

Heart of a Tiger: Meet Ayanna Hensley

Simply put, I created this column so that I could write stories about remarkable people like the reigning Miss Kansas, Ayanna Hensley. Life for Ayanna was a challenge from the start. She grew up in Dodge City, the child of two parents who a with substance abuse and related criminal activity. she never knew what would happen when she got up each day or what awaited her after the school day.

“My parents were young, and truthfully neither one of them was anticipating a child. I was the result of a teen pregnancy. Although there have been highs and lows in my relationships with my parents, I am grateful they sacrificed what they could in order to help support me in my endeavors today,” said Ayanna.

While other children her age enjoyed birthday parties, sleepovers, and family dinners, she was subject to abuse, neglect, and poverty. Trauma was something the young Ayanna simply had to learn to live with to survive. That was until she entered the second grade. Then, Ayanna encountered one of the first adults who recognized her as a traumatized child and did something to help.

Her teacher, Karen Bartholomay, noticed that Ayanna often fell asleep in class, tended to wear the same clothes every day, and couldn't handle even the slightest disruption or conflict. Karen created a “book club” for her and select classmates. This fed her natural love of reading and helped her develop social skills and relationships with classmates. She also allowed Ayanna to nap when she needed it and provided her with a snack drawer in the classroom she could go to on the days when she had nothing at home to eat. She didn't know it at the time, but the kindness of Karen Bartholomy instilled in a very young Ayanna a glimmer of hope that life for her didn't always have to be a struggle.

Still, it wasn't until middle school that Ayanna realized that the dynamics of her life differed from other students. Fortunately for Ayanna, the transition from middle to high school would also serve as a transformative experience for Ayanna. Cross country would be the catalyst for her transformation. She found a “tribe” in athletic competition that welcomed, respected, and supported her. She won her share of races but also learned to become a good teammate and leader. Competitive team sports also created structure and stability she had never known.

“Sports instilled consistency and accountability when I needed it most. I found an escape in activities that pushed me to be a better athlete and overall leader,” said Ayanna.

As a high school senior, Ayanna earned a prestigious Rudd Scholarship. The Rudd Scholarship is a Kansas program for Kansas residents who qualify for a Pell Grant and have the grit and determination to achieve their long-term goals. She arrived on the FHSU campus in the fall of 2019 with the intention of pursuing her love of dance as a member of the Tiger Debs Dance Team.

Entering FHSU, she also decided to make the most of the opportunity. During her freshman year of college, she decided to compete for the title of Miss Kansas.

“I finally had the money I needed to pursue the things I wanted to do, so I made a promise to myself to try new things. One of my high school friends had competed, and I saw her confidence grow through her involvement, so I figured, why not?” said Ayanna.

She took a bold leap and entered the world of competitive scholarship pageants, winning the Dodge City/Cowboy Capital/Boot Hill Scholarship Competition in her hometown of Dodge City. She parleyed that success into the opportunity to compete for the title of Miss Kansas. She finished second in the 2021 competition.

She re-entered the Miss Kansas competition in 2022, winning the title of Miss Kiowa County and again qualifying for the statewide competition. She won that competition in June of this year, and you might think that might be the culmination of a dream, but it was just the start for Ayanna.

Ayanna’s decision to compete for the Miss Kansas title was not a pursuit of personal fame and glory; it was always going to be about using the platform to make a difference in the lives of children who, like her, are stuck in a cycle of abuse, neglect, and poverty. Each Miss Kansas is required to create a social impact initiative. ACE’s Low: Overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences is the title of Ayanna’s initiative. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes “ACEs” as adverse childhood experiences that can tremendously impact future violence victimization, perpetration, lifelong health, and opportunity. ACEs include all types of abuse and neglect, such as parental substance use, incarceration, and domestic violence.

As the newly crowned Miss Kansas, Ayanna immediately dove into the vital work of advancing her ACE’s low initiative, crisscrossing the state and taking advantage of every opportunity to share the story of her experiences and how her faith has changed her life. She credits her faith with bringing people into her life who helped her reach her potential. She further credits her faith with providing her with a sense of consistency in new and often foreign environments, like scholarship pageants and public speaking tours.

Now four months into her service as Miss Kansas, Ayanna has made frequent appearances in Hays and on the FHSU campus. She was in Hays on September 15 to participate in the FHSU Language and Literacy Institute’s family literacy night at the Hays Masonic Lodge 195. The following day, she was on campus to promote a new FHSU scholarship program for Miss Kansas scholarship competition participants. She returned to campus on September 20 to join K12 education, mental health, and social work professionals for a live-streamed panel discussion on students and trauma.

I had the opportunity to meet Ayanna a few weeks ago, and I was struck by her seemingly boundless energy and her clear-eyed and complete dedication to using her opportunity as Miss

Kansas 2022 to do good work and make a difference. That work includes childhood literacy and mentorship through a partnership with the Big Brothers and Big Sisters network in Kansas. But her principal focus will be on bringing awareness to the issue of childhood trauma.

This amazing young woman endured and ultimately overcame years of childhood trauma that could have led to despair and getting sucked into the cycle of addiction, abuse, and neglect that had taken so much from her family. Ayanna Hensley personifies the characteristics of the wonderful people I speak about all the time in this column. She is persistent when the going gets tough and finds innovative ways to turn her Miss Kansas opportunity into a catalyst to make impactful change in our communities. And Ayanna does it all with an ethic of care in service to others, demonstrating what it means to approach life with the “heart of a tiger.”