Senior earns national research fellowship
NDSU senior earns prestigious research fellowship

Abbey Steckler hopes someday to lead the fight against disease.

The NDSU senior in veterinary and microbiological sciences is certainly off to an impressive start. Steckler recently was awarded an American Society for Microbiology Undergraduate Research Fellowship for her work with listeria, a pathogen that usually infects livestock, but also can be fatal for humans.

Steckler, who grew up in Minot, North Dakota, works in the laboratory of assistant professor Teresa Bergholz. She focuses on DNA sequences of listeria monocytogenes, infection-causing bacteria that are often spread through silage. The research is in collaboration with the North Dakota State Veterinary Diagnostic Lab.

“The isolates that I work with are all local, either from North Dakota or South Dakota. It’s interesting to see the diversity of listeria,” said Steckler, noting she analyzes the sequences using a database at France’s Pasteur Institute. “I was very surprised to receive the fellowship. It does open some doors for me, and helps me go to the society’s general meeting for the next two years.”

In her research, Steckler discovered a previously unknown listeria sequence, suggesting there are new types appearing in the area. “I did find an isolate that was totally new, one that had never been seen before. That was really exciting,” she said.

“Abbey is a remarkably persistent, dedicated and enthusiastic student and researcher,” said Bergholz. “There have been a number of times when experiments did not work as expected, and Abbey did not let these setbacks deter her from her goal. She used them as an opportunity to learn more about the process, refine the procedure and move forward.”

The fellowship grew out of Steckler’s participation in the college’s Russell and Anna Duncan Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, which is designed to reward and encourage student-researchers. The Duncan Scholars Program, new for the 2015-16 academic year, was made possible through a generous donation from the Duncan family.

“Early in their farming career our parents, Russell and Anna Duncan, came to realize the importance of NDSU research and extension in providing improved quality of life for them and increased profitability for their farming business. The use of their gift to NDSU to initiate and support the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program is a fitting use of their gift,” said son Marvin Duncan on behalf of himself, his sister Marilynn (Duncan) Moe and his brother David Duncan. “We enthusiastically support this new program as a means of helping bright young undergraduates experience the satisfaction of creative research. We extend special recognition to Abbey Steckler for her outstanding work under this program and the prestigious fellowship awarded her.”

“I did find an isolate that was totally new, one that had never been seen before. That was really exciting.”

Steckler, who plans a career as an epidemiologist, presented a poster about her research when the American Society of Microbiology met during June in Boston. The event annually attracts more than 10,000 microbiologists from around the world.

“I love learning about disease, because diseases affect everyone,” she said. “I find the research interesting and it is important work for all of us.”
NDSU names first endowed chairs

Generous gifts have established two endowed chairs in the College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources – the first positions of their kind for NDSU.

A total of $4.2 million raised from 40 potato industry donors in 13 states, along with an additional $2.1 million from the Challenge Fund, created the Neil C. Gudmestad Endowed Chair to honor NDSU’s longtime potato pathologist, who is set to retire in 2019.

The CHS Foundation awarded a $2.5 million grant to establish the CHS Chair in Risk Management and Trading, with the first holder being University Distinguished Professor William Wilson. The position will be in the Department of Agribusiness and Applied Economics. The CHS gift, coupled with another $1.25 million contribution by the country’s largest agricultural cooperative, is part of a total endowment of $11.7 million that supports the program. The endowment is supported by 53 donors.

“These are two great examples of NDSU’s fine faculty,” said NDSU President Dean L. Bresciani. “Dr. Gudmestad’s research contributions have been felt around the world and the respect he has gained among potato producers is truly remarkable. Dr. Wilson’s outstanding program readies students for careers in commodity training through cutting-edge education that is available nowhere else in the country.”

“The endowed chairs will provide strong support for the very important, highly visible potato pathology program and the risk and trade program established by Drs. Neil Gudmestad and Bill Wilson, respectively. The endowments will provide stable and long-lasting support for teaching, research and outreach,” said Ken Grafton, vice president, dean and director for agricultural affairs. “These two programs are highly successful, respected and needed by the region’s agricultural sector.”

The recipients, meantime, say they are humbled by the recognition of their efforts.

