

A PUBLICATION OF ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Impact

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Find out
what's cookin'
with ECC culinary
graduate and
"Next Level Chef"
Zach Laidlaw
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PLUS
Read the Q&A
with outgoing
ECC president
Dr. David Sam
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MISSION

The mission of Elgin Community College is to improve people's lives through learning.

SHARED VALUES

- Excellence
- Freedom of Inquiry
- Ethical Practices
- Accountability
- Collaboration
- Holistic Approach

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Inspiring Futures

A message from the ECC Interim President and Board Chair

Dear ECC Community,

We have so much to reflect on as Elgin Community College concludes its 75th anniversary. The milestones and successes we accomplished this past year are worthy of celebration, and we are very proud of our collective efforts. It's an honor to look back at our college's achievements and progress in fostering community relationships and strengthening ties within our region since 1949.

In this special edition of *Impact* magazine, we honor ECC's former president, David Sam, PhD, JD, LLM, who led the college for 17 ½ transformative years. You'll hear directly from him in our Q&A section, where he reflects on his time at ECC and our incredible shared journey. Additionally, this issue shines a spotlight on two of our outstanding alumni, Zach Laidlaw and Carly Corcoran, whose

personal and professional success stories began right here at ECC.

Each of our students has a story, and ECC often serves as just the beginning. However, that first step is crucial. We are committed to helping all of our students believe in their potential and explore the opportunities before them. Whether through academic support, financial assistance, or one-on-one mentorship, we dedicate ourselves to helping our students achieve their dreams.

This issue also highlights a new scholarship program —The Seigle Scholar Program — through the ECC Foundation. This initiative, funded by one of the most significant gifts in our history, will provide three students with full-ride scholarships this academic year, helping to ensure their success at ECC and beyond.

We hope you enjoy reading about these inspiring stories and the impact ECC continues to make. Thank you for your unwavering support as we reflect on the past, celebrate the present, and look toward a bright future.

Warm regards,

Peggy Heinrich, EdD
Interim President



Donna Redmer, EdD
Chair, Board of Trustees



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ON THE COVER:
ECC culinary graduate and "Next Level Chef" finalist Zach Laidlaw.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX TV



Q&A

REFLECTIONS AND VISION Q&A with Outgoing ECC President

Outgoing Elgin Community College President David Sam, PhD, JD, LLM, led the institution through 17½ years of growth and achievement from 2007 through 2024. Originally from Ghana, Dr. Sam's journey in higher education began with a dream to study at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, which he pursued with determination. Under his leadership, the college saw significant increases in degree completion, a reduction in student loan debt, and major campus improvements. As Dr. Sam transitions to President Emeritus status, he reflects on his tenure and the bright future ahead for ECC. *Responses have been edited for length and clarity.*

Rumor has it that when you first visited Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, you already knew your way around because you had memorized the campus map. True? As a young child in Ghana, West Africa, I wanted to come to the United States and I wanted to be trained as a diplomat. And so there was this particular graduate school that trains most diplomats, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. So even before I finished high school, even before I got my baccalaureate degree, I would write to them, and I would read [admission materials] from beginning to end and saw campus photos over several years. The first day I drove to the campus in 1981, I knew the place because, for 10 years, I'd been looking at the publications multiple times.

