

Four decades and two generations of Tiger Tots

Kali DeBey is a nursing student at Fort Hays State University. Like many non-traditional students, she must balance the immense demands of full-time work, a challenging academic program, and her responsibilities as a mother of three boys, ages 1 to 10. Kali works as a Certified Nursing Assistant in the operating rooms of the Hays Medical Center. This year, she decided to pursue her dream of becoming a nursing director. Her goal is to work in a nursing home. She believes the elderly deserve the best care possible, and she wants to be part of giving them the best quality of life possible.

This fall, Kali will begin a demanding and time-intensive course of study in the classrooms and nursing laboratories of Stroup Hall. Her middle son, Abel, will join her for part of her morning and afternoon routines on campus. Kali and Abel will start and end their day on campus in Rarick Hall, the home of the Tiger Tots Preschool Center. The premiere program of its kind in our region, Tiger Tots, offers a positive and safe environment that promotes each child's social, physical, intellectual, and emotional growth. Tiger Tots opened its doors in the fall of 1981 with the primary purpose of serving FHSU students. Now more than 40 years later, this focus remains.

Kali appreciates the tremendous resource the Tiger Tots Preschool Center is for the campus community. "It's a fun and interactive place for the children and a super helpful asset for any student-parent looking to go to or back to school. Like my mother, I trust the faculty and staff. For me, the best feature may be that I can visit Abel between classes," said Kali.

Kali DeBey has a special connection to Tiger Tots. She is herself an alumna of the program. As she prepares to drop Abel off at preschool, she remembers her mother, then a social work major, dropping her off at Tiger Tots each morning. And when she and Abel arrive, a familiar face will be there to greet them. It is the same face Kali used to see every morning when she was a Tiger Tot herself—the face and the welcoming smile of veteran Sara Stroup. She was one of Kali's teachers when she was a Tiger Tot.

Sara is also an alumna of FHSU. While earning her master's degree, Sara was teaching at Tiger Tots, where she had the opportunity to enjoy Kali and her family. She then taught at Hays, USD #489 Head Start program until 2009, when she returned to FHSU as an instructor in the Teacher Education Department. In early 2014, Natalie Unruh and Sara wrote a proposal to make the Tiger Tots Nurtury Center part of the Teacher Education Department. In 2015, Natalie and Sara began their leadership roles at Tiger Tots while continuing to teach courses in the early childhood unified program. They shifted the focus from a daycare setting with preschool activities to a preschool setting with daycare available in the afternoon. In 2015, they hired lead teacher Penny McGinnis. Sara and lead teacher Penny McGinnis wanted the facility's name to reflect the center's focus on learning more accurately, so in 2019, the Tiger Tots Nurtury Center officially became the FHSU Tiger Tots Preschool Center.

The recent renovation of Rarick Hall that I discussed in a previous Heart of a Tiger Column included a total makeover of the Tiger Tots spaces. The renovation added space for the children to spread out and explore in the classroom and the outside play area, office space for the director and lead teacher, better lighting, and a sound-dampening system built around a big artificial tree in the middle of the room. The renovation also provided an observation room for parents and FHSU students in education, social services, and allied health majors.

The new academic year begins next week, and Tiger Tots is at full enrollment. On hand to greet the students and parents will be Sharon Tallman, the program's new lead teacher. Sharon brings more than 27 years of teaching experience to the program.

Priority enrollment in the Tiger Tots Preschool Center is given to FHSU students and students enrolled in the North Central Kansas Technical College (NCKTC) or the Hays Academy of Hair partnership programs. The "[NCKTC Gateway Program](#)" provides students enrolled in a two-year associate's degree program to live and take classes on the FHSU campus. Enrollment is also open to the children of FHSU staff and faculty. Learn more about the Tiger Tots Preschool program at fhsu.edu/tigertots.