethnicities and colors ... folks forget that at the end of the day, we're all American," and all have value."

In the service, "they're your battle buddy and you count on them when the stuff hits the fan," Arroyo said. "I think that kind of philosophy is what I hope to bring to City Council. We can have a civil disagreement and get together afterward and enjoy a meal. A collaborative approach that recognizes our differences in how a city should operate but still have that base of respectability in being able to hash things out."

Bryan Burton, executive director of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Cedar Valley, who nominated Arroyo for 20 Under 40 recognition, said Arroyo "has quickly become an engaged civic leader, serving as a member of American Legion Post 138, the Waterloo Lions Club and the Waterloo Historic Preservation Commission."

Arroyo has secured funding for facilities improvements at the Boys and Girls Clubs, Burton said, and "played a central role in securing federal support," bringing critical after-school funding to the region.

"With over 13 years of experience in youth development and nonprofit leadership, his journey from undocumented immigrant to veteran and community advocate is a powerful story of service and resilience," Burton wrote.





CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

**AMANDA STEEGE**

# Powered by people

PAT KINNEY  
For The Courier

**A**manda Steege saw the importance of her current vocation during her grandmother's final hours.

She died in a setting she knew, with medical staff she knew and family around her.

That was at Grundy County Memorial Hospital. Steege is development director of the Grundy County Memorial Hospital Foundation, supporting hospital facilities and operations.

"It was so nice knowing that we didn't have to drive anywhere to see her in her final days, and we all could just be there," Steege said. "It was a lot of comfort knowing when she passed, someone she knew was with her; someone we knew was with her."

That fueled the motivation Steege already had inside her.

"I do think that's what makes the hospital so special," Steege said. "Everybody's family to them. Every patient that comes in is like family. It's easy to promote."

In just a little more than a year, she has

summoned her skills and knowledge from her previous professions in education and banking to raise substantial amounts for the rural hospital.

She believes in the hospital's mission — for herself, her family and the community in which she was raised.

"This year, we're raising money for some pediatric equipment," she said. "Just knowing that children in our rural counties don't have to go very far for support if they need it, if there's an emergency," it provides

*Please see Steege, Page 39*

20 UNDER  
FORTY



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## MAGGIE WATKINS

# Shaping the future

JEFF REINITZ  
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When she was in sixth grade, Maggie Watkins wrote about how she wanted to grow up to be an architect and design houses on the moon.

Today, Watkins, 36, fulfilled her dream, working as an architect with Invision Architecture in Waterloo.

And while she has yet to design any lunar homes, she has had a role in creating some of the more memorable places in Waterloo.

"As a senior associate and architect, she has helped shape more than 100 projects across the region, with a particular focus on healthcare environments," said Heidi Willis, a co-worker who nominated Watkins for the 20 Under 40 Award.

Among Watkins' favorite projects is the Single Speed Brewery in downtown Waterloo that repurposed the historic former Wonder Bread bakery.

"That building was going to be torn down, and the community really rallied together. People remember the third-

grade field trip to go to the Wonder Bread building," Watkins said. "To be able to become a destination for the community and within the state of Iowa and something so true to the people in the Cedar Valley, it was pretty cool to be part of that."

Inside Single Speed, several features of the bakery were put to a new use with the brewery, down to the oven doors and bike racks made from the old assembly line rollers.

*Please see Watkins, Page 39*



## Steege

From 37

"peace of mind" for rural families. "That's really rewarding to me, too."

Steege's motivation is pretty basic.

"The one thing I wanted to do when I was younger was help people. And so I feel like this has been the best fit for that," Steege said. "It looks a little different than I thought it would. Originally, I wanted to be an elementary education teacher. It's just a little bit of a shift from that, but I have loved it so far. It's really awesome."

Steege grew up in Grundy Center, and her parents are Grundy Center graduates. She played high school sports, competing against kids in neighboring towns that depend on the hospital where she works.

"For me, it's all about the people," Steege said. "It doesn't always seem like work. I'm conversing with them and figuring out what they're passionate about and what they want to support."

A few months after starting in her current position, Steege started working with a donor who was from Grundy Center but now lives in Texas.

