

A campus, and a community, where compassion and caring are in common practice

By Tisa Mason

Bill and I took a long weekend early this month to celebrate his mother's 94th birthday in Norfolk, Va. My mother-in-law is amazing. She still lives alone in her home and is very engaging and loving. We made a special birthday dinner complete with cake, candles, and wishes of continued good health.

But things were a bit different this year. Her best friend from childhood passed away earlier in the year, at the age of 97, leaving a definite void in the celebration. Her husband has been gone now for almost 20 years. There are very few friends left as most have passed.

My time in Virginia really got me thinking about how blessed I am to have good health and a wonderful family. It also reminded me about how proud I am to be part of a university that excels in outreach and service – or as I wrote in a previous column – serving as a steward of place.

Four Fort Hays State University programs in particular came to mind: our Senior Companion Program, the Foster Grandparent Program, the Neuromuscular Wellness Center, and our Active Aging Program. A common thread through all of these programs, and central to who we are as a university, is the focus on being a caring provider. Our faculty, staff, and students are driven by compassion, warmth and a desire to care for others.

The Senior Companion Program is a perfect example of people helping people. Volunteers age 55 and over are connected with adults who need help to remain independent. The volunteers help with chores, provide transportation, monitor medication, provide respite care and keep people in contact with the broader community. “Companions,” says the program’s statement of purpose, “help aging Americans maintain their dignity and quality of life while enriching their own lives through service.”

FHSU supports 108 Senior Companion volunteers who serve 370 frail, disabled or homebound adults in a 14-county service area of western Kansas. Sponsored by Fort Hays State University since 1974, this program was the first in the nation to be sponsored by an institution of higher education. What an incredible gift of service it provides.

Senior Companions and the next example, Foster Grandparents, are primarily funded through grants from the Corporation for National and Community Service, but funding also comes from Fort Hays State and local agencies.

Foster Grandparents provide “volunteers age 55 and over with opportunities to provide one-on-one mentoring, nurturing and support to children with special or exceptional needs, and who are at an academic, social or financial disadvantage.” The essence of the program is matching children who don’t have an adult to care about and love them with seniors who have love to spare. In 2018, FHSU’s Foster Grandparents served in schools, day care settings and Head Start Centers and were matched with 197 children.

The Neuromuscular Wellness Center, in our Department of Health and Human Performance, provides health-related fitness activities, functional movement, fall prevention and clinical exercise training for community members dealing with neuromuscular conditions. Individuals served may be stroke survivors or have been diagnosed with conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, paralysis, multiple sclerosis, or a variety of similar conditions. Individuals who are at risk from falling benefit greatly from the program, which helps individuals improve balance and walking through the use of exercise as well as through the use of assistive devices.

As the website says, this is not a rehabilitation program as in a hospital, but a fitness program, a “next step” for someone who has completed physical therapy. The staff creates a customized exercise routine and provides tools and support to promote movement, improve cardiovascular

health and increase stamina. The program advertises a “do it yourself” approach, with the ultimate goal of keeping people self-sufficient, independent and in their homes.

I think my mother-in-law would absolutely love our Aquacize and Active Aging programs, also sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Performance, which aim to improve the health and wellness of Hays-area community members. One can get in shape, make new friends, or add variety to an exercise routine. Regular exercise strengthens the heart and lungs, helps prevent chronic diseases, and can improve mood. These unique fitness programs, staffed by trained students supervised by faculty members, meet the needs of a range of community members. Thinking about this program made me smile. I was ready to buy my mother-in-law a really cool bathing cap for her birthday!

Our celebration with Bill’s mother was filled with fun memories and stories and much joy. My mother-in-law is a perfect example of someone whose love always outshines her losses. Her friendliness, positivity, and attention to others brings smiles to those around her. She would fit well in Hays, America, and would love, as I do, this community and this university.