

## A powerful redemption story

I look forward to writing these columns because I enjoy sharing stories about the innovative, caring, and persistent nature of the people who make Tiger Nation special. Today, I would like to focus on one alumnus who came close to throwing his life away before he turned 18. He spent more than a decade in prison but found redemption with the help of the caring people of Hays, America.

Tuan Huyn was 3 years old when he and his family fled their native Vietnam and settled in a public housing complex in Wichita. Tuan and many members of his small Vietnamese immigrant community immediately found themselves as outsiders in a new home. Life in America for Tuan almost immediately became a struggle to survive. He got into his first fight in kindergarten, and as he entered his teen years, he found gang life as a way to fit in, command respect, and survive on the streets.

Just shy of his 18th birthday, Tuan committed a crime that sent him to prison. While incarcerated, Tuan made a commitment to turn his life around. Until that point in his life, he'd always been a brawler. But from that point forward, Tuan decided to let his intellect and natural leadership abilities guide his direction in life. He began reading, taking college courses, and painting. His work caught the eye and respect of his fellow inmates. He went on to create an art education program that eventually attracted more than 40 inmate artists.

As he began his transition to life after prison, Tuan met several people who would become instrumental in his redemption story. Leslie (Chris) Hauck was the Sunflower Electric Power Corporation CEO in Hays and met Tuan through his involvement in his church's prison and jail ministry. The two forged an incredible bond, one so strong that Chris would later refer to Tuan as "my son." He also met Anna Shelter, whose mother ran seminars on leadership and fellowship that Tuan attended. She would later become his wife and the mother of their two daughters.

Chris took Tuan to Fort Hays State to meet some contacts on campus and explore his degree options. Tuan intended to enroll in a business program, but as they walked through Rarick Hall, Chris introduced him to Chaiwat (pronounced chy-what) Thumsujarit, a graphic design professor. Chaiwat noticed that Tuan was holding two original paintings he planned to take to a local framing store and was impressed with the artwork. The professor suggested that Tuan consider graphic design as a degree option.

A gifted artist with no background in the principles and practices of graphic design, Tuan struggled to keep up. While other students were already adept at using computer design software on projects, Tuan only knew how to paint. He had never used a computer. While reflective of his natural creative genius and artistry, much of his early work fell below his professor's expectations. He contemplated quitting school about a year into his studies.

Then it all started to click for Tuan. The persistence, creativity, and a newfound commitment to servant leadership that helped him turn his life around began to inspire his work. He began to seek and accept help from peers and his professors. And he began to find other ways to give back to the local community, including cutting hair for students and residents in a local retirement community.

The immense creativity of Tuan's work, his leadership, and his ability to accept and incorporate feedback caught the eye of Kerry Soukup, an FHSU alum and an executive with Leo Burnett Worldwide, a prestigious advertising agency in Chicago. In 2014, Kerry offered the recently graduated an internship. Tuan suggested that he probably would not pass a background check and initially declined the offer. But Kerry saw something special in Tuan. She and her Leo Burnett colleagues asked for a couple of days to consider options. When she called back a few days later, Kerry didn't offer Tuan the internship but a full-time job as an art director instead.

Tuan enjoyed a remarkable career with Leo Burnett, but in January of 2021, Tuan, the servant leader, decided it was time to venture out on his own. More than a year later, he now leads or is involved in several non-profit organizations in Chicago, including an organization he created called Chicago Peace (<https://www.chicagopeace.org/>). This group works to revitalize neighborhoods by building bridges between stakeholders through partnerships, education, the arts, compassion, and entrepreneurship.

And in early 2022, Tuan, the entrepreneur, launched a business initiative in partnership with family members still living in Vietnam to bring the distinctive flavors and aromas of Vietnamese coffees to America. The new company, VietFive Coffee (<https://www.vietfive.com/about-3>), recently opened on Madison Street in downtown Chicago.

Many who work in higher education say that a quality education can be a transformative experience. I am one of those who believe strongly in this observation. The immense value of the Fort Hays State experience is not just found in the professional skills learned and credentials earned.

Tuan's story demonstrates that great transformations are the direct result of the persistence of our students and the powerful relationships they forge here, relationships that break down barriers and fuel dreams for those who want to live a life of purpose and impact. FHSU didn't create Tuan, but he did find caring people on this campus and in the Hays community who were ready to help him on his path to redemption.

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