"She ended up giving us a half-million-

dollar gift this year," Steege said. "Very thankful for her support. Even though she's not here, she understands the importance of the work we're doing."

Steege planned to go to Texas to thank her, but "she said, 'You know what? I haven't been back to Grundy Center.' So, she actually came to visit in June, and I was with her for about three days. I was her chauffeur," taking her around to see her old home and neighborhood and visit local landmarks.

"It was nice to see her come back to her Grundy Center roots and see what we're doing at the hospital," Steege said.

It's important for donors to see where their money is going, who it's benefitting, she said.

Steege and her husband, Andrew, have two boys: Landon, 15, and Lincoln, 12. They previously lived in Iowa City and Norwalk, but returned to Grundy Center in 2011.

"I had such a great experience growing up there. I knew the culture of the community, and everybody supports you," she said. "My parents were there, all my grandparents were there. I kind of convinced (Andrew) it'll be temporary, but we've been there since 2011. He's really enjoyed it, too."

Andrew works in maintenance and

safety at the hospital and is a fire and ambulance volunteer.

In nominating Steege for 20 Under 40 honors, colleagues praised her skill in communicating the important role donors play enabling the hospital to provide vital services to the community. Steege led the foundation in completing a \$1 million fundraising goal to support a new \$30.5 million building addition, said Lisa Zinkula, chief financial officer at the hospital.

"Amanda is a driving force behind its mission and vision," Zinkula wrote in nominating Steege.

"Amanda's remarkable ability to cultivate relationships and understand donor wishes is evidenced by her recent success," and resulted in the purchase of critical endoscopy and ultrasound equipment.

"Her commitment to community is just as impressive," co-nominator Erin Wentzien, the hospital's human resources and foundation coordinator, said of Steege. "Amanda is actively involved in Dollars for Scholars, the Grundy Center Development Committee and Grundy County 100 Women Who Care. Her willingness to serve — often behind the scenes and without recognition — makes her a quiet force for good."

## Watkins

From 38

"The cool thing is the beer-making process is a lot like the bread-making process," Watkins said.

Another project benefiting from Watkins' insight is the University of Northern Iowa admissions center.

Outside of her job, Watkins is involved in bringing the world of science, technology, engineering and math to young girls. She leads the after-school Girls in STEM program in Waterloo elementary and middle schools.

With the program, she focuses on the everyday STEM careers in the area.

"I think it's important in male-dominated fields such as construction and architecture and design to really show girls what is out there," Watkins said. "We have John Deere in our back

“

*I think it's important  
in male-dominated  
fields such as construction  
and architecture and design  
to really show girls what  
is out there."*

**Maggie Watkins, 20 Under 40 winner**

yard. We have tons of female engineers. You might not know that your neighbor is working in a STEM field."

Watkins also is a member of the Cedar

Falls Planning and Zoning Commission.

Originally from Sioux City, Watkins credits her upbringing with her interest in architecture.

"My mother is an art teacher, and my father works in economic development, so it's kind of the perfect merger of the two. I've always loved drawing and all things in the arts," Watkins said.

The grain-bin-themed Sioux City Arts Center is one of her favorite buildings, and she also found inspiration while studying Rome, Italy.

Watkins gradually moved east following high school, first earning her bachelor's degree at Iowa State University in Ames and then arriving in the Cedar Valley when she landed her job at Invision Architecture in Waterloo.

Watkins is married to her husband, Brett, and they have a 9-month-old son, Otto.

# Heartland Bank, CNB to merge

Waterloo branch part of deal worth more than \$170 million

BEN SINGSON  
Jacksonville (Illinois) Journal-Courier

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A Waterloo bank branch is among 84 locations included as two major central Illinois financial institutions have signed an agreement to merge in a common stock/cash deal valued at more than \$170 million.

HBT Financial, the holding company for Heartland Bank and Trust Co., which has a location at 4020 Bankers Blvd. in Waterloo, and CNB Bank Shares, the holding company for CNB Bank & Trust, said CNB Bank will merge into Heartland Bank and Trust.

The combined company will have about \$6.9 billion in total assets, \$4.7 billion in total loans, and about \$5.9 billion in total deposits, according to a news release.



