

Graduates' stories show the heart of a university education

NOTE TO EDITORS: The hyphen in G-d in Hezekiah Herrera's story is to respect the religious practices of Herrera's religious faith.

By Tisa Mason

This year 4,533 students received degrees at Fort Hays State University. How exciting it was to be a part of these record-setting commencement exercises! These newly conferred academic degrees are gateways to new beginnings for our most recent alumni. These graduates are full of promise and hope, and it was with both pride and confidence that I conferred degrees.

The pride comes from valuing the hard work and the many accomplishments of our students. The confidence emanates from the knowledge that Fort Hays State University is truly a student-centered institution. Our students work hard to earn their degrees, but it is often our faculty and staff who inspire their dreams, help them discover their talents, and fuel their passion in this leg of their journey through life.

My remarks during the ceremony centered on the theme of change and how a Fort Hays State University education prepares our alumni for a world of constant change – equipping them to be agents of change. As the famous saying goes: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

While I was preparing my remarks, I took a moment to ask our graduates to share with me their stories of change. To my delight, I received many emails from our graduates, sharing their stories of change and impact. Here are a few of their stories:

Hezekiah Herrera –

I'm a 32-year-old, single father of two. I, like many others in my position, decided to return to school. It was having my first child that motivated me to complete my degree. Two years into my studies, I would welcome my second child. All the while, I had experienced intimate partner violence throughout the course of my marriage until a heartbreaking divorce during my final academic year ... Despite these setbacks, with the support of G-d, family, friends, and faculty at FHSU, I was able to walk across the stage to greet you in front of both of my children – I wanted them to see with their eyes that anything is possible and what defines us is not our past, but our future.

Kristi Rodriguez –

The leadership courses have expanded my ability and shown me the passion I have for leadership. These courses gave me an excuse to take the risk to do the things that I never put as a priority. Since taking these courses, I have created a community project partnering with six other agencies, taught a professional training course for my organization, and made the time to truly reflect and build on my abilities as a leader and a follower. ... I began like an amateur ball player who just ended her season with a grand slam!

Trevor Shankle –

Change can be difficult at times, but without change life becomes stagnant and predictable. I leave this university ready to face whatever change the world may throw at me. I cannot imagine my life without Fort Hays State University and I am forever grateful to be a part of the Tiger Family.

Faith Burdine –

I never thought that I would be earning my master's degree by 22-years-old, I never thought I would be as mature as I have become. FHSU has enabled me to change from an emotionally charged, impulsive teenager to a rational (with some emotion), logical thinker. I still have days where I eat cookies for breakfast and ice cream for dinner and sometimes my emotions can cause me to want to react impulsively, but with the help of some of my wonderful professors at FHSU, I know that I am still becoming the person (and eating a balanced diet) I want to be and that FHSU has been and will be my alma mater and home.

Douglas Lindsay –

I have obtained my bachelor's degree in nursing at 47 years old. Neither of my parents were high-school graduates and obtaining a degree was never really emphasized. Unfortunately, it took me a while to discover the value of an education. That all changed when I became a nurse. I finally found a place in which I excelled and thoroughly enjoyed my work. Prior to that profession, it was usually one or the other. The field placed a high value on education and learning. So, I continued my education. I graduated summa cum laude from FHSU in December 2017. I have already begun my advanced degree as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner. I could not be more thrilled. So, the changes I have experienced at FHSU are not only mine. I have changed the trajectory of my life. I have changed the trajectory of my family's life. I have changed the trajectory of my son's life, who is 4 years old. In my profession, I effect change every day. I have the opportunity to heal and educate people and change the trajectory of their health and lives, thereby affecting all of the people they know.

So as I looked out at the graduates, faculty, and staff in the coliseum, I knew that our faculty and staff prepared our students well to be agents of change and engaged global citizens. Fort Hays State University delivers more than a degree, it provides a passport to the future – and it fills me with a great sense of optimism.