

Heart of a Tiger: Meet a talented Tiger twirler

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By FHSU University Communications

HAYS, Kan. – Fun fact: in high school, I was a majorette. This might be where I learned one of the most important skills a college president needs—the ability to juggle. Majorettes twirl batons, and sometimes those batons are on fire. They can also spin knives, flags, and rifles. While I see many metaphorical connections here, the story I want to share is that of Yaritza Vega Herrera, an amazing person, outstanding student, and our very own talented Tiger twirler.

Yaritza grew up in Salina, Kansas, and first picked up a baton at the age of five. She loves the challenge of twirling multiple batons at once, ranging from twirling one to four batons at a time.

Competitions involve both individual and team events ranging from novice to advanced levels. Individual events mainly include modeling (showcasing one's appearance via dress, makeup, and hair), solos (individuals demonstrate impressive tricks, difficulty, and personality), and strut (individuals showcase bodywork, marching, and technique).

At Fort Hays State, Yaritza is currently our only majorette, so she had to quickly master the transition from high school to college twirling while flying solo. Today, she creates all of her routines and performances. In college, everything is bigger. The marching and pep bands you perform with are bigger, the crowds are larger and louder, and there are more young eyes looking up to you and wanting to be like you. No pressure.

“In the sport of baton twirling, there are also some tough spots that I had to face head-on and overcome,” Yaritza said. “Some of these include frustration, lack of confidence, and injuries. I would say twirling is a mix of gymnastics and dance with sticks of metal added in to create new tricks, crazy catches, and exciting combinations.

“As thrilling as it sounds, I had to overcome many mental blocks and injuries to get to where I am today. The physical and mental demand that twirling requires is just a small part of the sport itself; the many successes and opportunities it offers far outweigh the negative.”

Two coaches were pivotal in helping Yaritza realize her dream of becoming a collegiate twirler. Her Hays coach, Shelby Higdon, the color guard coach for the Tiger Marching Band, and Shannon Meis, owner of Shannon's Stars Twirling Club in Salina.

Yaritza said she owes many of her twirling successes to these two amazing coaches who have guided her in the sport of twirling and life as well.

“Even though I create my performances and routines on my own, the process and inspiration that goes on behind the scenes would be much more difficult without these two ladies. I wouldn't trade them for the world, Yaritza said.

Yaritza loves to perform at both FHSU football and basketball games.

“One of my biggest college highlights was receiving a standing ovation from the audience at the basketball game against Northeastern State,” she said. “I was in tears walking off the court after my performance at halftime simply because I was overwhelmed by the support and love from the Hays community.”

Another college highlight Yaritza shared was hearing her name announced at a home football game as a selectee to compete in the World Championships in England in the summer of 2023.

“My team and I will compete in one event. I am beyond thrilled to attend this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in England, competing to represent the USA, the state of Kansas, and FHSU, which I’ve been so blessed to call home, she said.

Yaritza’s college journey has been just as exciting as her twirling journey. As a youngster, she dreamed of going to college but did not necessarily have the resources to pursue that dream. So she dedicated most of her senior year to applying for as many scholarships as possible to take the financial burden off of her parents.

Then, she learned about the Rudd Foundation’s full-ride scholarship to Fort Hays State University. Yaritza applied and was thrilled when the Rudd Foundation staff surprised her at her high school with a giant check – a check that would cover everything from tuition, fees, room and board, and books for four years of college.

“The Rudd Scholarship has been nothing but an absolute blessing, and the support system that it comes along with is truly one of a kind,” said Yaritza. She is a sophomore majoring in nursing and is very eager to begin her nursing classes next fall. In fact, it was our excellent nursing program that attracted Yaritza to Fort Hays State University over other Kansas universities. She is currently a certified nursing assistant for our Health and Wellness Center located in the Fischli-Wills Center for Student Success. Her passion for serving in the medical field continues to grow, thanks to the amazing FHSU nurses and staff.

“I’ve learned so many life lessons throughout my fourteen years of twirling,” Yaritza said. “I’ve learned that with hard work, dedication, and perseverance, you can overcome any obstacle that comes your way. I have also learned that the little kids who watch me perform and come up to me after games view me as a leader.

“I perform my heart out every time I step foot on the football field or basketball court for those kids who might need a little push to fully chase their dreams and passions. I think being a role model for those who look up to you and overcoming obstacles big and small are what makes you a real champion.”

Yaritza’s talent and resilience are reflective of the DNA of this university. Whether in the classroom, mastering the complex knowledge of her chosen profession, or in the limelight, perfecting her twirling skills, Yaritza is always growing and learning. I am so proud of Yaritza and hope you will join me in cheering her on at the World Championships in August.

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