A baby, a degree, and a community that never lets go

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By Tisa Mason
Hays, KAN. - Seeing a sweet baby in a stroller isn't a rare sight on the second floor of Rarick Hall in the Teacher Education Department. Most likely, it's Josiah, a smiling little man who accompanies his mom, Dacia Rice, as she attends her classes.

Dacia is soft-spoken. She does not use many extra words. But anyone who sits with her for a few minutes quickly notices the two things that matter most in her life: her faith and her family. She also possesses a quiet determination to finish what she starts, a trait that carried her through one of the busiest years of her life. That kind of steady resolve is something you encounter often at Fort Hays State University, a school built on a spirit that refuses to quit, no matter the changes or challenges that arise.

While attending school in the Buhler School District in Kansas. Dacia first heard about Fort Hays from a friend who played soccer with her. "That put Fort Hays on my radar," she recalled. When the time came to choose a university, Fort Hays State stood out for reasons that went beyond academics. The campus felt manageable in size, and the people she met along the way made her feel she would be more than a number. She enrolled, and from her first semester onward, it was clear she intended to make the most of the opportunity before her. That intention was tested in ways she could not have predicted.

Dacia met her husband, Landry, when she was a freshman at FHSU, during a young adult's retreat through Celebration Community Church. They were married before Dacia's junior year. Dacia is now a senior majoring in elementary education, and she will begin her student teaching next semester. In August, right before the fall semester began, Dacia gave birth to Josiah. Josiah was just 12 days old when she began classes this fall. Many new moms would take time off from school. Dacia did not.

"We were still having sleepless nights and were trying to figure out how to do college and parenthood at the same time," Dacia said. FHSU's teacher education faculty members made the transition much easier, as they were open to her bringing Josiah to class. Not only were the faculty very supportive and accommodating, but so were her classmates. That's the kind of environment one can count on at Fort Hays State University, an ethic of care and support that goes deep.

Rather than step back from her coursework, Dacia leaned on the people around her.
She counts Amy Schaffer, instructor of teacher education, as a trusted mentor.
"Amy has always been there for me," Dacia said. "I feel like I can go to her and ask questions anytime I'm walking by her office. I always stop by if I've got Josiah with me."

Linda Feldstein, teacher ed associate professor, has also become a source of steadiness. When Josiah gets fussy, Dacia slips to the back of Dr. Feldstein's room to nurse him. Other times, classmates, and even Dr. Feldstein herself, take turns gently rocking his stroller so he can fall back asleep. "Her persistence, work ethic, and powerful sense of responsibility to both her family and her future career have been remarkable," said Dr. Feldstein. She pointed out that Dacia has never turned in a late assignment and has missed only one class all semester.

Teacher education faculty have taken to calling her a "rock star." “She is determined to get her degree no matter what obstacles come her way,” Amy Schaffer said. “She is a hard worker. If she needs help, she asks and is always open to suggestions, which helps her grow as an educator.”

It is the same spirit of dedication, grit, and community support that FHSU prides itself on fostering in every student who walks through its doors. Balancing school and motherhood is not easy. Dacia admits that finding time for homework can be hard. While she studies, she is always listening and watching, making sure Josiah is comfortable and cared for. She does not do it alone. Her mother-in-law, DeLynn, watches Josiah during the day. When DeLynn cannot, Dacia's own mother drives to Hays to help.

Dacia also receives an Access to Academic Opportunity Grant (AAOG), which helps students access higher education. As part of her AAOG cohort, she attends evening meetings, and during that time, Landry takes over watching Josiah. It is a web of family, faith, and faculty working together, much like the extensive support system FHSU builds around every student it serves.

When asked what the phrase "Heart of a Tiger" means to her, Dacia said it extends beyond the classroom and into the entire Hays community. "I really feel like I am a part of things," she said. Dacia visited larger campuses but says they feel separate from their towns. FHSU is different. It feels woven into the fabric of the town itself, exactly the kind of accessible, community-rooted experience the university strives to offer every student, every day.

After graduation, Dacia hopes to teach first grade right there in Hays. She loves working with young children, and she plans to put down roots in the town that gave her so much.

Dacia's journey is really a story of faith and family. When she arrived in Hays, she was welcomed into a church family and into FHSU's teacher education family. Because of that care, baby Josiah has already been wrapped into a community of his own, rocked to sleep by future teachers who will one day shape classrooms across Kansas.

At Fort Hays State University, we support one another with a mind and willingness to invest deeply and personally. We engage in people’s stories, build confidence, and attend generously to each other’s needs. Our mission is simple: reinvest in what matters most - our students. Through Dacia Rice and Josiah, that mission comes to life, one feeding, one rocked stroller, and one finished assignment at a time.