Heart of a Tiger: The power of showing up

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Tanner Herskowitz was already thinking about the fire.

It was about 4 p.m. on Feb. 9. His crew at the Ellis County Fire Department had just gotten the call. A grass fire was burning near Celebration Community Church, and the flames were creeping toward a building. Every second counted. The whole station sprang into action.

But as Tanner pulled on his heavy gear, something nagged at him. His friend and fellow firefighter, Matt VanDyke, wasn't moving with the rest of them. So, Tanner didn't just head to the truck. He went to check.

He found Matt lying on the floor, unconscious. Tanner shouted for help. Firefighter Mason Emerson and Captain James Younger rushed over. Tanner checked for Matt’s pulse and found that he had no pulse. There was no time to wonder how or why. The crew went to work, and because they did, Matt is alive today.

Tanner gathered the emergency medical equipment needed for Matt’s treatment. Captain Younger stayed with Matt and the EMS crew while Tanner and Mason left to fight the fire near the church.

Later, Matt was taken to the hospital, and he survived with no lasting damage.

EMS providers call that a "field save." Most people who go into cardiac arrest outside a hospital don't make it, even with the best care. When a patient's heart starts beating again in the field, and they walk out of the hospital on their own, that is a reason to celebrate.

That moment could be the whole story. But for Tanner, it is just one page in a much bigger book.

Tanner didn't have an easy start. He grew up in and out of foster care, moving between homes and schools more times than most kids can count. Growing up in foster care taught Tanner things school couldn’t. He learned how to be patient. He learned how to keep going when life felt hard. Most of all, he learned that showing up for people matters. Those lessons didn’t stay with him as memories. They became who he is.

He graduated from Hill City High School. Tanner had originally planned to join the U.S. Marine Corps, but a series of concussions from high school football, wrestling, dirt bike and ATV accidents, along with a traumatic brain injury sustained during a Kansas high school bull riding competition, made him ineligible.

College came next. He earned a welding degree from Fort Hays Tech | North Central, then transferred to FHSU, where he is majoring in criminal justice with a minor in history and a certificate in leadership. At FHSU, Tanner has found many ways to connect with other students – through Alpha Gamma Rho, as vice president of the criminal justice club, on the Interfraternity

Council, in the Student Government Association, and on the criminal justice crime scene and firearms teams, which compete regionally and nationally.

In addition, he works with the SOUL Family organization and the Kansas Youth Advocacy Council.

“I’m what is called a lived experience expert. These organizations help me get my voice out there to advocate for others.”

During the summer, Tanner attended the fire academy in Hutchinson. He plans to go on to get his hazmat tech or EMT certification next summer. He has been fascinated with fire and arson investigation ever since he saw the movie *Backdraft* as a kid.

He's drawn to work that takes patience and precision; metal, heat, and a careful hand. Welding and firefighting may sound like two different worlds. For Tanner, they're the same instinct. In both, you measure twice, you pay attention, and you never cut corners when someone else's safety depends on you.

His goal is simple to say and hard to do. “I always had a love for public service and law enforcement, and when learning more about what I could do to connect those two, I found arson investigation. There are always going to be problems. Things will overheat, but being able to figure out what caused it and hopefully sharing that information with whoever made the product could potentially save other people, because they could fix their problem.”

Tanner is also very passionate about history. “When I was thinking about getting a minor, I was between political science and history, and the thing that made me think about getting a history minor was that there’s so much of our policy and how we shape our policy in the U.S. and globally that is rooted in history. It’s almost impossible to ignore it. History is not just a lesson. We can learn so much from it to better our impact, to make our greatest societal impact.”

Firefighting and school aren't two separate lives for Tanner. They are the same life. Both are about learning fast, staying calm, and putting other people first. He brings what he learns in the classroom onto the truck, and he brings what the truck teaches him back to class.

Tanner earned the Ellis County Lifesaving Award and was named the recipient of Foster Club’s 2026 Outstanding Young Leaders, one of 50 young leaders recognized nationally. Tanner does not talk much about these awards or saving a friend’s life. That is not how he is built. But if you ask him why he does this work, he will probably tell you it is about people.

He knows what it feels like to need someone. He knows that sometimes the difference is just one person who shows up. He knows what it means to have the *Heart of a Tiger*.