

Heart of a Tiger: Rounding up

I recently read a posting by Meredith Houston Carr entitled living a “round up” kind of life. In her article, she relayed a story about checking out of a store when the cashier asked her if she would like to round up her total in support of a children’s charity. As she went about her day, she wondered: “where else in my life can I do round up – giving just a little more?”

Since reading her piece, I have been thinking about how I can be a little more intentional in “rounding up” my life. I realize it is the simple stuff: greeting everyone enthusiastically all day long, pausing before meetings to check how my colleagues are doing, embracing the gift of “hallway or sidewalk time” to connect with people rather than rush off to the next meeting, sending just one more email or note that focuses on gratitude and affirmation, and even inviting someone to cut in front of me in line or take that great parking spot I had my eye on. Simple, intentional moments, “round up” moments of generosity, make a difference.

These “round up” moments are also what defines our community of care. A community in which my wonderful colleagues “round up” every day. As I reminisced about so many heart-warming stories of care, memories flooded my thoughts. Here are just a few.

Before class, Dr. David Fitzhugh asks his students every Monday morning about their weekend and listens purposefully. These moments of belonging and connection matter.

Ken Windholz, one of the kindest, affirming persons I know, sends emails to acknowledge the works of others. I have been a recipient of his kindness, and it made my day better and brighter.

Dr. Emily Weber arrives early for each class to stand at the door to greet every student by their first name. A student shared with me that two years later, after having just one course with Dr. Weber, they bumped into one another. Dr. Weber remembered her name and asked her how she was doing. Remarkable.

I have asked Vice President for Student Affairs, Joey Linn, to “adopt” struggling students, checking in with them constantly to ensure they have the support they need to graduate. He does, they succeed, and then I get to shake their hands as they walk across the commencement stage. This is the intentionality that drives our mission.

I loved how our chemistry faculty wrapped their support around Mallory Fischer – a non-traditional student about to achieve her dream of walking across the commencement stage to receive her diploma when she ruptured her ACL with additional complications. Doubting that she would physically be able to make it to commencement, her professors insisted she participate in graduation and “rounded up” their love and support. Mallory did cross the commencement stage as chemistry’s Dr. Balthazor, a commencement marshal, pushed Mallory’s wheelchair – making a longtime dream come true.

The unforgettable redemption story of Tuan Huyn will always remind me of our purpose in action. A naturally gifted artist, Tuan’s early life was marked by deep pain and bad choices. Tuan’s future was turned around by the kindness of many, beginning with Chris Hauck, who befriended Tuan through his church’s prison ministry. Chris connected Tuan with professor

Chaiwat Thumsujarit. Chaiwat became Tuan's mentor. Tuan, overcoming herculean barriers, not only graduated from FHSU but also enjoyed a remarkable career with the Leo Burnett advertising agency. Later he created a non-profit organization, Chicago Peace, to revitalize neighborhoods by building bridges between stakeholders through partnerships, education, the arts, compassion, and entrepreneurship.

The "round-up" intersection between Curtis Pitts and the Nichol family is another example of Tiger Nation's powerful relationships. Curtis came to FHSU in 1980 to play football. In 1982 he left FHSU for an internship and did not return. Life continued to happen – including the loss of his parents. Prior to their deaths, he had promised he would complete his college education. Long story short, Curtis was able to complete all of his classes except for one in which he continued to struggle. So, last summer, FHSU staff connected him with a KAMS student living in the same area. That student's entire family "rounded up" their love and support and, together, tutored Curtis. Curtis is now a proud alumnus of FHSU. I smile every time I think of Curtis saying: "The Nichols embraced me like family and always made sure I had snacks and a cold drink in a glass engraved with Fort Hays State University's logo on it. I couldn't have completed this class for graduation without their help!"

Small acts of kindness, such as donating professional clothing to Tailored for Tigers, a closet brimming with complimentary professional attire for interviews, business presentations, career fairs, and other professional activities, have been a game changer for our students. We were even able to help a student who lost nearly everything when the family home caught fire.

I am so grateful for our community's focus on caring for one another authentically and generously. I appreciate this simple reminder that in my life, with just a bit more focus, I can continue to round up – giving just a little more to those around me.

As noted, author and professor Leo Buscaglia shared, "too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word... all of which have the potential to turn a life around."