

# Heart of a Tiger: How Carter Will found his future at FHSU

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Have you ever felt like you were ready for a giant adventure, even though you were still just a teenager? For Carter Will, that feeling started at Jackson Heights High School. Carter was a great student, but he was also very bored. He finished his work quickly and wanted to learn about things his school didn't even teach yet.

While many people in Kansas grow up in quiet towns like Carter's hometown of Denison, not everyone decides to move away to college before they even have a driver's license. This is the story of how a "quietly confident" student went from a small high school to building rockets and testing the Earth's water.

Carter's journey didn't happen by accident. His path to success began when he met Sherri Matlock and Suellyn Stenger, leaders of the Kansas Academy of Mathematics and Science (KAMS) at Fort Hays State University (FHSU). Their job is to find talented students across Kansas, from the biggest cities to the smallest rural towns, and show them how they can reach higher and seize their future.

Sherri and Suellyn saw that Carter was a perfect fit for the KAMS program. They knew that KAMS, Kansas' premier early college program for gifted 11th- and 12th-graders, would give Carter the STM-focused (Science, Technology, and Math) experience he was looking for.

When Carter's counselor mentioned KAMS, Carter was excited. But his parents were worried at first. Denison is a long way from Hays, and Carter was only 16. They weren't sure if he was ready to live on his own so far from home.

Everything changed when they visited the campus. They met Sherri and Suellyn in person and realized these were "good people with their heads on straight." Once the Wills saw the safety nets the school had in place to help young students, they knew Carter would be in good hands.

When Carter arrived at FHSU, his world got a lot bigger. One of the first things he did was join a rocketry group. Working with Dr. Paul Adams, Carter learned how to build and launch rockets. It wasn't just about making things go "zoom." He had to learn physics and how to ensure the rockets could land safely.

"Rocketry is a hobby," Carter said with a smile. "It was probably the most fun I've had here on campus. It is free, and you learn a lot. It is a cool experience."

But it wasn't all fun and games. Carter also dove into serious science research. Even though he plans to stay at Fort Hays State and major in Biology next year, he spent much of his time at KAMS working in the Geosciences department. He worked with Dr. Jeanne Sumrall, testing well water across Kansas for nitrates.

Nitrates often come from sources like farm fertilizer. Carter's work was very important in helping Kansas families determine whether their water was safe to drink. He learned the "chain of custody," which means he learned how to keep science samples organized so they don't get mixed up.

He even got to fly on a plane for the first time to go to a science conference in San Antonio, Texas.

"The convention center was the biggest building I've ever seen," Carter remembered. It was crowded and loud, and Carter was nervous. But he did so well that a professional science company reached out to his research team. They were so impressed that they wanted to publish the team's research in their journal.

Moving to college early isn't just about science; it's about growing up. Carter had to learn "social stuff," like how to live in a dorm and make new friends. He found a great group of friends, and they spent many evenings playing basketball at Cunningham Hall. He also joined the FRC (First Robotics Competition). His team built a robot that could move and complete tasks. He traveled all the way to northern Iowa and Kansas City to compete against other robotics teams.

To serve the FHSU community, Carter became a VIP Ambassador. This job taught him how to give a "cold pitch." Imagine you are in an elevator with a very important person. You only have 30 seconds to tell them who you are and why your project matters before the door opens. Carter practiced this until he could do it perfectly.

"We learned how to start from nothing and leave an impression," Carter said. "I think that will stick with me for a while. It was a great experience for me."

Usually, when students finish a special program like KAMS, they might think about moving to a new city or a different school. But Carter decided to stay right here at Fort Hays State. He plans to become an optometrist or an ophthalmologist.

Carter knew this was the right place for him to keep studying. Why? Because of the community he found at FHSU.

"The scholarships are great," Carter explained. "I already know many people here and have strong connections. It made the most sense financially. All my connections are still here and carry over, so I don't have to switch to a whole new town. Fort Hays was perfect for me."

He also has amazing mentors like Suellyn. Carter calls her a "sweetheart" who helps him with everything from picking classes to finding scholarship opportunities. Suellyn says that reaching goals is the true measure of success. She knows Carter has a strong foundation and is ready for anything.

Carter went from being a bored high school student in a small town to an academic researcher and a campus leader. His advice for anyone else thinking about their future is simple: get involved.

"If you want to get involved, you will probably meet people who are seeking you out," he said. "It doesn't matter what you're here for, there's going to be a group of people trying to know you and help you and further your education. That's awesome, honestly."

Carter Will is more than just a student; he is a scientist, a mentor, and a loyal friend. Suellyn knew from day one that KAMS was the perfect place for him to shine. By setting big goals and working hard to reach them, Carter has shown everyone what true success looks like. As he continues his journey at FHSU, he is building on a foundation as solid as rock. Carter doesn't just attend this university, he lives its values.