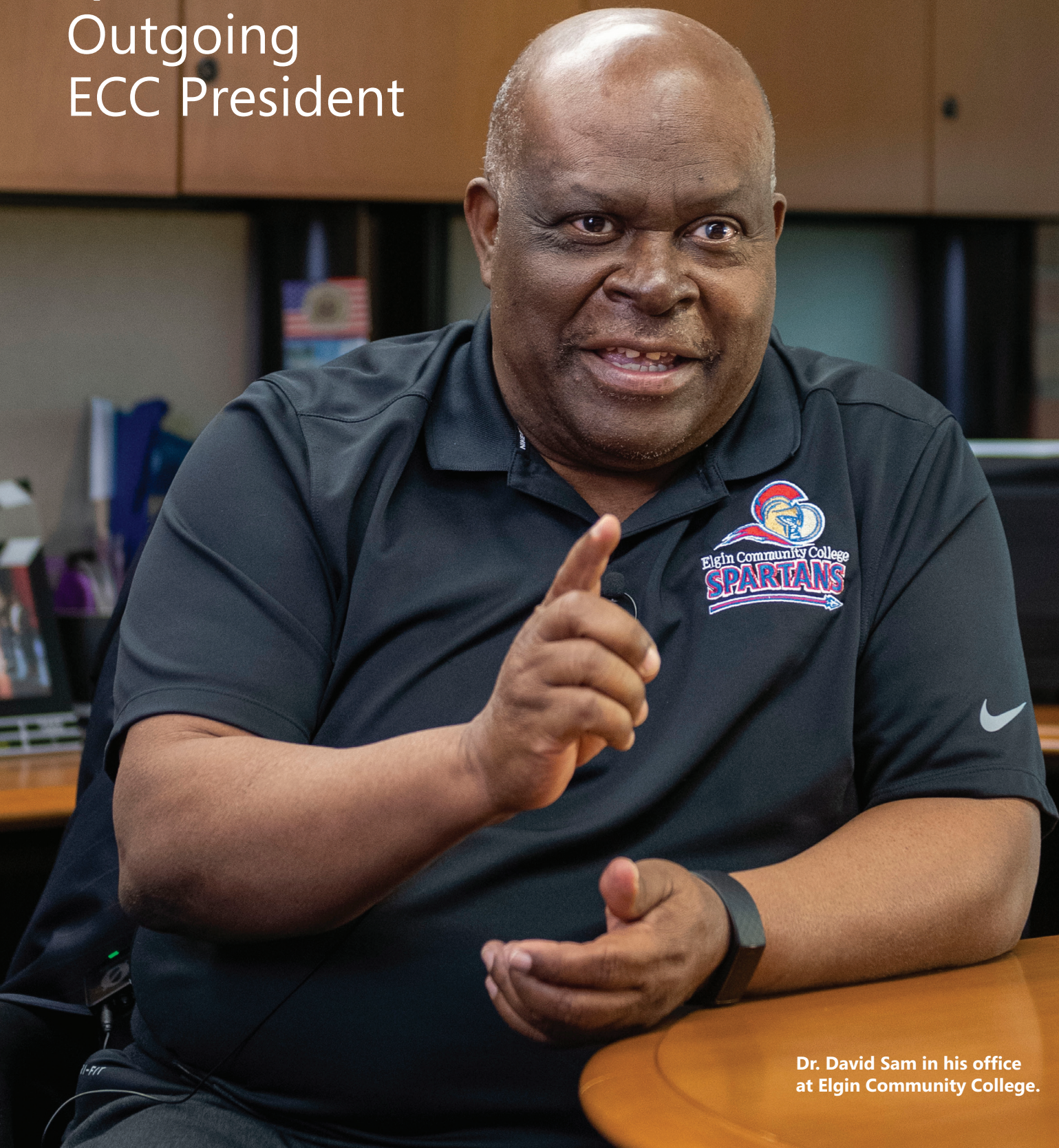
Is it true that a college dean learned about you and offered you a scholarship? Yes. I had been so interested in going to Fletcher that, psychologically, I couldn't go anywhere else. I had scholarships to go to Big 10 universities and full rides for graduate school, but Fletcher didn't offer me much money. I applied for a scholarship from the Ghana government, and originally, I was told that the paperwork was in place. Later, they told me they couldn't find my folder, so I resubmitted everything right before it was time to go to Fletcher.

When I arrived in Boston, the registrar asked how I would pay my tuition. I said I hadn't received a scholarship response yet

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REFLECTIONS AND VISION

Q&A with
Outgoing
ECC President



Dr. David Sam in his office
at Elgin Community College.



and was told I couldn't register. Later in the evening, I went to the associate dean and explained that even though I had about half a dozen universities where I could do my graduate work, Fletcher had been on my mind for 10 years.

He asked me about the scholarship I said I'd applied for, and I explained that I had to resubmit. He asked when I thought I would get an answer, and I said, "Well, it could be by Thanksgiving." But I also added there was no guarantee that I was going to get a scholarship. That impressed him. He said, "Young man, many people in your situation would have said it is in the bag and it's coming, but you admitted that it wasn't guaranteed." He then took my paper and signed it for the semester. And that's how I started at Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

What or who ignited your career interest in higher education? You said you were initially interested in becoming a diplomat, but now you're sitting in the president's office.

My mentor, Dr. Mary Fifield, who was the dean of instruction at Harold Washington College in the mid-'80s. I was working at an accounting firm when I saw a grant position there — I applied, and she hired me for 2 ½ years.

I subsequently found a position as an assistant professor and coordinator of international studies at the College of DuPage (COD). In the meantime, Dr. Fifield moved from Harold Washington College to Mott Community College in Michigan. Toward the end of my first year, she called me about a dean's position opening at Mott, but I indicated no interest in that. We spoke multiple times the following year, and toward the end of my second year, she told me that the position was still available. Again, I said I wasn't interested. She asked, "David, what will you be doing in six years?" I said I'd be a tenured faculty member in charge of international education.

