

Resilience is part of the culture at FHSU

I love the Nelson Mandela quote, “Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” That is a beautiful description of the resilience for which Fort Hays State University is known.

Resilience is on constant display by our adult learners, who often juggle jobs, family, and school. There are first-generation students who struggle with the guilt of leaving their families and financial responsibilities at home while they navigate an unfamiliar environment of higher education. There are also students who have experienced a blend of failed and ultimately successful attempts on a graphic design project, research project, business start-up competition, or running for a campus leadership position. At the root of resilience is grit, determination, and the patience to play the “long game.”

I see this quote in action every day as I listen to remarkable stories of courage and transformation from students and alumni as well as from faculty and staff.

One of the greatest privileges of being a university president is to be present to celebrate our people – knowing that each diploma, each award, and every ceremony is not only about the glorious outcome, but it is equally about the discipline of getting back up after each stumble or fall.

So today, I dedicate this column to the 1,081 undergraduate students and 624 graduate students who are receiving diplomas this weekend.

One student walking across the stage is Alec Bevis from Wichita. Alec is receiving a bachelor’s degree in chemistry with an emphasis in biochemistry. You may recognize Alec’s name as our 2022 Torch Award recipient, the highest honor for our undergraduate students at FHSU. The award is given on the basis of classroom excellence, leadership, participation in professional organizations, and involvement in student, civic, or research activities.

Alec is a team captain of our men’s soccer squad and was named to the United States Coaches Scholar All-America Team. He has also been a highly engaged member of our Honors College as well as a student assistant for the chemistry department.

During his time at FHSU, Alec engaged in undergraduate research under the mentorship of Dr. James Balthazor.

“I am excited to see where Alec’s future takes him,” Dr. Balthazor said. “He was accepted to a Ph.D. program in biochemistry at the University of Kansas, and he has already found the girl of his dreams, as he says it. I cannot wait to see what he does as an alumnus of FHSU.”

I believe the Nelson Mandela quote is so applicable to Alec. In his own words: “through soccer, I have not only learned how to persevere through strenuous physical activity but also learned many invaluable life skills such as time management and leadership, and because of it, I have formed relationships with friends all around the world.”

I love how Dr. Balthazor describes Alec: “He embodies everything I love about being a Tiger. As humble as they come, Alec doesn’t think he deserves the accolades, but he genuinely deserves them. I will miss seeing him every day, and his shoes will be difficult to fill.”

Another student walking across the stage will be Alison Helget from Hays, dogsitter for FHSU’s “First Dog,” Dakota Grace Mason. Alison received both her undergraduate and master’s degrees in history from Fort Hays State and is one of two Lighthouse Award recipients, the graduate version of the undergraduate Pilot Award.

Alison is the perfect example of resilience and the powerful impact made by caring faculty who fuel that determination when the going gets tough.

“Once I started my graduate program, the professors pushed me even harder as a scholar, supporting me throughout several conference presentations and publication reviews,” Alison said. “With constant reaffirmation, I began believing in myself. As a result, I have chosen to take another leap of faith and pursue a doctorate, something that I could not have even imagined four years ago.”

“As I move on, wherever it may be, I will never forget the amazing faculty I met at FHSU and the way they kept me focused, even when all odds might have been against me,” Alison continued. “When I hit rock bottom, the history department took me in and has since watched me transform from a timid girl into a strong, independent woman, who is proud to call herself a Tiger.”

Mary Kathy Robb, also a Lighthouse Award recipient, is graduating with a Master of Fine Arts with an emphasis in ceramics. Artists are often known for their discipline as well as for their persistence – doing something that is difficult or even opposed by other people. Artists make us stop and think.

Linda Ganstrom, professor of ceramics, said that Robb captures these qualities well.

“Kathy is an early riser and was often in the studio hard at work as I started my day,” she said. “She is helpful, challenging, and encouraging of her fellow artists. Kathy has big ideas, gained the skill to realize them, and put in the hard work to bring her dreams to life.”

“As a child, she was a dancer and performer,” Professor Ganstrom continued. “She was expected to build a successful corporate career but never found the satisfaction she had felt in her creative endeavors. So, she went back to school and learned the skills she needed to express herself and tell her stories of love, danger, abuse, and fear.”

Kathy Robb’s decision to leave her corporate career and pursue her passion propelled her into the world of art. That led her to FHSU, where she fully engaged the opportunity to develop her potential and skills as an artist. She has become an influencer, a cultural provocateur. She uses her art to help people understand that we are all on this planet together and should be appreciative and help each other survive and thrive.

Woven into all three of these stories – and I would bet of the lifeline of every Fort Hays State student – are moments of falling down, getting back up, learning, and growing. And sharing the floor of the coliseum with our graduates this weekend will be our outstanding professors – the people who helped to get our students across the stage amidst their own “moments of getting back up.”

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