“To think that my research project has had that kind of impact across such a large geographic area is beyond my ability to comprehend. It is inspiring to me to hear from so many donors and to have them tell me that they do not consider this a donation to my research program, the college or NDSU, but rather as an investment, an investment to their future profitability in the potato business,” Gudmestad said, noting his potato research group is one of the largest in the world.

The Gudmestad endowed chair position will have a nine-member consultation committee to provide input on such things as new equipment, graduate student stipends, support staff salaries or seed money to establish a new research direction. The group also will assist in the selection of Gudmestad’s successor.

“Knowing my research program will continue in perpetuity, in my name, and at a high level, has been overwhelming. I don’t have the vocabulary to adequately describe what it means to me,” Gudmestad said.

NDSU students pursuing careers as global commodities traders or in risk management learn in the technology-based commodity trading room in Barry Hall, and Wilson suggests the CHS donation will lead to new classes and scholarships.

“The endowed chair is an honor to me, but also to our department and NDSU,” Wilson said. “It represents CHS’s commitment to agriculture and NDSU, and this is manifested in a responsibility to me and my department to fulfill their expectations.

“The gift will help fill the longer-term need for employees in the industry. Hence, for NDSU it will mean more students, better technology and better training,” said Wilson.

NDSU administrators send special thanks to lead donors Black Gold Farms Inc., Pro-Health LLC, R.D. Offutt Co. and Simplot Food Group for the potato endowment and major contributors CHS, BNSF and the North Dakota Soybean Council, among many others, for the risk management and trade endowment.
NDSU club restores tractors to former glory

A recently completed restoration project has members of the NDSU Agricultural Systems Management Club brimming with pride. Their hard work has brought two old John Deere Model-H tractors back to life.

A few years ago, the tractors stood rusting in a field near Towner, North Dakota. Tires flat, they were fading reminders of agriculture’s past. But NDSU alumnus Ryan Taylor saw potential.

At an NDSU Homecoming parade, Taylor, BS ’92, noted the excitement ASM Club members felt for antique tractors, and he came up with a proposal. If the students would restore his father’s old two-cylinder tractors, the club could keep one of them.

Taylor’s Model-H tractors were two of 60,000 manufactured by John Deere from 1939-47. When they were new in 1940, they cost $650 apiece.

“They were haying tractors for us, but they had been retired before I joined the haying crew,” Taylor explained. “My dad was a John Deere guy and he used to joke about his long, green line – it was a rusty, green line, actually. Those tractors had more than a little age on them. But, I wanted to see them operating again.”

Club members jumped at the offer, and in December 2012, work began.

Nick Steffl, a senior majoring in agricultural systems management from Callaway, Minnesota, participated in the project from day one. He remembers thinking the club had its work cut out for it.

“The next step could have been the scrapyard,” Steffl said. “We found dirt packed in both the crankcase and transmission. The engine had to be taken apart piece by piece, cleaned or replaced, and then put back together again.”

After months of effort, searches in salvage yards and orders from after-market parts companies, things started taking shape. In May 2014, club members took a big step; they tried to start the engines.

“We cranked, and cranked and cranked; we finally got them to fire. The excitement in the room was crazy,” recalled Joe Burner, a junior from Clara City, Minnesota. “In this project, we learned teamwork, each member brought their own strengths and we got it done.”

Dorothy Floren, a sophomore from Royal City, Washington, joined the project in its final stages. The distinctive John Deere green paint was applied and final adjustments made. “I really enjoyed the experience,” she said. “I love history, especially agricultural history, and I find it really interesting to see how they used to do things. I had a lot of fun.”

Steffl said the ASM Club’s John Deere Model-H is now one of approximately 18 tractors members drive during the Homecoming parade and other campus events. “Anybody who worked on this project will say the same thing – bringing an old piece of machinery back to life is pretty neat,” he said.

The other John Deere is sometimes used to grade Taylor’s driveway and it has become a prize coveted by his two young sons.

“It’s hard to believe they are the same tractors,” Taylor said. “You can tell the club members put their heart and soul into the project. It’s nice to see the students have so much respect for old things.”
College’s Outstanding Senior wins FFA national honor

In the cattle business, Justin Zahradka knows firsthand that producers need an edge to be successful. His research makes that possible.