It will have 84 branch locations across Illinois, eastern Iowa and Missouri.

The boards of both companies unanimously approved the decision. The merger is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2026.

The per-share price of CNB Bank stock jumped almost 15% in trading upon the announcement.

CNB Bank & Trust is based in Carlinville and has branches across west-central Illinois, including in Jacksonville, Taylorville, Chapin, Pittsfield, Jerseyville, Carrollton and Virden.

Heartland Bank & Trust is headquartered in Bloomington and has branches throughout central Illinois and eastern Iowa.

"This partnership marks an important milestone in our ongoing commitment to deliver exceptional service and value to our customers, employees and communities," CNB Bank Shares President and CEO James T. Ashworth stated in the news release. "CNBN has always believed in the enduring strength of community banking, and joining HBT positions us to continue that mission with expanded capabilities and a broader foundation for future growth."

Both banks have "strong local roots in central Illinois, have successfully expanded to larger growth markets, have excellent deposit bases and solid commercial loan growth," stated J. Lance Carter, president and CEO of HBT Financial and Heartland Bank.

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CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

## ADEN ZWANZIGER

# Staying connected

PAT KINNEY  
For The Courier

**T**he cute little kid who charmed customers at his folks' New Hampton restaurants grew up to swing a pretty mean golf club. And in golf parlance, Aden Zwanziger thinks he's "holed an ace" coming to the Cedar Valley and PDCM Insurance — where, perhaps not coincidentally, he has restaurants among his commercial clients.

Also, perhaps not coincidentally, the "cute little kid" became a big-brother mentor as

an assistant coach to a group of golfers from Waterloo Columbus High School who won the 2025 class 2A state golf championship.

Asked if there was a correlation between his avocation — golf — and his vocation in the insurance business, Zwanziger replied, "I would say so. Absolutely. There's definitely a hand-in-hand. One of my mentors builds his entire (client) book off the golf course. When you talk about going out and meeting people, and getting four to five solid hours of talking with a decision maker or a business owner, a golf course is

probably one of the best places to do it."

That mentor, PDCM partner Chris Fereday, who nominated Zwanziger for 20 Under 40 recognition, cited his "calm, encouraging" approach to coaching — a style that carries over into the business field.

When Fereday congratulated Zwanziger for his role in the Sailor golfers' state tournament win, he said Zwanziger responded, "I just try to show up, stay humble and help where I can."

*Please see Zwanziger, Page 42*

# Zwanziger

From 41

Zwanziger “embodies PDCM’s culture by consistently delivering thoughtful service and fostering strong relationships” with business clients as well as community service.

As an example, he noted that in 2023, Aden “played a key role in revitalizing Cedar Valley Young Professionals,” a young leadership recruitment and retention organization under the Grow Cedar Valley economic development organization.

In any field, whether it’s cultivating camaraderie among young leaders, golf or insurance, patience and persistence pays off, Zwanziger said.

“I’m coming in close to year three, and there’s definitely some patience in this line of work, especially when you get started as a young professional,” he said. “It’s not easy being 25 years old and trying to earn a business owner’s insurance when they’ve been running the business for 20, 30 years. It takes a lot to get to build a relationship; it takes a lot of conversations to build trust.”

“

*It’s not easy being 25 years old and trying to earn a business owner’s insurance when they’ve been running the business for 20, 30 years. It takes a lot to get to build a relationship; it takes a lot of conversations to build trust.”*

**Aden Zwanziger, 20 Under 40 winner**

After graduating from New Hampton High School and a stab at electrical line workers school, Zwanziger attended Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo. At the same time, a family friend introduced him to the insurance business

and an opportunity interning for a firm in Des Moines selling employee benefits.

Meanwhile his fiancée and now wife, Sydney, graduated from the University of Northern Iowa with a degree in school psychology and landed a job at Central Rivers Area Education Agency. They were married last June 6.

“The Cedar Valley is perfect for me and my wife’s lifestyle,” Zwanziger said. “You can easily get the big-city feel, but it’s also a big small town.”

He looked for local job opportunities and found one at PDCM. “I feel, honestly, pretty damn lucky because it was the first time they hired a producer in five to 10 years.”

