

Heart of a Tiger: Finding strength through community

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - When Madison "Maddie" Stoumbaugh walked across the stage at Fort Hays State University in May 2026, she carried more than a nursing degree. She carried years of hard work, heartbreak, and hope. She also carried the lessons she learned from a university community that stood beside her every step of the way.

For Maddie, college was never a straight path. In 2020, she started school at the University of Northern Colorado. Her first year was difficult. After that, life changed quickly. She took two years away from school, gave birth to her daughter Ryleigh, and worked in agriculture in Colorado.

Those years on ranches and feedlots shaped her future in unexpected ways. Maddie worked long days roping cattle, helping with lambing season, caring for sheep, and working in feedlots. She discovered she loved agriculture, not only the hands-on work but also the business side.

When it came time to return to college, Maddie needed a place that could support both her education and her life as a single mother. She found that at Fort Hays State University.

Maddie chose Fort Hays State because it was affordable and offered support for students with children, including access to on-campus childcare. She and Ryleigh lived in Wooster Place for a year and a half, building a home while Maddie worked to rebuild her dream of earning a degree.

At Fort Hays State, Maddie did not simply attend classes. She became part of campus life. She joined Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, the Barn Hoppers country dancing club, the university honor society, and the nursing honor society. Friends and mentors became part of her support system.

Balancing school and motherhood was not easy. Nursing classes brought long hours, studying, and demanding clinical work. But Maddie found creative ways to include her daughter in the journey.

Instead of seeing Ryleigh as a distraction, Maddie made her a study partner. While learning nursing skills, she practiced head-to-toe assessments on her daughter. She used coloring books, toy stethoscopes, and bedtime study sessions to keep Ryleigh involved.

"My daughter does an amazing head-to-toe assessment," Maddie said proudly. "I feel like that girl is going to grow up to do amazing things. A lot of times, she just wanted to be involved. We made it work."

During her senior year, Maddie completed her nursing capstone in labor and delivery at Hays Medical Center. There, she discovered the kind of nurse she wanted to become.

“I really enjoyed it,” she said. “I delivered 10 babies. It’s so much fun! I absolutely love it.”

Soon after graduation, she began working as a labor and delivery nurse in Great Bend. For the next year, she plans to focus fully on nursing and building experience in her career.

But Maddie’s story does not end there.

She plans to return to Fort Hays State next year to finish a second degree in agricultural business. With less than a year of coursework left, she is already looking ahead to a future that blends both of her passions: caring for people and building a life in agriculture.

Her long-term dream is to continue nursing while helping her fiancé’s family’s agricultural operation and eventually launch her own agricultural business. One day, she hopes agri-business will become her full-time work, with nursing remaining a meaningful part-time calling.

Behind Maddie’s achievements is a story of deep resilience. While at Fort Hays State, she faced a difficult time: the death of her daughter’s father. Grieving while raising a child and completing a nursing program could have stopped her journey. Instead, she found strength in the people around her.

“Fort Hays State completely changed my life,” Maddie said.

She speaks often about the support she received from professors, classmates, and sorority sisters. Faculty members worked with her when life became overwhelming. Friends checked in on her. The university community made sure she never felt alone.

“If I didn’t have the opportunity to go to Fort Hays State, I don’t know if I would have been able to finish college,” she said. “The support I’ve had from everybody at Fort Hays State — my sorority members, my professors - everybody offered me support when I needed it.”

For Maddie, the university’s support went beyond grades and deadlines. It was an ethic of care — a belief that students are people first.

“Truly, the people at Fort Hays State got me through,” she said. “My professors helped me make sure I got my assignments done. They helped me get extensions and helped me make sure I was understanding things, not just getting the grades.”

That distinction mattered. The goal was not simply for Maddie to pass classes. The goal was for her to learn, grow, and succeed.

Today, Maddie is beginning her nursing career, raising a bright 4½-year-old daughter, planning a wedding, and preparing for a return to college. Her path has been anything but easy, but she keeps moving forward with determination and grace.

She also carries with her deep gratitude for the community that helped her succeed.

“I think everybody is the Heart of a Tiger at Fort Hays State,” she said.

Maddie's story is more than a story about earning a degree. It is a story about resilience, motherhood, friendship, and the power of a university that cares for its students. It is a reminder that behind every diploma is a human journey — and sometimes, an entire community helping someone find the strength to keep going.

For Fort Hays State University, Maddie Stoumbaugh's journey reflects the very best of what it means to be a Tiger: courage in hard times, compassion for others, and a commitment to lifting each other.