The major in crop and weed sciences, who was recognized this spring as the Outstanding Senior of the College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources, purchased his first bred heifer as a freshman in high school, and he has focused on increased production ever since. His herd near Lawton, North Dakota, grew to more than 170 head.

When still in high school, Zahradka began investigating cover crops as he looked for the right combination to feed his growing cow-calf operation. “2011 was the first year I grew a cover crop – I used radishes, turnips, barley, peas and sorghum grass,” he explained, noting his animals usually averaged weight gains of two pounds per day, about double what they would have gained on pasture.

He has continued his cover crop research for the past five years, and his work has gained national attention. In October, Zahradka was named the National FFA American Star in Agriscience.

“There's only one in the nation,” he said of the prestigious honor. “It's something I set my sights on when I was a freshman in high school.”

Zahradka readily shares his knowledge by giving cover crop seminars around the region. He has given eight presentations in the past year, and he’s also produced YouTube videos about his research.

“I've always had a natural curiosity and willingness to learn,” said Zahradka, who also was named a Farm Credit 100 Fresh Perspectives national honoree. “The education I've received at NDSU has helped me understand the processes taking place in the field and I’ve learned how to improve yields and efficiencies.”

“Justin’s research interests have been driven by practical questions for his own production operation, and he has been very willing to share the results with neighbors, classmates and many organizations,” said faculty adviser Kirk Howatt, associate professor of plant sciences. “Justin assimilates information from various disciplines into complete, yet simple, solutions for agriculture.”

Highly active in student organizations during his collegiate career, Zahradka has developed an impressive resume of leadership both on and off campus. He was a state FFA regional vice president, past president of the NDSU Agronomy Club, president of the Ag Ambassadors and a member of Saddle and Sirloin and the Collegiate Farm Bureau. He also was a member of Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity.

“Through my student activities, I've been on trips all around the country. I’ve made connections throughout the college and across the surrounding states,” said Zahradka, whose operation was used by the North Dakota Department of Agriculture to promote livestock production in the state. “I have met a lot of people I’ll talk to on a regular basis during my career.”

Following graduation, he’ll work as a crop production consultant in Park River, North Dakota. Zahradka also will custom graze cow-calf pairs this summer, and look for calves to background feed this fall.

He is the son of Jeff and Lori Zahradka of Lawton, North Dakota.
Graduate student wins 3 Minute Thesis Competition

Manpreet Bains, an NDSU doctoral student in molecular pathogenesis from Fargo, delivered the top presentation at NDSU’s Three Minute Thesis Competition, hosted Feb. 10 by the College of Graduate and Interdisciplinary Studies. He earned $1,000 for the accomplishment.

Bains, who grew up in Rochester, Minnesota, presented “Modulatory Effects of Neural Proteins on Your Microbiome.” In his presentation, Bains described how neural proteins, which are secreted by the brain and nervous system, interact with different parts of the body.

“Winning the competition means that I can share my research with a greater population and show people the diversity of research that occurs at NDSU. It provided me the opportunity to get people excited about the research that’s taking place here,” said Bains, whose faculty adviser is Glenn Dorsam, associate professor of veterinary and microbiological sciences. “I want to thank the faculty, staff and students in NDSU’s Department of Veterinary and Microbiological Sciences. Their support has been essential in my success.”

Local and state civic and business leaders, along with NDSU students and faculty, judged the competition. They selected Bains’ presentation from a group of six finalists that also included students majoring in developmental science, pharmaceutical sciences, communication, electrical engineering and botany.

Each of the finalists earned $250 for advancing from the competition’s initial rounds. Bains was impressed by the scope and quality of the research by his fellow competitors.

“When I walked through the presentations of this competition, I had no idea about the variety of research going on at NDSU. It still shocks me that in every part of campus you can find someone studying something completely different, something you’d never expect,” Bains said, noting his future career goal is to continue conducting research in either academia or industry.

The competition began with 35 graduate students from a variety of disciplines competing in early rounds. Their objective was to quickly explain the objective and value of their research in terms relevant to government officials, media, future employers and funding organizations. An 80,000-word thesis would take nine hours to present, but the competitors are given just 180 seconds to showcase their work.

