

Responding to the greater need

Valentine's Day. It is a day dedicated to telling the people in your life how much you care about them. For some, a day to celebrate strong connections. For others, a magnifier of loneliness. Even with our strong ethic of care at Fort Hays State University, I sometimes worry about missed opportunities to invest in one another every day, not just on February 14.

I am reminded of a story that writer David Vitt, the author of the *Teachable Heart*, once shared about a daddy-daughter date on Valentine's Day. He and his young daughter went to a nice restaurant. After several minutes of lively conversation, she became silent.

She had noticed an elderly man sitting alone. It made her both sad and curious. She wondered if he was waiting on someone. Then, he was served his meal and remained alone. David tried to reengage his daughter in conversation, but she stayed focused on this man eating alone on Valentine's Day. She asked, "Dad, we've got to do something for him; can we buy his dinner?"

As David witnessed his daughter's concern, he took the opportunity to embrace the moment and go deeper. He responded, "something tells me he has enough money to buy his meal; what do you think his greater need might be?"

She replied, "Dad, he's lonely. I can just tell; I think he needs company." So, on their Valentine's date, they invited the elderly gentleman to join their table. It took some coaxing, but he eventually agreed to share a cup of coffee.

For the next 30 minutes, dad sat and watched as this total stranger and his daughter interacted like they were good friends. They learned his name, that he was 85 years old, and that this was his first Valentine's Day without his wife of 62 years. He had buried her a few months before, and that restaurant had been "their place."

I was so taken by both the simplicity of his story and the depth of how small acts of kindness can create authentic moments of connection and mattering. What I know about student success, and creating communities of care, is that those moments of mattering can make the difference between students who leave us and students who succeed. The same is true for colleagues.

I know that a residence hall housekeeper who notices a student at their best and worst, and befriends that student, will likely be the first person they introduce to their family at commencement. I also know that the dining hall worker who remembers the favorite foods of our students is one of our strongest student success tools. I know that the professor who calls all of her students by name and models grace is one of our most vital assets. And I know that staff who notice a student, who, like the elderly gentleman in the story, is sitting alone and makes time to learn that student's story is demonstrating the authentic sense of community that makes Tiger Nation so special.

Simply put, the more we multiply our efforts in investing in one another and focusing on a person's greatest need, the stronger our community becomes. As a result, we find joy, hope, connection, and gratitude.

The lesson I carry from this daddy-daughter Valentine's Day date is that in the business of our world, it is so important to notice, to be curious, and to be brave.