Then she said, "No, in six years, you will be a college president. Three years as a dean, three as a vice president." I had never thought about being a college president. And so, Dr. Fifield was the one who ignited my interest in being in administration at the community college level. That was a pivotal moment in my career.

What would you consider your proudest achievement during your time here at ECC? I'm pleased that during my 17 ½ years, 57% of all the degrees and certificates ever awarded by the college were awarded during this time period. I could point to a few other equally important things. In 2009, we held a referendum, which changed the face of the campus.

When I arrived, Spartan Drive ended in the middle of the wetlands. Within two weeks of my arrival, a couple of community leaders took me out and said, "If you want to be remembered, join Spartan Drive to Randall Road." I was able to work with the ECC Board of Trustees and the city of Elgin to join McLean Boulevard and Randall Road through Spartan Drive.

One accomplishment that is also special to me is the reduction in student loan debt. Student loan debt has been a national issue for several years now. By the time I got here, I realized that there were some students whose debt was higher than what I had taken out for my master's and doctoral degrees. I thought that was unconscionable. So we had a great financial aid office that had just been reconstituted around 2007. Back then, 1,870 students were taking on \$6.6 million a year in student loans. Today, 304 students take about \$1.6 million. That's a reduction of 80% in both the number of students taking loans and the amount taken. We can truly say that these students have been able to achieve

their dreams with little or no student loan debt.

We earned Aspen Institute's Top 25 community college recognition and made Aspen's Top 150 five times. We also became an Achieving the Dream Leader College of Distinction. These are achievements we made while working collectively.

What have been the most significant accomplishments at ECC as they pertain to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion? We've been named the top DEI institution twice — once in 2014 and again this past June. Last year, we were recognized nationally with top awards. The most significant factor in this, though, is ensuring everyone (students, faculty, staff, visitors, etc.) has a sense of belonging.

You can do so many things, but if people do not feel that they belong, then they are not able to take advantage of the rich resources we have at our institution. And while that cannot be quantified very easily, the fact that we've recorded the largest Latinx population ever shows that people have a sense of belonging. As of now, over 50% of our students have Latinx heritage, which is very significant.

What are some of the biggest challenges you faced in your presidency, and how did you overcome them? I always look at challenges as opportunities. In 2006, just before I got here, ECC tried for a referendum and was defeated, so it was very challenging to attempt another referendum in 2009. By that time, we were in a great recession, and everyone was saying it was not a good time to go for it. That was challenging, but we went for it — and succeeded!

What opportunities do you see for ECC moving forward? You've laid a lot of groundwork with your amazing team. What do you hope to see after you're gone?

I will take this opportunity to thank the ECC Board of Trustees for making me President Emeritus, which will tie me very closely to the college for the rest of my life. ECC is clearly well-positioned for whatever level of greatness we seek to achieve. I see more and more of the same types of things that we've done. I see the college continuing to grow in excellence.

Can you elaborate on your vision and your objectives for ECC's new Manufacturing & Technology Center and, ultimately, how it will benefit not only students here but the community? One of the things that became very clear during the pandemic was the disruption in the supply chain. Many products were manufactured abroad and never arrived here. These are items that could be manufactured here, but manufacturing has been outsourced abroad on a large scale in the last 20 to 30 or more years. Well, manufacturing is back! More and more is being produced here, so it's important that we have facilities to train the people who will be in the labor force for years to come. Businesses and industries need that workforce, and ECC is responding to those needs.

As you reflect on the 17 years you've been here, what do you hope your legacy will be when people talk about Dr. David Sam and ECC? I think it will be different for different people. I don't have a single legacy that I would hope people remember. If pressed, I would say the legacy is that over the last 17 ½ years, we assembled a group of outstanding faculty, staff, and administrators, some serving for many years. Their dedication and achievements have positioned ECC for continued success and a lasting impact on the community for many years to come. ■



THE COOK'S TALE



ach Laidlaw, a 2024 "Next Level Chef" television series finalist, began his culinary journey at just 13 years old in his hometown of Burlington, Illinois.

Starting as a dishwasher in a local restaurant, Laidlaw was quickly drawn to cooking, inspired by his brother, who worked there as a cook. "I've got to learn how to cook this thing," Laidlaw recalled thinking after his brother served him steak during a shift. That moment marked the beginning of a lifelong passion for the culinary arts.

