

Heart of a Tiger: Meet Leea Smarsh, a survivor who has learned to thrive at FHSU

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Leea Smarsh, a soon-to-be Fort Hays State University graduate, may appear as an ordinary college student, balancing classes and a part-time job and facing the uncertainties of post-grad life. Yet, her story is a testament to the extraordinary power of resilience, determination, and a profound passion for making a difference, serving as an inspiration to all.

Leea's story is about more than just academic success. A cancer survivor at the age of 15, she faced a rare and aggressive form of thyroid cancer with courage and grace. After surgeries and radiation treatments, she was declared cancer-free in February 2020, only to be met with the challenges of a global pandemic just a month later. Despite the obstacles, Leea persevered, finishing her high school senior year online.

Originally from Wichita, Leea's decision to attend FHSU was driven by affordability.

"To be completely honest, moving to a small town for college was not on my radar," Leea said. "Once I stepped on FHSU's campus, I fell in love with the campus and the faculty I met on my visit." She was not sure what she wanted to major in, but she was reassured by the FHSU admissions team that not knowing her major right away was okay. "This made me see FHSU in a new light, which ultimately persuaded me to choose FHSU – and I am so grateful I did," Leea said.

Leea's college journey began as an exploratory major. Her advisor guided her through various majors and career paths through major and personality inventories, and to her surprise, Leadership Studies emerged as a top match. Initially unfamiliar with the concept, she took a leap of faith and chose this major, a decision she's immensely grateful she made.

"I truly feel I have found my calling. Being a leadership major, you are taught different ways to interact with groups and teams, as well as teaching followers effective ways to interact with people from different cultures, backgrounds, and other factors that differ from yours," Leea said. "I am so excited to take the skills I have learned from the leadership program and put them into practice!"

As a student worker in the Department of Social Work, Leea was not only an invaluable member of the administrative team, she was also a driving force in planning the department's signature event, the 49th Annual National Institute on Social Work and Human Services in Rural Areas. This year's conference, "On the Road to Thriving Rural Communities," underscored the significance of diversity in rural areas and provided the participants with crucial professional development opportunities and resources.

Leea's contributions earned accolades from mentors and colleagues alike. Her efforts in carefully planning this prestigious event are a testament to her leadership, organizational skills, and plain hard work. From coordinating hotel reservations, managing communications with vendors and presenters, and overseeing the event schedule, her work earned high praise from presenters who were eager to meet Leea.

In fact, I first learned about Leea through a glowing letter from a social worker who has attended the conference for years. Impressed by her dedication, he penned a two-page letter, prompting me to delve deeper into her story.

For Leea, the conference is the pinnacle of her academic journey, symbolizing a chance to make a meaningful impact on the social work and human services professional communities. She has collaborated tirelessly with faculty and stakeholders while balancing a full summer schedule with online classes and working a part-time job. Leea's future may include working in human resources or event planning.

Grateful for the support and mentorship from the social work faculty at FHSU, Leea acknowledges their significant role in shaping her journey, boosting her confidence, and instilling in her a drive to make a global impact. As she readies herself to embark on a new chapter post-graduation, Leea is well-equipped with the skills and experiences necessary for a bright and impactful future.

Her cancer journey has fueled her zest for life and her relentless pursuit of her passions. In her downtime, Leea loves spending time with her friends and family and has recently taken up pickleball.

Leea's journey epitomizes resilience, dedication, and the pursuit of one's passions. She embodies the spirit of Fort Hays State University and serves as a shining example of what can be achieved through hard work and determination. Her story is about surviving, thriving, overcoming obstacles, and achieving greatness. Leea Smarsh is an inspiration and a testament to what dedication and hard work can accomplish.

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