A walk can lead anywhere. Walking impelled 27-year-old Phil Hanson into a whole new career. In the process of acquainting himself with resources relevant to a new job in the City of Columbus’ Neighborhood Health Division, Hanson discovered America Walks and the Walking College and applied with his supervisor’s encouragement. He was admitted as a Fellow to the 2016 class.

From Advocate to Walking College Fellow

A walker since childhood in his native city of Columbus, Ohio, Hanson freely explored his neighborhood in Upper Arlington, an affluent inner-ring suburb, which offered good schools, a great park system that provided summer camps and soccer leagues, and walkable neighborhoods. He walked and biked to school. Everything supported a healthy and accessible environment until he left for Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A highly segregated city, Milwaukee jolted Hanson into a new urban reality.

“I didn’t have a lot of experience in that kind of urban setting before I went to college,” he recalls. “There were some parks and there were sidewalks, but it just didn’t have the feeling of the kind of neighborhood I grew up in. The parks weren’t necessarily as well maintained. Milwaukee has a beautiful lakefront, but it feels very separated from the city’s lower-income residents.”

Originally aspiring to become a physical therapist, Hanson found opportunities to volunteer to promote health sciences education as a freshman. He mentored local kids and helped design weight-lifting classes at the United Community Center on the near south side, in a predominately Hispanic community.

“These kids were like me, they loved to be active and outdoors, but they just had one safe place to go – the community center,” Hanson says. “They were struggling not just because of their socio-economic status, but because of the quality of infrastructure in their neighborhood.”

Getting directly involved in the community and seeing the effects of the built environment on kids’ choices helped reframe Hanson’s educational interests and priorities. Encouraged by Dr. Chris Simenz, his mentor at Marquette, Hanson helped out on a 10-year Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and in his senior year, he sought out a research internship with a public health professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. That experience cemented his commitment to public health.

From Walking College to Walkable Communities for All

The timing was perfect. “Participating in the Walking College when I did, after I’d settled in at my job and had gotten comfortable with my workload” — including overseeing four community walking clubs — “gave me a guided way to start thinking again about what really excited me and got me refocused on my priorities,” says Hanson.
“Wherever anybody is in their career path, having that kind of opportunity to dive into these important topics, even if it is already part of your work, setting aside time to learn, read, think and talk about them makes a big difference.”

The city is doing much to improve its trails and bikeways, create complete streets and develop new greenways, Hanson notes. Doing so may help those most in need, but putting in the work to make sure low-income areas and communities of color are truly engaged in the planning and development of healthy environments is essential, as well. Columbus’ Walk Score of 40 dips below the average score, and outside the central city, where many low-income residents live, walking is simply not an option. Columbus has a great deal of potential, but it also struggles to serve many of its most vulnerable residents.

“Social justice and equity is part of everything we do here at Columbus Public Health,” Hanson says, “but we also have programs to deliver, and we have to be sure we’re consistently making that commitment to equity, or we’ll lose sight of it in all of our deadlines.”

Throughout his Walking College fellowship, relationships and resources proved pivotal for Hanson, helping him answer important questions and frame a productive approach to his work in the city. “What I valued a lot was the conversations we had with our mentoring groups,” he says. “The resources, the readings – I’ve bookmarked a lot of them. It was really great to have those resources in my back pocket, but going through and talking about what we were learning and how we were putting that into action was really impactful.”

As for his own action plan, Hanson created an ambitious proposal to help the City of Columbus apply for and receive designation as a Walk-Friendly Community by the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center in late 2016. The designation would inspire more pedestrian planning and programming and put Columbus on the map as a great place to walk. After embarking on the process, however, he learned that collaborating with city staff who were already working on the renewal application for Columbus’ existing silver-level Bicycle Friendly Community designation — due in summer 2017 — would be more strategic. While working on the new collaboration, Hanson discovered more opportunities to expand and develop his existing walking programs, including Columbus Art Walks.

**Beyond the Classroom**

Hanson credits the Walking College with giving him the impetus to apply for the grant that will fund the new Culture Walks program. “I don’t think I would have seen it the same way or gone for the opportunity without the Walking College,” he says. “And we wouldn’t have pursued Walk-Friendly designation as quickly. That project has momentum now, which otherwise may have just languished on the vine, so to speak.”

Hanson recently received a grant to expand the Art Walks program. Called “Culture Walks” the program partners with the Columbus Landmarks Foundation and hopes to take four of the Art Walks neighborhoods to tell stories and capture the ‘spirit of the neighborhood’ rather than focusing just on the history, art and architecture. “That’s part of the story, but the people and the place are the part of the story we want to capture with these Culture Walks,” says Hanson.

For more on the America Walks Walking College, visit: [http://americawalks.org/walkingcollege/](http://americawalks.org/walkingcollege/)
Hanson is also working on evaluating the city’s walking programs, and he turned to Walking College mentors to learn more about how to do that well. “I tried to ask a lot about evaluation, how they’re evaluating projects and understanding successes and learning opportunities,” he says. “Every year, we try to improve and refine the surveys we give out to people. If we can, we’d like to get answers to questions like, ‘Does a program like this encourage people to get out and walk more often?’ We’re trying to create momentum and growth, not just learning how many people there were or how far they walked. We have a storytelling initiative that others in our office are leading, so we use those resources, too.”

With a fresh outlook and new toolbox of ideas, Hanson has also started thinking about his own lifestyle, talking with his fiancée about where they want to live and how they might be a one-car family. Both grew up in suburban Columbus and find it easy to just imagine themselves building a life in the same kind of neighborhood they experienced as kids.

"At a very personal level, I’ve been having those conversations [about cars and neighborhoods] a lot," he reflects. "As I was going through the Walking College, I’d bring home the conversations I was having with my group. It’s definitely shaped the kinds of things I want to do in my life. Continuing to expose myself to other parts of the country and other areas that do these things helps me think about unique solutions and unique ideas."

Walking College connections empowered Hanson to further develop the “value-added” walking programs he has been working on in his job, he says. "Like Walk With a Doc. People can take a walk with a physician and ask questions and be in a comfortable setting, just feeling more comfortable just talking with a doctor, which is not always easy, especially for lower-income people or those in 'health-vulnerable' neighborhoods. A lot of our participants may not have regular access to a doctor. Or the Art Walks, where people have the opportunity to learn about their city and see it in a new way. With the Culture Walks, we’ll hear stories of people who have lived in neighborhoods for generations, or learn the story of the place."

All of these experiences are about much more than walking.

"I think that’s an important aspect of walking and walkability that I find really powerful," Hanson says. "Making it something where we’re not just asking people to come out and walk with us – we’re talking, we’re learning, we’re exploring our city. Walking is a great way to do that, but walking is not the only focus of the activities we do. It’s the way we do these activities, but we look for things that will hopefully encourage people to not just think, ‘Well, I need to go walk for 30 minutes.' Instead, they might think, ‘I really enjoyed walking through German Village and learning so much on the art walk and landmark talk that we did last week. Maybe we should do it again next week and learn a new neighborhood.’"

It’s about moving people from choosing to go on a walk to making walking a natural part of their everyday lifestyle. "We’re trying to help people get healthy in a way that doesn’t feel like work," he says.