Fast-forward 21 years, and Laidlaw found himself competing on the Fox Network culinary reality show, judged by celebrity chefs such as Gordon Ramsay.

"I'm just forever grateful for that opportunity," Laidlaw said. "It literally came out of nowhere."

Before his culinary career took him to unexpected places and opportunities, Laidlaw started his expedition in the Culinary Arts & Hospitality Program at Elgin Community College (ECC) in 2007. He earned degrees in both culinary arts and hospitality management while working full time as a cook and server.

The Beginning

Deciding to attend ECC was a pivotal decision in Laidlaw's life.

"Choosing the culinary route kind of saved me," he said. "I was a troublemaker kid, so culinary really pulled me together and got my head straight."

Laidlaw found his perfect fit at ECC because it was close to his home, affordable, and he could work while attending classes.

"The whole time I was at ECC was great," Laidlaw said. "I really got to learn the fundamentals and basic techniques to get me to where I wanted to take my culinary career."

While in school and working, Laidlaw networked with other chefs and restaurateurs, which inspired him and sparked his interest in the molecular side of cooking.

"Becoming more technical with my food was more fulfilling with the dishes I was creating," he said.

Laidlaw's talent and drive led him to pursue his culinary dreams, opening restaurants and cooking in various locations. From his

hometown in Illinois to the British Virgin Islands and later Australia, Laidlaw eventually found his landing point in what he describes as paradise: the island of Maui. There, he currently works as the executive chef and vice president of experiences at Hua Momona Farms, a 25-acre organically managed endeavor specializing in microgreens and small-batch vegetables.

Hawaii: Fires, Family, and Fox

In 2017, Laidlaw reconnected with an acquaintance, Gary Grube, an inventor, entrepreneur, and mentor from his Chicago days, to start Hua Momona Farms. Laidlaw settled into life on the farm, working tirelessly seven days a week.

However, his life took an unexpected turn when the Lahaina wildfires in Maui devastated his home and damaged the farm.

"I became homeless and in debt overnight," Laidlaw said. Even with his home in ashes and the greenhouse roof blown off at the farm, Laidlaw made it his mission to help those in need. He activated the commercial kitchen and worked with other Maui chefs and volunteers to feed Lahaina's displaced, which he still does today.

"As a victim of the fire myself, I just felt like it was the right thing to do," Laidlaw said. "This is my home and family."

A month after the wildfires, Laidlaw traveled to Ireland to film Fox's "Next Level Chef." It was difficult for him to leave his community during such a challenging time.

"I felt so guilty for leaving, but I'm so happy I did because it helped my mission to foster awareness about [relief efforts in] Maui," Laidlaw said.

What's Next?

"Next Level Chef" was just the start for this ECC Sensational 75 alum, who is eager to expand his brand.

"Maui and Hua Momona Farms is my home," Laidlaw said, "but I'm traveling and doing a lot of pop-up gigs, food and wine festivals, and working on some brand deals."

Although under contract with Fox for a year, he hopes to seize a potential opportunity with Food Network next.

"Fox gave me so much exposure, but hopefully, they'll let me shine on another show. And if I can get on Food Network, I'm there and will win it this time." ■

**Chef Gordon Ramsay
with Zach Laidlaw
on the set of
"Next Level Chef."**



LABOR OF LOVE

Egin Community College alum Carly Corcoran has emerged as a transformative force in the field of labor and delivery, working as the lead nurse at the Birth Center of Chicago for the past two years. Finding her passion and purpose in the field of nursing didn't come easily for Corcoran. Beginning at ECC in 2011, Corcoran took the next five years to figure out her path, something she says she has never regretted.

"ECC helped me explore with all the classes they offered," she said. "I would take a class and realize 'this is not what I want to do.' This allowed me to narrow [my career] down to nursing. I may not have found it if I had rushed through to figure out what I wanted to do."

As a first-generation college student, Corcoran juggled a full course load with a full-time job. For months, she wrestled with uncertainty and self-doubt, questioning her choices and ability to afford her education. Attending the birth of a friend's baby provided clarity; she finally realized her calling in life.

Already interested in her ECC biology courses, Corcoran began pursuing the prerequisites for nursing.

"At ECC, I really started to form amazing connections and was influenced by my biology professors. More importantly, though, ECC truly taught me how to persevere and find balance in my life," she said.

After ECC, Corcoran enrolled in the nursing

program at Aurora University, where she excelled. She even became president of the nursing club. After graduation, Corcoran began working in labor and delivery at St. Alexius Hospital in Hoffman Estates.