“This is a chance for anybody to hear in a really digestible, sound bite-ish way about the breadth of the work that is done at NDSU,” explained Brandy Randall, associate dean of the College of Graduate and Interdisciplinary Studies. “One of the things really exciting about the championship round was that we had six different colleges represented and the audience could see the variety of work done here.”

Australia’s University of Queensland developed the first Three Minute Thesis Competition in 2008, and the concept has spread to institutions around the world.
Ag Week brings agriculture into focus

North Dakota agriculture was in the spotlight during NDSU’s annual Ag Week. Held April 11-16, the festivities included a kickoff cookout, student poster presentations, a panel discussion on genetically modified organisms, Ag Olympics, a fun run and the Ag Week banquet.

Organized by the students of The NDSU Agriculture Coalition, the activities are intended to bring awareness about one of the state’s leading industries.

“The goal of NDSU Ag Week is to get people from all areas of campus together to celebrate NDSU’s agricultural roots. What we hope to achieve is a greater appreciation of what role agriculture plays on campus, in the community and across the state,” said Jodi Boe, president of the NDSU Agriculture Coalition and a senior majoring in crop and weed sciences from Golden Valley, North Dakota.

The NDSU Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs sponsored advertising for the event.

Timothy Alvarez, vice president for student affairs, noted he has supported and attended Ag Week programs for the past two years.

“What we hope to achieve is a greater appreciation of what role agriculture plays on campus, in the community and across the state.”

“First of all, this is a student-led initiative – they coordinate all of the events and activities to promote the importance that agriculture has on our state. Secondly, the passion and commitment these students have for agriculture is simply inspiring,” Alvarez said. “The future of our state and of food security and production is inextricably connected to these dedicated students interested in pursuing careers in the agriculture field. I have a great deal of confidence that these influential leaders will continue to have a positive impact in providing food for our state and country.”
A delicate balance: development and environment

Combining development with the environment is a matter of balance. That’s the perspective of wetlands authority Cheryl Feigum.

An expert in a variety of wetland and environmental issues, the NDSU alumna is a principal, vice president and senior environmental scientist for Barr Engineering Co., Minneapolis.

During her career, Feigum’s many projects have varied from mines in Minnesota’s Iron Range to macroinvertebrate surveys in Missouri. If it has to do with natural resources and the permit process, Feigum knows how to work through the issues.

“I’ve worked on some very complex, diverse and challenging projects,” she said. “At Barr, I work with a large team of colleagues to come up with innovative, out-of-the-box solutions. That makes it a lot of fun.”

Feigum works closely with developers, proponents and regulators because many considerations come into play during the planning stages of a project. Are there wetland or environmental concerns? Are there issues with an endangered species?

Sometimes projects can be problematic, so options must be considered.

“Things aren’t black and white; you need to look at the grey areas as well. It’s the whole picture: the soil, biota, plants, animals, air, everything. You need to bring in all the components, and that makes the work exciting,” Feigum explained.

“I like the strategy involved,” she said. “I like having a discussion with the client and other members of my team, and then collaborating on how to solve complex issues.”

Feigum, MS ’95, zoology, PhD ’01, soil science, regularly relies on her education at NDSU, where she learned the nuances of the investigative process, how to analyze a plan and bring about a successful conclusion.

She also was a teacher assistant for David Hopkins, associate professor in the School of Natural Resource Sciences, and conducted a study on water quality influence on aquatic species in the Buffalo River of western Minnesota.

Hopkins remembers her as an intelligent, focused student. “As the teaching assistant for my soil class, she frequently demonstrated a nearly passionate interest in learning all she could about the subject matter – a laudable attribute in any professional,” he said. “She is a determined, competitive individual who evaluates the mission of the organization and strives to implement it.”

As she studied, Feigum also learned there isn’t always a simple answer.

“NDSU is where I developed my curiosity and my desire to understand how the whole process works,” Feigum said. “I remember standing on a road with (NDSU adjunct professor) Dr. Jim Richardson near a wetlands project of mine. He told me that maintaining my professional reputation is everything. He said to always tell people the truth and let them know what is going on.”

