

Team Mallory

If you've read this column regularly over the past several years, you know how much I love commencement weekend at Fort Hays State University. For the graduating students and their families, this is a time of tremendous joy, and it is an honor and a privilege for me to greet each one as they cross the stage.

Several days after our spring commencement weekend in May, I received a note from Mallory Fischer. For Mallory, graduation day was a celebration ten tough years in the making. After years of struggling to find her way, she decided to take control of her life. "I made a lot of mistakes. I got kicked out of college. I was basically homeless. Finally, I decided I didn't want to be mediocre anymore," said Mallory.

In 2014, Mallory enrolled at Seward Community College in Liberal, where she went on to earn two associate's degrees that led to her starting a career as a certified surgical technologist. She then came to FHSU in 2019 to pursue a bachelor's degree in biology with the goal of becoming a physician's assistant. At FHSU, Mallory decided to pursue a minor in Chemistry and began working in the department.

Four days before graduation, Mallory was studying in the Memorial Union. She looked out the window and saw a group of students playing volleyball on the quad. She decided to take a break and join in the action. In the heat of competition, Mallory recalls hearing and feeling a "pop" as she fell to the grass. While on the ground and initially a bit embarrassed after her tumble, she noticed that the lower half of her leg-didn't look right. As the result of the fall, Mallory ruptured her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), suffered several micro-fractures in her lower leg, and strained both her posterior cruciate ligament (PCL) and her medial collateral ligament (MCL). In short, very little was holding her leg together below her knee.

Immediately, her fellow students, most of whom she didn't even know, sprung to her aid. Several headed for the Medical Services office in the Fischli-Wills Center for Student Success to help. They came back with a medical team and a wheelchair. While waiting for the medical staff to arrive, graduate student Misael Trejo sat with Mallory and kept her calm and alert.

Mallory admits that she probably should have gone immediately to the Hays Medical Center, but at the time insisted on going home to Dodge City to seek the attention of an orthopedist she knew well and trusted from her time working in the operating room.

It was about this time, just a few days before the graduation ceremony she had looked forward to for so long, that Mallory began to despair. Before she could even think about it and how she might be able to participate in commencement, she still had one more exam she had to complete-a chemistry final. With her leg secured in a brace but still suffering from significant pain from a major injury that would require an operation, Mallory made the trek back to campus to take her final. She recalls three things from this last academic challenge. First, she cried most of the way through the exam.

Second, she bombed the test. And third, her professor, Dr. Krisztina Benze, was there to remind her that she had done so well in the class that failing her exam final would have no bearing on her grade or her being able to graduate.

Relieved as she was to complete all of her academic requirements despite the injury, Mallory still doubted whether she would be able to physically make it into the ceremony and participate with her graduating class as she had envisioned. That's when her mentors in the Chemistry Department stepped in. Dr. Benze, Dr. Arvin Cruz, and Dr. James Balthazor were adamant. They told her she had no choice. They told her they all had decided that she would graduate with her class, and they would be there to support her throughout the event.

Mallory then decided to reach out to the Office of the Provost to explore any accommodations the university might make so she could participate at some level. She really wanted to process with her fellow graduates and walk across the stage to receive her diploma, but she was ready to accept something lesser if she could still attend the ceremony. Executive Administrative Specialist Cynthia Cline answered her phone call. She is one of our principal commencement ceremony organizers. Cline told her not to worry. She would meet Mallory at Gross Memorial Coliseum on the morning of the event and ensure everything would be OK.

Mallory arrived on graduation morning, and Cynthia was there as promised. She told Mallory that her significant other could sit with her and push her wheelchair as necessary. While Mallory was waiting for the event to begin, she encountered Dr. Balthazor. She told him she thought she was going to her seat on the coliseum floor ahead of the student procession and would probably miss joining this part of the event. Balthazor, slated to guide the procession as a commencement marshal, told her that not only would she participate in the procession, she would lead it! He then stepped behind her wheelchair, and Mallory, with the help of her friend and mentor, Dr. Balthazor, led the procession.

In her email to me, Mallory shared these thoughts:

I am so proud of how far I have come, and thanks to this incredible university, I was able to celebrate this very special day in front of my friends and family.

FHSU is my happy place. I received an excellent education that has prepared me for my future and simultaneously allowed me to cultivate relationships I will always treasure with many brilliant professors and my fellow students. I will miss this campus dearly. And I will never forget the kindness the professors, staff, and students provided me throughout this experience. You have an amazing team.

Thank you, Mallory. I think you are right. We do have an amazing team at FHSU. I call it our "ethic of care," and it's a fine description of the compassionate and caring people who make this university community special.