Zwanziger’s folks are as well known in the restaurant business in New Hampton. His mother’s family has operated Klunder’s Kafe, just off U.S. Highways 63 and 18, for 45 years,

“I started working there when I was 13, and I still work there on the weekends,” he said. “That’s something that’s kind of ingrained in me, work ethic, and also being able to talk to people.”

His father owned and managed another staple New Hampton establishment, The Pub at the Pinicon.

“Growing up, I was always around restaurants, and I was always around people,” Zwanziger said. “I’m the youngest of four. I was the little kid running around the restaurant annoyingly, but everyone loved me because I was a cute little kid.”

He counts as a friend and mentor Cory Kent who operates George’s Local on the Cedar Falls Main Street Parkade and was acquainted with his father through the restaurant business.

“In my job, I probably meet five to 10 new people every single week. And I absolutely love it,” Zwanziger said.

Fereday noted, “Aden also gives back through civic leadership. He serves on the Grow Cedar Valley Board, volunteers with Leader Valley and supports Cedar Falls Community Main Street, contributing to regional growth, youth development and downtown vibrancy.”

As a leader in business and community, Zwanziger, borrowing from his own words, makes connections, “shows up” and helps where he can.

**Congratulations, Maggie!**

FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT INVISION.

“I’m grateful for this recognition, but even more for the chance to serve the people who surround me and inspire my work. My goal is to shape spaces that improve lives and nurture communities—because, as my mother says, great architecture lifts the human spirit!”

MAGGIE WATKINS, AIA, WELL AP  
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Brittany and Joe Wilson are the owners of Grow Room, the new organic and wellness boutique in downtown Waterloo.

CHRIS ZOELLER photos,  
Courier Staff Photographer



# A new leaf

Plant store sprouts up in downtown Waterloo

MARIA KUIPER | MARIA.KUIPER@WCFBCOURIER.COM

A new store has sprouted up downtown, offering lush gifts for both the master gardener and casual green thumb.

Brittany and Joe Wilson combined their love of mental health awareness and plants into one concept, which resulted in Grow Room at 309 E. Fourth St. in Waterloo.



A wide variety of plant species and pots on display at Grow Room in downtown Waterloo.

The idea began when the couple started becoming more holistic at home and getting into the organic soil business. The soil they use, Big Rootz, is 100% compost or animal waste. When Joe got into the company, he tried selling it to area greenhouses and hardware stores.

"They didn't want anything to do with it, so it kind of lit a fire under my ass," he joked. "We've seen this building pop up, and we had been talking about it, and we went for it."

*Please see Plants, Page 45*

# From Mexico WITH LOVE

## Downtown Waterloo bakery seeing immense success

MARIA KUIPER  
maria.kuiper@wfcourier.com

If you visit downtown around 11 a.m., you are bound to see a line of croissant lovers outside of Con Amor Bakery and Cafe.

Esperanza Ayard Benitez opened the Mexican-American patisserie, 331 E. Fourth St., less than four months ago and nearly every day sells out of treats before the end of the business day.

She and her husband mix, fold and bake the laminated dough pastries; her mother makes the fillings and toppings; and her sister bakes cookies. These include tiramisu, chocolate almond and seasonal flavored croissants; apple pie Danish pastries; a pastry topped with cream cheese and filled with berries; croissant cookies and muffins; and cheesecake. They also serve coffee and espresso drinks.

Ayard Benitez found a love of baking during the COVID-19 pandemic, after seeing videos on TikTok. She tried her hand at it and found success, selling baked goods out of her home and at pop-up events. She realized she had to hone in on a niche and picked croissants.

She found a croissant making class in Mexico City. After returning, her customer base grew.

"When I took the class, I was like, this is going to be good for me, but I didn't realize how much it was really going to benefit me and my business, because nobody can really find (croissants) like that around here," she said. "A lot of people always tell



**Above:** Esperanza Ayard Benitez, owner and founder of Con Amor Bakery & Cafe, serves a customer in her shop in downtown Waterloo.



**Left:** Fresh croissants and pastries are on display at Con Amor Bakery & Cafe in downtown Waterloo.

CHRIS ZOELLER PHOTOS, Courier Staff Photographer

me how they taste exactly like the ones they had in France, and I haven't even gone to France."