Those are words to live by when developers and neighbors have conflicting views on a project.

“Projects can be controversial, but at the same time, you’re juggling all the pieces until things level out, there’s resolution, projects get permitted and move forward.” Feigum said. “You need to balance with a give-and-take. Every project has its challenges, but the question I ask is, ‘What’s the process to get through this?’ ”

Feigum and her husband, Gregg, live in Bloomington, Minnesota.
Alumnus honored for Extension career

In acknowledgement of alumnus Myron D. Johnsrud’s outstanding career, he received an Honorary Doctorate of Agriculture during NDSU commencement ceremonies May 14. Johnsrud was a leader in Extension at both NDSU and the national level.

Johnsrud, a Watford City, North Dakota, area native, earned his bachelor’s degree in agricultural mechanization from NDSU in 1957. He held a number of positions with the NDSU Extension Service, including assistant county agent in Williams County, director of personnel and program development and Extension director.

In Washington, D.C., he was director of staff development for Extension Service USDA and later served as administrator. Johnsrud went on to join the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, where he was director of Extension and outreach. He retired in 2002, concluding a 37-year career in Extension.

In addition, Johnsrud was a member of the National 4-H Council’s board of trustees from 1985 to 1993.

“Dr. Johnsrud had an exceptional career,” wrote nominators Chris Boerboom, NDSU Extension Service director, and Ken Grafton, vice president, dean and director for agricultural affairs. “The impacts of his leadership are present with us today.”

Johnsrud’s many other honors include the Meritorious Executive Award from President George H.W. Bush, induction into the International Adult and Continuing Education and National 4-H Halls of Fame, NDSU Alumni Achievement Award, NDSU Harvest Bowl Agri-business Award and Epsilon Sigma Phi National Distinguished Service Ruby Award.

NDSU alumni honored

Two respected alumni of the NDSU College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources have been recognized with prestigious awards. Rodger K. Johnson, BS ’65, animal science, received the 2015 Henry L. Bolley Academic Achievement Award and Lynden Johnson, BS ’82, agricultural economics, was honored as the 2015 Harvest Bowl Agribusiness Award recipient.

Rodger K. Johnson
Johnson is a world-renowned expert in swine genetics who has had a major impact on the swine industry through his efforts to improve production and the quality of pork. Holding the title of Professor Emeritus of Animal Science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Johnson published more than 125 peer-reviewed research papers during his outstanding career.

Johnson was a faculty member at Oklahoma State University from 1973 to 1978, before joining the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Johnson's many honors include the Rockefeller Prentice Award in Animal Breeding and Genetics in 1988 and the American Society of Animal Science Morrison Award in 2013. He also received the Darrell Nelson Award for Excellence in Graduate Advising at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Master of the Swine Industry from National Hog Farmer and Outstanding Graduate Alumnus from Oklahoma State University.

Lynden Johnson
Johnson is the executive vice president of CHS Country Operations, a Fortune 100 company. He leads a unit that delivers products, marketing and processing to more than 75,000 CHS farmers and ranchers in 16 states and Canada. CHS Country Operations generates $8 billion in annual revenues and employs more than 6,100 agriculture professionals.

Earlier in his career, Johnson led three local cooperatives in Minnesota and North Dakota, and he was an active leader in many cooperative system organizations. In 2005, Johnson moved to CHS to lead CHS Business Solutions. He was named to his current role at CHS Country Operations in 2014.

An ardent supporter of NDSU, Johnson and CHS have helped create the CHS Classroom, Commodity Trading Room and the CHS Endowed Chair in Risk Management and Trading, as well as numerous scholarships and grants.
Distinguished Alumnus pushes teamwork for quality research

Communication and teamwork are the keys to success. That’s the astute advice of the 2015-16 Distinguished Alumnus of the NDSU College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources.

Mike Tokach, BS ’86, animal science, speaks from experience – he knows what it takes to be a leader in his field. In addition to his duties as a professor and swine nutrition researcher at Kansas State University, Manhattan, he also holds the position of Extension State Leader for Animal Sciences and Industry.

