

Heart of a Tiger: The Hernandez Family is Back on Campus

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. – Even before classes officially begin, our campus is already alive with energy. You can hear the laughter of our international students during orientation on the Quad. You can feel the determination of our Tiger football players as they power through practice in the sweltering Kansas summer heat. By this weekend, most of our on-campus students will be moved in, and on Monday, we'll turn the page together and begin the 2025–2026 academic year — another exciting chapter in the proud history of Fort Hays State University.

Among the students returning to our residence halls is Dominic “Dom” Hernandez, a high school senior from Hays who is enrolled in our Kansas Academy of Math and Science (KAMS) — FHSU’s premier early college program. While KAMS is known for its unmatched academic rigor, students like Dom also take full advantage of the opportunities our university offers outside the classroom. KAMS students serve in student government, lead in campus organizations, engage in community service, and even take part in cutting-edge research.

Dom’s story is deeply rooted in the values of family, hard work, and education. His father, Manuel Hernandez, grew up in Mexico City, the son of parents who sacrificed greatly so their children could have a better life. Manuel’s mother worked as a cook in the Spanish Embassy, and his father left elementary school to work in construction. Manuel followed his mother’s culinary path, eventually becoming a professional chef.

Dom’s mother, Erin Schamber, grew up in the tiny rural town of Damar (population 107), in a safe and supportive community where everybody knew everybody. Her father’s Peace Corps service inspired her love for travel and other cultures. After building a life in Colorado, Erin and Manuel moved to Hays so Manuel could join the team at Gella’s Restaurant. They thought it would simply be a good place to raise their family. What they didn’t know then was that FHSU would become central to their story.

Manuel is now head chef with Union Catering, delivering between 2,000 and 3,000 meals daily and providing customized catering solutions for a wide range of campus events. Erin earned her master’s degree in clinical psychology here at FHSU and went on to launch a rewarding career advocating for youth in the Ellis County juvenile justice system. Both parents have embraced our campus and community, attending events like the Hays Symphony and sending their children to STEM summer camps.

About two years ago, Dom came home from school and told his parents about the KAMS program. “I just wasn’t feeling challenged enough in high school,” Dom said. “My dad taught me and my siblings to always be looking for ways to excel and ways to take advantage of the opportunities we are lucky enough to find.” Dom saw KAMS as an opportunity to embrace his dad’s advice.

During his first year in KAMS, Dom conducted research on advanced insulating materials, journeyed to Ireland to participate in archaeological fieldwork, and attended a National Rural

Electric Cooperative Association leadership conference in Washington, D.C. Each state sent students to the conference, and Dom was selected by his peers to represent all of his fellow Kansans as a member of the Youth Leadership Council.

Like the majority of FHSU students, Dom also works part-time. He serves as a barista at the Breathe Coffee shop in downtown Hays, and thinks this experience, well beyond the boundaries of campus, has been especially rewarding.

“Breathe is more than a coffee shop in the sense that it's also an outlet for people to find a community and an environment that is understanding. There are a lot of customers that I've become very close with. They've helped me with a lot of things, and I think I've helped them as well,” Dom said.

Patrick McGinnis, the owner of Breathe, believes Dom contributed greatly to the warm and welcoming culture of the coffee shop.

“Dominic understands that through excellence even in the small things, you can make a difference in people's lives,” McGinnis said. “He is authentic. He cares for everyone and is tirelessly dedicated to becoming the best version of himself.”

The Hernandez family's presence on campus is already strong this fall. Manuel's culinary team started serving meals on August 13. Dom's older brother Leonardo, a sophomore physics major and member of the Tiger Cheer squad, is practicing for our first home football game. And Dom is serving as one of my VIP Student Ambassadors, helping us connect with visitors and share the spirit of FHSU.

The Hernandez family reminds us about the connections we cultivate and the hearts we touch. When Dom's family arrived in Hays, they never anticipated that Fort Hays State University would weave itself into the fabric of their lives. Yet, today, they are enriching our community in ways that inspire and strengthen us all.

Here's to another year filled with opportunity, discovery, and the heart of a Tiger that beats powerfully within us all.

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