Along with authentic croissants, the Mexican flavors she incorporates – like tres leches, tropical fruits and horchata – makes it extraordinary.

"I think the combination of flavors that we have are also really unique," she said. "And maybe people haven't had it before, because I remember the mango one, people

would try them, they would be like, 'I've never had anything like that.'"

Customers Ryan and Macey Meyers agree.

"Everything we've had is amazing, better than anything around," Ryan Meyers said. "Everything is so good, homemade, fresh. You have to leave the country to get better than this, in our opinion."

Ayard Benitez was quickly outgrowing her home kitchen but did not see a brick-and-mortar store in her near future.

*Please see Bakery, Page 45*



# Plants

From 43

Grow Room is the first store of its kind in the Cedar Valley, with nurseries and garden centers being the only place people can buy plants. Instead of flowers, they focus on houseplants, with the most popular being the Pink Panther – or *Tradescantia Callisia* – and string plants such as String of Pearls or String of Turtles.

The couple said instead of complaining about “not having anything to do in the Cedar Valley,” they decided to do it themselves.



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

A wide variety of plant species and pots on display at Grow Room in downtown Waterloo.

“I think people are looking for something to care for and something to brighten their homes,” Joe Wilson said. “Something to it is alleviating for your mental health and it’s nice to have, there’s enjoyment in taking care of something and to watch it bloom and see how beautiful it gets.”

They said interest in house plants has skyrocketed, especially since COVID-19 when people were staying indoors.

“Having plants and caring for plants, especially through the winter and when we’re cooped up in our houses, it’s very good for the soul,” he continued. “It gives you a little bit of extra purpose at home, it’s something else to take care of besides just yourself.”

“Your purpose is to bring that plant to its full fruition,” Brittany Wilson added. “It gets a leaf that changes color or you finally get the light setting right for it, or, you know, a flower blooms.”

The two handpick plants locally through a wholesale greenhouse near Ames, or when they travel to vendor shows. They attempted buying plants online, but they often showed up half-dead.

Eventually, they aim to open their own greenhouse.

The couple also hopes they have their

foot in the door if cannabis becomes legal in Iowa, which they believe there is a strong push for from residents.

As for now, they want to get their CBD license in order to sell CBD-infused drinks or hemp oil.

The shop also sells clothes and jewelry, and is an event space for small groups wanting to host events like bridal showers, planting parties or book clubs.

Brittany Wilson said the new business is a great asset to the growing downtown area.

“I think people are catching on that you can walk down downtown Waterloo and there’s multiple places you can go,” she said. “You’re not coming down here for coffee and then have nothing else to do.”

The store has not had a formal opening yet and is still in their “soft launch” period, but its doors are open. The hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the weekend. It is closed Monday.

“I think it’s going to bring a lot of joy to people’s lives. Nobody walks in here without a smile on their face,” Joe Wilson said. “The feedback that we’ve gotten from people is Thank you, thank you, thank you for making this happen and bringing it down here.”

# Bakery

From 44

“We weren’t really looking for a place, I was just like, if it’s meant to be, it will be,” she said. “Then I saw that Rocket’s (Bakery) was closing and I just shot my shot.”

Business went off without a hitch. She saw even more business during Iowa Irish Fest, which took up the streets around the bakery.

Customer London Nelson stood in line for 10 minutes to get a birthday treat for her friend who tried the bakery during the festival.

“She came in after Irish Fest and she couldn’t stop raving about it and said that the one thing she wanted for her birthday was this,” Nelson said. “(The Cedar Valley) has a desire for stuff like this, we have a want, we have a need. And coming here will fulfill that need.”

Ayard Benitez does not think she is doing

well just because there are no other shops like hers – but because of the thought that goes into every baked good.

“Everyone always tells me that it’s the quality, they tell me that you can actually taste that it was made with love, compassion, like you can tell that it’s not something that I just kind of threw together,” she said.

That’s how the bakery’s name came to be. Con Amor translates to “with love” in Spanish.

“The most important thing is quality, I always want to have quality over quantity,” she continued. “So that’s why we sell out, because we try to put our focus on making sure that they come out right.”

