

A place where stories of transformation are written

One of the things I love most about being president of Fort Hays State University is that I get to hear stories from our alumni about the life-changing power of a college education and the caring, hard-working people of this amazing institution.

As you read this, I am in China, where I am performing one of my favorite duties, which is conferring degrees upon graduates at our partner institutions there. So, this week, I want to share alumnus Michael Durall's personal story of transformation. It is a story that begins in the 1960s with a "shy, uncertain young man" who credits the people of our university with encouraging him to persist and discover the person he was meant to be.

Fort Hays Kansas State College changed my life forever

By Michael Durall, B.A. '70

I enrolled at Fort Hays Kansas State College in the fall of 1964. At that time, tuition was \$125 per semester, and many students paid in cash. I remember standing in line at the Registrar's Office in the Coliseum to pay. I could hear the basketball team practicing on the nearby court, where the Beach/Schmidt Performing Arts Center is today.

I worked various jobs that paid \$1.25 per hour. At first, I lived at home to save money. When I eventually shared an apartment, the going rate was about \$30 per guy, per month. We shared one landline phone and divvied up the cost.

I was a naïve, shy and uncertain young man. I hadn't studied much in high school and shouldn't have gone to college, but I just didn't know what else to do. I flunked out my freshman year. I worked construction for about eighteen months, and when I returned most of my beer-drinking and poker-playing buddies had moved on.

I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I changed majors a number of times, trying to find a path.

But by then, the Vietnam War was heating up, with body counts increasing daily. The civil rights and the women's liberation movements were also gaining momentum. No one realized that the '60s would be one of the most tumultuous eras in American history.

I remember a silent anti-war vigil on the corner of 12th and Main on a Saturday morning, led by a number of local clergy. They stood silently for an hour while police with sniper rifles were on the roof of the bank building across the street. Things like that weren't supposed to happen in Hays, Kansas. A poll revealed that about 60 percent of Americans believed the National Guard did the right thing by killing four unarmed students at Kent State.

The once peaceful world I knew evaporated forever, lost in an alarming, unpredictable, and surrealistic turn of events.

Amidst this turbulence, one seemingly innocuous event at Fort Hays State remains etched in my memory. It falls into the category of late-night conversations that many college students remember as life altering, more than anything they learned academically.

I was a student in the late Bob Lowen's journalism class. I was seated next to a married female student who was a few years older than I. By any imaginable calculation, she was out of my league. She told me she had gotten straight A's, then added, "It's not so much my grades that are important. Rather, I'm becoming a person who is increasingly interested in the world and the people who inhabit it."

I felt like I had been struck by lightning. This was the person I wanted to be. I began to take my education more seriously. I looked at my professors in a new light, and realized how much time, effort and skill was required to teach effectively at the college level. Being an English major, I was exposed to the world's great literature. In art history classes, the late John Thorns opened a visual world of art and sculpture that I hadn't known even existed.

I also realized that if I wanted to become more knowledgeable about the world and its people, there were certain requirements. These included not making snap judgments about people based on their appearance; being a reliable friend; becoming strong enough to stand against prejudice when I encountered it; and being slow to criticize and quick to forgive.

Fortunately, in the years since I was a student, I've been able to travel. In gratefulness, I funded a travel fellowship at Fort Hays for about five years that allowed students from small Kansas towns to travel anywhere in the world. Since I had been given much, I felt an obligation to give in return.

Looking back to the days I was a student, I don't even remember my classmate's name. But I am eternally grateful for Fort Hays Kansas State College giving me the opportunity to be in that particular place and time. Becoming curious about the world and the people in it helped me become who I am today.