

Heart of a Tiger: Gilberto Guerra, a scholar beyond his years

7/16/26

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Imagine starting college at nine years old. While most nine-year-olds are in the fourth grade, playing recess games and learning long division, Gilberto Guerra was already studying complex computer programming online.

By the time he was 13, he graduated with his bachelor's degree from Fort Hays State University (FHSU) with a perfect 4.0 grade point average. Today, he has added a master's degree in computer science to his achievements.

While Gilberto's story sounds extraordinary, he sees it a bit differently. To him, it is simply the result of a family tradition that loves learning, an online university that opened its doors, and a lot of hard work.

Gilberto grew up in a family where curiosity was celebrated. Even though he started college very early, he does not consider himself a lonely genius. In fact, he is a fourth-generation college graduate.

Long before Gilberto was born, his great-great-grandfather in Mexico believed that a good education was the greatest gift a parent could give a child. He passed that belief down through the generations. Gilberto's mother read to him and his siblings before they were even born.

"My parents knew they could offer my siblings and me a better education than was available in conventional schools," Gilberto says.

His parents wanted their children to move forward in school, but they also wanted them to enjoy being kids. They focused on "quality over quantity." Instead of piling on hours of heavy homework, they focused on a deep love for reading and exploring new questions.

This approach worked wonders. Gilberto and his siblings began formal homeschooling at age three. By that time, they were already doing schoolwork at a third-grade level. By age seven, Gilberto was working on high school subjects. By age eight, his parents knew he was ready for the next big step: college.

Finding a university for an eight-year-old was not an easy task. Gilberto was a homeschooled student and an immigrant who came to the United States with his family in 2011. On top of that, expensive universities were out of the question for the family's budget.

His parents made a massive spreadsheet with hundreds of colleges. Most of them said "no" right away because of Gilberto's age. Some schools worried about the legal risks of having a child enrolled. Others made him take multiple SATs, only to tell him he could join but could not actually take classes.

Then, they found Fort Hays State University. FHSU looked at Gilberto's high-test scores and his talent rather than just his age.

Because Gilberto lived far away from Kansas and was too young to live in a dorm by himself, he became a full-time online student. FHSU's online program allowed him to study from the safety and comfort of his family home.

The transition was made possible by helpful hands at the university. Dr. Philip Wittkorn and Dr. Paul Faber reviewed his unusual case and approved his admission. Staff members Megan Masko and Helen Robson helped guide his family through the complex paperwork.

Once enrolled, Gilberto was paired with an academic advisor, Rebecca Newell, who helped his family navigate the unfamiliar world of college systems.

"She was always there to guide and answer every single question," Gilberto recalls gratefully.

Even for a brilliant student, college was not always easy. Gilberto faces the same challenge that many adults struggle with every day: time management.

"My greatest nemesis was, and still is, time management," Gilberto admits. "I tend to underestimate how long something will take me to complete."

This challenge became even bigger during his final year of graduate-level classes in 2024-2025. A close family friend became very sick and needed home hospice care. Because the friend had no other family nearby to help, Gilberto and his parents spent months traveling across the country to support them.

It was an exhausting time. Gilberto's parents constantly checked on him and his sister, who is also an FHSU online student, to make sure they had time for school. Gilberto kept working hard, keeping his worries to himself, and successfully finished his degree. He views the precious time spent helping a friend as something he would never trade away.

After earning his bachelor's degree at age 13, Gilberto decided to keep going. FHSU had recently started a brand-new master's degree program in computer science, which matched his interests perfectly.

During his graduate studies, his advisor, Dr. Anas Hourani, became a wonderful mentor. Dr. Hourani taught several of Gilberto's advanced classes and guided him through his final capstone project.

Dr. Hourani pointed out that Gilberto's achievements have gone far beyond earning perfect grades at such a young age.

"He demonstrated exceptional analytical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and a level of maturity that is rare in any graduate student," Dr. Hourani said. "What truly sets him apart is his humility, dedication, and genuine love of learning."

"It has been an honor to mentor him, and I am confident he will make significant contributions to the field of computer science."

Now, with a master's degree under his belt and a perfect college record, Gilberto is not stopping. He is currently working toward a second master's degree and building up a portfolio of his computer science work.

Fort Hays State University is deeply proud to be a part of Gilberto's journey. His story proves that when a student has dedication, a supportive family, and a university willing to open its doors, age is truly just a number.