In order to sell more, she hopes to buy more kitchen appliances. Making a croissant is a three-day process which requires a lot of refrigerator space. The current set-up allows for six doughs which make about 100 croissants. She gets in around 5 a.m. everyday just to be open in time.



CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

Customers are lined up outside Con Amor Bakery & Cafe as the doors opened on Sept. 20 in downtown Waterloo.

“I’ve always seen food as art,” she said. “Anything that you create with your hands, to me, is art, and it takes time and it takes passion and love.”

Con Amor is generally open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday. The hours change due to demand and the most updated opening times can be found on the bakery’s Facebook page.

# Impact Marketing announces new Cedar Falls location

CEDAR FALLS — Impact Marketing, a full-service marketing agency serving businesses across the Cedar Valley and beyond, announced its move to a new office location in Cedar Falls. The agency has relocated from its previous office on Technology Parkway to its new home at 3316 Cedar Heights Drive, Suite A.

The move marks a new chapter for Impact Marketing as the team continues to grow and expand its services. The new space offers enhanced collaboration areas, upgraded technology infrastructure and improved accessibility

to better serve clients and foster creativity.

In addition to the relocation, Impact Marketing has also acquired CR Advertising, a well-established advertising agency known for creating and distributing direct mail campaigns for car dealerships across the United States, as well as local small businesses. This acquisition expands Impact Marketing's capabilities in the automotive marketing sector and strengthens its ability to offer comprehensive, multi-channel

advertising solutions to clients.

"We're thrilled to start this new chapter at our Cedar Heights Drive location," said James White, CEO of Impact Marketing. "This move allows us to create an even more collaborative environment for our team and provide an elevated experience for our clients."

"Impact Marketing's acquisition of CR Advertising, Inc. immediately adds 25 years of direct mail expertise, strengthening our ability to deliver innovative advertising strategies for local small businesses," said Kevin Custer.

## PEOPLE IN BUSINESS

### Veridian promotes Wedemeier to team leader position

CEDAR FALLS — Veridian Credit Union announced the promotion of **Autumn Wedemeier** to team leader of the member contact center.

Wedemeier is originally from Marion and currently resides in Cedar Falls. She has been employed by Veridian for four years, most recently as a loan originator.



Wedemeier

### Target Distribution hires new operations manager

**Craig Fulton** joined Target Distribution — T-590 as a MBP operations manager. Fulton joins Target from PetSmart where he was a store leader.



Fulton

### Community Bank of Oelwein adds new staff members

**Oelwein** — Community Bank of Oelwein welcomes three new employees to the bank.

**Virginia Williams** has recently joined Community Bank as an operations specialist, bringing over a decade of experience in banking and finance, as well as six years of experience in legal administration. An accomplished artist, Williams channels her creativity into painting, photography and interior design. Her dedication to service is evident in her involvement with The Daughters of the American Revolution and the Wounded Warrior Project, where she serves as a devoted caregiver to her spouse, an Iraq war veteran.

Williams and her husband, Ron, have seven children and three grandchildren.

**Amanda Richter** recently joined the bank as customer service representative. She assists customers with deposits, withdrawals, account inquiries and



Williams

everyday banking needs.

Richter is a native of Oelwein and has worked as a paraeducator at both Wings Park and Oelwein High School. She most recently worked as the office manager for a local optometrist. She is a member of Antioch Christian Church, where she serves as a Sunday School teacher and the youth leader for the ninth-grade girls.

Richter and her husband, Jordan, have seven children and one grandchild.

**Jessica Burkhardt** joined Community Bank in August as a new account specialist/marketing. She assists customers with opening new accounts, serves as a teller and supports the bank's marketing efforts.

Burkhardt graduated from the University of Northern Iowa with a bachelor's degree in leisure youth and human services, with an emphasis in aquatics. She has worked in the parks and recreation field for almost 25 years for the cities of Mount Pleasant and Oelwein.

A volunteer at Sacred Heart Church, Burkhardt helps with Faith Formation and the National Catholic Youth Conference Youth Group.

With her husband, Mike, Jessica has four children and a grandson.



Burkhardt



Richter





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