

Celebrating those who lift us up

January signals a new year, with new hopes, opportunities, and aspirations. As I think forward each year, I also pause to think about my journey to the here and now. One thing always present in my mind is the number of people who helped me get to where I am today – the people who believed in me and supported me in so many ways – family members, neighbors, friends, colleagues, teachers, clergy, and supervisors.

I know how very fortunate I am to have been surrounded by so many people who invested in me. I also know that not everyone in this world is as fortunate as I am. And so, as a new year begins and resolutions abound, I often think about reaching up and reaching down: reaching up to thank those who helped me (after all, I do genuinely believe one cannot say “thank you” too much), and reaching down to find opportunities to offer an encouraging word, to help develop a skill or to invest in someone else’s dream.

At Fort Hays State University, I witness so many stories of how our faculty and staff encourage, support, and inspire our students. Those stories fill me with energy and hope. Those stories provide evidence that we walk our talk about being a student-centered university.

Take for example the words of Aaron Elsasser in describing Eric Deneault, an assistant professor of applied technology: “He is always there to listen when you need a friend. He is always looking for ways to make his curriculum enjoyable for students, along with ideas and activities to keep the students involved and willing to learn. With these lessons in class, he also pushes you to do your best. He always told me the sky is the limit. ... He has a game plan for everything he does. He has not only taught me the things I need to know for my class, but the values of life.”

Every day, I experience the essence of this truly heartfelt mentoring relationship at our university – on campus, virtually, and internationally. This is our magnetic north.

Several years ago, I was introduced to National Mentoring Month. Launched in 2002 by MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the month of January is designated as a time for all of us to think more deeply about the need for mentors, as well as how all of us – individuals, businesses, schools, faith communities, and nonprofits – can work together to amplify mentoring activity, thereby contributing time and effort to help assure positive outcomes for others. This year the national program features these key dates and activities:

Jan. 4: I Am A Mentor Day. A day for volunteer mentors to celebrate their roles and reflect on the ways mentees have enhanced their world.

Jan. 17: International Mentoring Day. A day of international conversations on social media where photos, video and powerful, mentoring stories are shared.

Jan. 21: Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service. A day to share in the inspirational words of MLK and to elevate the spirit of service through volunteerism. At Fort Hays State University, our community will celebrate MLK Day of Dreams in the Memorial Union from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Stop by to browse a poster tour of MLK’s life while enjoying a cup of hot chocolate. Take time to write your hopes and dreams for our country on a campus display board.

Jan. 31: #ThankYourMentor Day. A day for all who have real-life mentoring experiences to thank those who helped them on their path to adulthood and beyond. Let’s do this. Won’t you join me on Jan. 31 and send a note, an email, or make a call to say “thank you” to someone who helped you?

It is not really about a month or a collection of activities, though. It is about people lifting up and supporting others every day, in a wonderful variety of ways. I hear so many beautiful stories about how people at the university and in our local community invest in one another. I see it, hear it, and feel it in action constantly – not just during the month of January. This focus on believing in and working towards

positive outcomes for others makes me feel good about being a member of this community. This natural flow of generous spirit in Hays America is another reason why this place feels like home.

Note: Learn more about MENTOR and the many resources offered at www.mentoring.org.