

Irene's story is the story of Fort Hays State

As I have been reacquainting myself with Fort Hays State University, I have been exploring impact stories. As human beings, we all have unlimited potential to make a difference in the world, and what I love most about this community is the limitless stories of how we care for and nurture one another.

My collection of impact stories is rapidly growing. The stories are inspirational, varied, and humbling. They are stories about how lives have been transformed through selflessness. One such story is that of alumna Irene Waters.

Born into a Kansas farming family, Irene was raised by parents who worked long hours in the fields to provide food and shelter for the family. While she was in grade school, the Great Depression struck. Adding to the hardship, a terrible farming accident blinded her father. Even today, the memory brings tears to her eyes.

As a result of the struggling economy and her father's accident, the family's resources were very strained. Irene's mother returned to the fields. The hired hands were let go. College wasn't going to be an option, and piano lessons were clearly out of the question. But she continued to dream about music.

One day, Irene was visiting her great aunt, who asked her, "If you were able to go to college and major in what you really want to do, what would it be?" The answer was, "Music! Without a doubt!"

On the next visit, a check was waiting to send her to college. Irene says, "I don't think my feet hit the ground going home. I was so elated! I can still remember the feeling, as it was unbelievable to me. I had never had a lesson, but playing music was all I wanted to do!"

So Irene was off to Fort Hays State University. During her college days, she earned 25 cents an hour working seven hours a week cleaning and 15 hours a week at the library. With her great aunt paying tuition and her mom bringing food once a week, Irene got by. She deeply appreciated the opportunity to study music. She graduated in 1944 and began teaching in Utica, Kansas.

Irene knew she wanted to honor the incredible opportunity her great aunt had bestowed on her, so she started saving money with her very first paycheck, which was about \$10. She saved something from each check throughout her 70-year teaching career, and in 1992 Irene established the Holtzinger Family Scholarship in honor of her mother and father.

Each year since, and forever in the future, students studying piano at Fort Hays State will benefit from Irene's generosity. She says, "I owe everything to FHSU, where I received my start. I want to make opportunities available for students like me."

I love Irene's story. Her passion for music, her drive to "pay it forward" and her deep gratitude make up one of the many stories that weave together an incredible tapestry of the people and community of Fort Hays State University. #TigerTreasures