

An ode to the joy and power of praise

By Tisa Mason

I love the month of May. It ushers in so many joyful celebrations of our faculty, staff, and student achievements. My past two weeks have been filled with many opportunities to congratulate and thank people.

I particularly love the FHSU tradition of surprising faculty award recipients during their classes. Interim Provost Jeff Briggs, Deron O'Connor, community president of Commerce Bank, (Commerce provides a cash award), colleagues, students, friends and I, accompanied by our photographer Mitch Weber, interrupt a class in session to surprise each of three faculty members with this high distinction.

Each semester we present three awards. This year, Angela Walters, Department of Informatics, received the teaching award; Dr. Mohammad Riazi-Kermani, Department of Mathematics, received the award for research and scholarly activity; and Ken Windholz, Department of Psychology, received the service award.

The joy and appreciation of those moments were deep, and these wonderful events got me thinking about the power of encouragement and celebration.

One of my favorite stories is about a man named Don Bennett – the first amputee to reach the summit of Mount Rainier. That's 14,410 feet on one leg and two crutches! While most of his story has to do with his own courage and vision, an important part involves his daughter, who fueled that courage and vision when the journey was getting tough.

During his climb, Bennett reached one particularly difficult stretch – an ice field that took him four hours to cross. His daughter stayed by his side the entire time he was hopping across the ice. With each hop she shouted: "You can do it, Dad!" "You're the best Dad in the world!" This spontaneous verbal encouragement kept Bennett going, strengthening his commitment and his dream to make it to the top.

To this day, Don Bennett says that there was no way he could have quit with his daughter giving him such words of encouragement.

I think about this story a lot – the difference that encouragement and celebration can make in our lives. I recall being surprised one day by a letter from a student athlete who was responding to a quick note I had sent her. This particular student had just earned recognition in her individual sport. In my note I congratulated her achievement and ended with the words, "I am proud of you."

In her letter she thanked me for acknowledging her accomplishments, and then she wrote that no one had ever told her they were proud of her. I was astonished – how could that be? She was quite an accomplished young lady.

The memory of her words, "no one has ever told me they were proud of me," stays in my heart as a constant reminder of the power of recognition and of my responsibility to encourage the hearts of others as authentically and frequently as possible.

Good job. Well done. I am proud of you. When these power words are combined with a supportive academic community, loving families and friends, and hometown communities who share the pride of "one of their own" – well, that is life changing. And being a part of those moments in life reminds me again of why Fort Hays State University focuses on creating a campus environment that our students, faculty, staff and alumni call home.