

# Walnut Strong

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**“Hearing from the voices that are not heard as much, we can use those conversations to take our education to another level to help benefit those who don’t have the same resources or privilege that we do and it also makes you more aware of some of the issues that might come into the classroom.”**

**- Megan Walsh**

Megan Walsh, a senior majoring in elementary education, was a part of a service-learning class that helped with outreach for the 415 Walnut Collective in Waterloo. This experience helped her grow, not only in her professional life, but also in her personal life. Through this service-learning course, she learned more about the people in her community, especially the voices that are underrepresented. This experience expanded Megan’s awareness of societal issues that could potentially come into the classroom through her students. Additionally, it allowed her to gain more of an understanding for how to provide opportunities for all individuals in the Cedar Valley.

The Walnut Neighborhood Coalition in Waterloo, was formed in 2016 with a dream to help the neighborhood flourish. Today the work is continuing as the 415 Walnut Collective. Members of the project include representatives from Habitat for Humanity, Link Christian Community Development, the University of Northern Iowa including Imagining America, as well as neighborhood community members. Habitat for Humanity,, purchased the Walnut Street Baptist Church in 2018 with plans to renovate and reuse this important historic landmark.

UNI faculty and students have become more and more involved in this community project as it has continued to develop and grow. The faculty involved include: Thaddeus Atzmon, (Drs.) Julianne Gassman, Zachary Batt, Dana Potter, Gary Gute, Disa Cornish, Gowri Betrabet Gulwadi, and Shuaib Meacham. Faculty, staff, and student involvement includes interior design students working towards creating a 3D model of the church with help from local architects, College of Business students as web designers, students in the Geoinformatics training, Research, Education, and Extension Center (GeoTREE) program, as well as through other various class involvement and volunteer opportunities.

This partnership is a great example of how community engagement and collaboration can work effectively. Community collaboration has led to rich practicum opportunities and experiences for students and has allowed them to become embedded into the culture of what it means to be a UNI student. The UNI campus has a strong history and culture of giving back to the community and being a community-focused institution that continues to grow with every generation of students. There are people and agencies from across the Cedar Valley working together to help rebuild and develop this historic neighborhood in Waterloo. The key component that has surrounded this project, has been to turn this building into something that the community members want and need, while preserving the history surrounding it and the neighborhood it is in. By listening to the members of the community and having them involved in the project, community voice is being prioritized. Once the planning team is gone, the overall goal is that this space, the neighborhood, and its community members walk away with something meaningful, useful, sustainable, and something that they can feel proud of.

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