

Heart of a Tiger: Teddy Roosevelt, Neil Armstrong, and our own Dr. Matthew Clay

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - In 1902, Hays, Kansas, was a vibrant yet rugged railroad and military outpost in the heart of the sprawling High Plains. The town offered opportunity and challenge, attracting a colorful mix of characters—from hardworking pioneers and recent immigrants seeking a fresh start to those with less honorable intentions. To thrive in such an environment required more than mere survival; it demanded an adventurous spirit, an ability to adapt, and heaps of determination. As Fort Hays State University (FHSU) opened its doors within the confines of a former military hospital on the grounds of the historic Fort Hays, it became a place where that very spirit flourished, shaping a community that continues to resonate with the same tenacity that built it.

Associate Professor of Teacher Education Matt Clay is at the forefront of this endeavor, a living testament to the adventurous spirit that defines FHSU. Raised in the rural town of Clearwater, Kansas, situated southwest of Wichita, Matt spent his childhood outdoors, soaking up the beauty of nature while engrossed in tales of adventure. Books detailing the exploits of figures like Teddy Roosevelt and Sir Edmund Hillary inspired him. They instilled in him a lifelong passion for exploration—one he would carry into his career as he prepared the next generation of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) educators.

Matt began his academic journey at Pittsburg State University, earning a Bachelor of Science in Education, focusing on biology. He continued his studies at Montana State University, earning a master's in science education before completing his doctorate at the University of Northern Colorado. Alongside his academic pursuits, he gained invaluable experience as an educator in public and private schools throughout rural Kansas.

Since he arrived at FHSU, Matt has creatively infused his classroom with his love for the outdoors and adventure. He regularly led students on expeditions to the breathtaking Rocky Mountains and introduced them to the intricate art of using 360-degree landscape cameras to capture stunning vistas from heights exceeding 13,000 feet. The visuals they captured were transformed into teaching resources that now extend educational experiences to K-12 teachers and students around the globe.

With an undying curiosity driving him, Matt envisioned aligning his work with the established narratives of exploration he admired so much during his youth. Thus, he contacted the president of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the New York City-based Explorers Club—a premier organization devoted to supporting scientific expeditions across varied disciplines. Known for its illustrious members, including Arctic pioneers Robert Peary and Roald Amundsen, astronauts like Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, and zoologist Jane Goodall, the club has long been a beacon for individuals passionate about discovery.

“I wasn’t sure if my work would even qualify for membership,” Matt confessed. “However, I felt compelled to give it a shot, even just to deepen my understanding of what being a member meant.” To his astonishment, his application was accepted in June, allowing him to become part of a legacy that typically includes those in hard science fields. “I was amazed,” he admitted. “This was a world I’d only dreamed of entering.”

Since joining this esteemed organization, Matt has gained more than just a membership card; he has tapped into a treasure trove of resources and connections in exploration. He met a botanist who has conducted groundbreaking fieldwork in the Himalayas—a dream location for Matt, who aspires to photograph its grandeur with his landscape camera. Additionally, access to valuable insights, like strategies for maintaining equipment in frigid conditions, has enriched his craft and field operations.

Emboldened by his connection to the Explorers Club, Matt envisions personal growth and avenues for his students to engage in exploration. “There are numerous private and corporate donors that could support the efforts of club members,” he explained. “While such funding rarely supports university work, opportunities arise if one isn’t afraid to ask.”

His wife, Krysten, initially raised an eyebrow when he shared the news of his acceptance. “She wondered how I could benefit from a club I’d rarely visit,” he laughed, recounting his attempts to convince her. “I pointed out that the club’s location, just two miles from Broadway in Manhattan, might offer its own adventures!”

Matt Clay epitomizes the ethos of our Tiger Teacher Nation at FHSU. He doesn’t merely teach future educators; he embodies the passion for discovery that inspires them. Alongside his wife and three children, he dedicates his time to exploratory missions throughout Kansas and the Rocky Mountains, braving snowstorms, extreme cold, and wildfire threats alongside his intrepid students. Together, they’ve trekked to some of the most remote areas, documenting the natural world and forging connections between exploration and education.

As Dr. Matt Clay continues to blend adventure with academia, he resonates with the principles that have framed Hays, Kansas, from an outpost into a place of possibilities—a true modern-day explorer inspired by the legacy of those who came before him.