She then took her passion for labor and delivery and transitioned into a position as the current lead nurse at the Birth Center of Chicago. Corcoran tirelessly strives to foster a nurturing and inclusive environment for her patients.

"I honor and recognize the holistic experience of labor and delivery because it's a moment bigger than yourself," Corcoran said. "It's physical, mental, emotional, even spiritual. I step back and realize I have to care for these people and think about how they would like to be treated, and I've learned to do that by looking at the bigger picture. I am helping nurture these families in building their families. It's so humbling for me."

This past year, Corcoran experienced a significant shift as she became the one being nurtured. Welcoming her first baby, Caiden, marked what she described as a full-circle moment for her. Corcoran said this allowed her to truly put the importance of her work into perspective, fueling her desire to care for her future patients even more. Her commitment to being a lifelong learner continues as she dedicates herself to remaining up-to-date with the latest research, trends, and best practices.

"This is such a special field. It will always be fulfilling for me to help families the best way I can during one of the most vulnerable times in their lives. It's very special that I found this." ■



Carly Corcoran sits on a birthing tub (far left) and checks over an infant at the Birth Center of Chicago.

Seigles' gift offers full-ride, mentoring to ECC students



The Elgin Community College Foundation is dedicated to empowering students and strengthening the local community. This commitment inspired ECC

Foundation Board Member and Secretary Robin Seigle and her husband, Mark Seigle, to establish the Seigle Scholar Program this fall. Their gift of \$500,000 for the program is one of the largest the college has ever received.

"The recipients will receive not only tuition but also money for books. It's a full ride," Mark Seigle said. "The program will be a game-changer for the scholars."

Three students make up the first cohort. They will receive a full-tuition scholarship

"Giving back is what I know."

— Mark Seigle

for the 2024-2025 academic year and mentoring support. All scholars qualified for the program with a minimum 3.0 GPA, being first-year, full-time students, demonstrating community involvement, and more.

"This will make a huge impact," Robin Seigle said. "I'm really happy we can keep this local."

The Seigles' decision to support ECC students is rooted in their upbringing and strong connection to the local community.

"Giving back is what I know," Mark Seigle said. "Our families raised us with that belief, and there's no greater joy than helping others."

The Seigle Scholar Program is just one example of the ECC Foundation's commitment to student success. The foundation offers nearly 100 scholarship opportunities to help students achieve their goals.

In December of 2023, the ECC Foundation launched the public phase of its student-centered Bright Futures campaign to help more students achieve their dreams. With the community's backing, and co-chair Robin Seigle, the campaign successfully exceeded its goal of \$3 million.

"When we began our Bright Futures



Mark and Robin Seigle

campaign, we knew we would reach our goal because supporting the students of ECC is so important to so many in this community," said Susan Taylor-Demming, executive director for institutional advancement and the ECC Foundation.

"Through each of our scholarship opportunities, we continue to increase access to education and improve people's lives through learning. And when we help our students, we help our community."

A key focus of the Bright Futures campaign is addressing the region's most critical workforce needs in health care,

truck driving, automotive mechanics, welding, and other fields. By supporting students pursuing these career and technical degrees, the ECC Foundation helps ensure a skilled workforce for the region.

The Seigles are looking forward to mentoring opportunities with the Seigle Scholars and helping them achieve their goals.

"I feel like this scholarship will make a huge impact on them and change their lives," Robin Seigle said. ■

Foundation Gala raises \$150,000 for student scholarships

T

hanks to the generosity of donors, the ECC Foundation's annual gala raised more than \$150,000 to support student scholarships. The event, sponsored by Otto Engineering, featured music and dancing and recognized

ECC's Sensational 75 alumni. In addition, the college bestowed awards to the Rotary Club of Schaumburg-Hoffman Estates (2024 ECC Friend of Education Award), Rita Shaw (2024 Exceptional Friend of the ECC Foundation), Danise Habun (2024 ECC Foundation Lasting Impact Award), and Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein (2024 ECC Foundation Lasting Impact Award). ■



1-Gala co-chairs Linda Hefferin, ECC professor emerita (left), and Robin Seigle, ECC Foundation Board of Directors secretary, welcomed the guests.

2-ECC Interim President Peggy Heinrich, EdD, (left) with Rita Shaw, 2024 Exceptional Friend of the ECC Foundation, Jenni Betancourt, chair of the ECC Foundation Board, and Susan Taylor-Demming, Executive Director of the ECC Foundation.

3-ECC Sensational 75 alum Frank Catalano plays his saxophone during the dinner.

4-ECC student Shynecka Manderson shares how her scholarship has impacted her life.

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