His research focuses on the day-to-day nutrition problems of swine producers, searching for ways for them to maintain profitability.

Tokach is internationally known and respected for his efforts. National Hog Farmer Magazine listed him among the 50 people who have made the greatest impact on the swine industry in the past 50 years.

“Growing up in North Dakota, you learn work ethic early in life,” said Tokach, who was raised on a livestock and grain farm near St. Anthony, North Dakota. “And the connections I made at NDSU were very important to me. Through my activities with the judging teams, Saddle and Sirloin Club and Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity, I could travel, meet people with different points of view and see the opportunities that were out there.”

Tokach made the most of those opportunities, and his alma mater is recognizing him as a Distinguished Alumnus.

“For Tokach, the research is all about everyone making a contribution. That’s the message he emphasized as he met with NDSU students and faculty during a campus visit Feb. 10.

“What I like best about my job is the chance to work with colleagues who are friends that have a common goal of helping the industry,” Tokach said, noting the KSU swine nutrition team is a close-knit group of five experts. “My biggest daily joys are finding solutions for producers and working with high quality students who accomplish incredible things.”

After graduating from NDSU, Tokach earned his master’s degree at KSU and doctorate at the University of Minnesota. During his illustrious career, he has presented seminars at more than 300 animal and veterinary science meetings around the world. He has written 250 refereed journal articles, 590 abstracts and seven book chapters.

Contributing in a team setting may be a top requirement to a successful career in many professions, but there are other factors as well.

“This award means a lot to me because I have a great deal of respect for what NDSU has done for producers and students,” Tokach said. “I know the quality of people who have graduated from this college, so to be considered for this honor is quite humbling.”

During his time at NDSU, Tokach also met his wife, Lisa, who was a pre-veterinary student. They now live in Abilene, Kansas, and have three children – Sage, Rogan and Fiona.
Alumna sets sights on equestrian excellence

The quest for perfection drives NDSU alumna Marguerite “Mimi” Stanley as she reaches for her ultimate prize.

The 2013 graduate in equine science is an expert in dressage, an intense training regimen for horses that is an Olympic sport. Stanley’s aim is to someday demonstrate her skills as the world watches.

Dressage is a French term meaning “training” that originated with highly obedient horses trained to take commands during warfare. At its best, the rider appears relaxed, using minimal aids as the horse willingly performs a series of requested movements.

“It is the physical and mental development of the horse, intended to bring out their most athletic and beautiful form. I liken dressage competitions to compulsories in figure skating,” explained Stanley, who has won 20 national championships, 12 reserve championships and the Young Rider Grand Prix. She also has earned her Gold, Silver and Bronze medals and the Freestyle Gold Bar through the U.S. Dressage Foundation.

Stanley and her mother, Karla, BS ’77, are the primary owners and operators of Prairie Rose Training Center in Bismarck, North Dakota. The full-service equine facility is part of a family-run business including father, Curt, AD ’75, that concentrates on dressage and Arabian sport horses.

Dressage requires perseverance and patience because it can take at least six to 10 years for a rider and horse to reach the highest levels of training. Precision comes in small, sometimes tentative, steps.

“It’s an interesting puzzle to help a horse understand what to do. Dressage is a continuous search for perfection, and that speaks to my own attention-to-detail and perfectionist tendencies,” Stanley said. “To me, it’s really the development of the relationship, the understanding, the physical abilities and improving upon what you accomplished last time.”

Stanley is glad she followed her parents to NDSU, noting the educational experience prepared her for career and life. “NDSU was a great place to develop more clarity for my personal aspirations and goals,” she said. “I gained knowledge about nutrition, genetics and production, and I developed my business background through my courses, as well.”

“NDSU was a great place to develop more clarity for my personal aspirations and goals.”

Stanley is currently working with Abraxa, a three-year-old Westphalian mare recently imported from Germany. The hope is that eventually the pair can combine for a bright future.

“Competing internationally is my long-term goal, and representing the United States in the Olympics would be my greatest goal,” Stanley said. “My timeline is wrapped up in Abraxa right now. The earliest she’d compete at the highest level would be as a nine-year-old, and that’s if everything goes smoothly. But, it looks like she has good prospects for it.”
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