

Heart of a Tiger: Profiles of two determined first-year medical school students

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. – At Fort Hays State University, our resolve to outlast and achieve is exemplified by many tales of grit and perseverance. Recently, Fort Hays State University students Chris Crawford, Morgan (Hammersmith) Turner, and Maleigha Schmidt quietly made history. They just completed their first year of medical school at the Kansas College of Osteopathic Medicine (KansasCOM), not through the typical route but by participating in a trailblazing partnership that promises to reshape healthcare in rural Kansas.

Before I share their stories, let's appreciate the gravity of this partnership. Known as a 3+4 program, it allows select FHSU students to jumpstart their medical education in what would traditionally be their senior undergraduate year. This acceleration means that students complete undergraduate and medical degrees in seven years, one year less than usual, with the dual advantages of entering the workforce earlier and reducing the overall cost of their education.

This strategic alliance is rooted in shared goals: to address Kansas's stark physician shortage and to empower the next generation of healthcare professionals. I was able to connect with Maleigha and Morgan, who shared their experiences for this column. They represent the first fruits of this collaborative venture, each with a journey as unique and inspiring as the communities they aspire to serve.

Maleigha's desire to heal and help others found fertile ground at FHSU. The close-knit community and FHSU family legacy of six siblings and her father, a wrestler, fueled her interest in studying biology. She recounts the influential mentorship of Dr. James Balthazor, a chemistry professor and a pivotal force in her pursuit of a medical career. His support and our caring academic environment prepared Maleigha well for the rigor and lightning-fast pace of medical school.

Maleigha's rapid and serendipitous admission to KansasCOM is a testament to life's unpredictability.

"I took a job at a hospital over the summer, and that was when my life turned upside down," Maleigha said.

After working a night shift, she received a voicemail from KansasCOM asking if she was still interested in the school, as they had some openings for their upcoming class. Maleigha called them back and ended up doing an interview over the phone.

"I got a call the next day saying I had been accepted and that I needed to be at the school in Wichita the next Monday for orientation. They told me I would be starting school the following Monday!"

That week was very stressful. She was in orientation all day long, and her parents, who are teachers and were still on summer break, thank goodness, searched for apartments. "It was probably one of the craziest things I have done," Maleigha said.

The initial year of medical school proved challenging yet immensely rewarding, filled with intense study schedules and sacrifices. Balancing academics with personal obligations and long-distance family and friends tested Maleigha's resolve. Still, her unwavering dedication to her future patients and a supportive network of fellow Tigers fueled her determination.

Morgan's journey is marked by family tradition and personal ambition. Drawn to FHSU by its small class sizes and the warmth of the faculty, she excelled in Chemistry under the guidance of Balthazor and Dr. Bruce Atwater. Morgan also described her first year of medical school as challenging. She had to reinvent her study strategies and treat academics as a full-time job. The small triumphs over the year underscored the infinite possibilities her education could unlock.

Now, as these students look toward the next phase of their training with anticipation and a smidge of trepidation, they know they are part of something much larger than themselves. They embody a concerted effort by KansasCOM to nurture homegrown talent and dedication that can flow back into the communities they know and love.

The journey of our first three KansasCOM tigers demonstrates the potential of this partnership. They speak of the first year in tones of exhaustion mixed with exhilaration, long study sessions, an overwhelming influx of new information, and the relentless pace of medical education. Maleigha and Morgan believe it's all been a euphoric experience marked by tremendous academic and personal growth.

KansasCOM, nestled in the heart of Wichita, has opened its doors to a new era of medical students and to a future where the physician shortage in Kansas is no longer a foregone conclusion. Their model – student-focused, patient-centered, and community-based – is designed to ensure that these students become physicians deeply integrated with the pulse and needs of their communities.

The impact of this partnership transcends individual success stories. It reflects a future where rural areas are no longer medical deserts, where the next generation of doctors, like Chris, Maleigha, and Morgan, bring healing back to the places that raised them. It promises security and care to the aging farmer, the school-going children, and everyone who calls Kansas home.

As the second year looms with the promise of clinical rotations and the anxiety of board exams, these students stand poised to tackle each obstacle with the same enthusiasm that carried them through their whirlwind first year. Their ultimate dreams may differ, with Maleigha still exploring her specialization options and Morgan envisioning a future in obstetrics and gynecology. Still, their core mission is united – to provide empathetic, skilled care to the underserved communities in Kansas, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of health.

Thus, in Fort Hays State University's corridors and the rigorous halls of KansasCOM, the future of medicine is being shaped - one student, one patient, and one community at a time. It is a story of synergy between a future-focused university and remarkable and determined individuals working together to craft a healthcare landscape as resilient as the Kansan spirit.

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