

Tiger Nation: An ethic of care like nowhere else

At Fort Hays State University, we nurture each other to maximal success. We stand to support one another with a willingness to invest deeply and personally. The students who comprise our campus come from diverse backgrounds, each person with their own story, hopes, and dreams.

These stories – testimony to how we come together to improve lives through a deep investment in one another – are what motivate me every day.

I love how at FHSU we go the extra mile for one another. Take for example our December 2021 graduate Curtis Pitts. A recruit from south Florida, Curtis came to FHSU in 1980 to play football. In 1982, he left Fort Hays State for an internship at The Martin Luther King Junior Center and was then hired to work with the Southern Christian Leadership Center.

Life continued to happen – including the loss of both his parents, who he had promised he would get a college education. Long story short, Curtis was able to complete all of his classes except for one, in which he continued to struggle.

This past summer, when we heard about Curtis' situation, we knew we needed to put together a Tiger care team to get him through to the finish line. In stepped Dr. Joey Linn, vice president for Student Affairs. Dr. Linn reached out to Curtis to learn more about his struggles and to put together a care team strategy.

Curtis was living in Topeka and needed to take the class online. After visiting with Curtis, Dr. Linn realized a tutor would be an essential part of his care team plan and wondered if we had a KAMS student living in Topeka who might help.

KAMS – the Kansas Academy of Mathematics and Science – is a program for 11th- and 12th-grade students to attend Fort Hays State and take 68 hours of college classes, then transfer those credits back to their sending high school to receive a high school diploma. While at FHSU, the students experience hands-on research opportunities, leadership development, civic engagement, and a myriad of college activities.

KAMS Director Will Burns immediately thought of Graidon Nichol, who is from Topeka and was living at home for the summer. Will first spoke with Graidon's mom, Shannon, who thought Graidon would love to help. Unfortunately, Graidon was attending a Boy Scout camp in New Mexico. Then, she thought of Grant, Graidon's older brother, who also attended Fort Hays State and completed the KAMS program.

When Shannon returned Will's call, she indicated that Grant would be happy to help but also had a scheduling conflict. But the family was "all in." After all, both Shannon and her husband, Eric, are FHSU graduates, too.

So, Graidon's dad tutored Curtis until Graidon was able to take over when his camp was completed. As a result of the ethic of care poured out by the Nichols, and driven by a promise Curtis made to his parents in 1980, he successfully completed the course and will be walking across the commencement stage this December.

By the way, Graidon is 17 years old. Curtis is in his late 50s. The age difference didn't hinder Curtis' learning curve at all. In fact, quite the contrary.

“Graidon was one of the most organized and intensely prepared young men I have ever met,” Curtis said. “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 his help.”

I love this story. It’s a great example of how we invest in our students, build confidence and knowledge, and nurture them to success. I am so grateful for the entire Nichol family, Will Burns, and Dr. Joey Linn – all who had a role in Curtis’ ultimate success.

This December commencement ceremony will be extra special. I cannot wait to hand Curtis his Fort Hays State University diploma!

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