

Heart of a Tiger: Seeing a need, creating a solution

8/13/26

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Home isn't always the place where you were born. Sometimes, it's the place where you decide to stay, put down roots, and spend your life making it better. For Jennifer Kaufman, that place is Salina, Kansas, a community she has served for nearly two decades by building programs that improve lives and expand access to mental health care.

"There is something about the middle of Kansas that I enjoy, so I stuck around," Jennifer says. Her dad was in the Army, so her family moved around a lot when she was young. After moving to Salina in fourth grade, she found the home she had been looking for. Jennifer graduated from Kansas Wesleyan University in 2008. While she was a student there, she studied abroad in Australia. After graduation, Jennifer explored more of the world before coming back home to start her career.

Jennifer's first career after college was at the Central Kansas Mental Health Center in Salina. It turned out to be the perfect fit.

"I found out that I really liked working with kids, and I liked building programs," she says. "I was intrigued by so many things, and I just enjoyed learning."

For years, Jennifer worked hard and grew in her career. But something was missing. She wanted to go back to school and earn her master's degree in social work. The problem was that life was busy. She was a mom of two young kids, and she had a full-time job.

"When I was 35, I thought, if I'm going to go back to school, I'm going to do it before I turn 40. I need to get it done," Jennifer remembers.

So, at age 36, with her kids just 5 and 8 years old, she applied to Fort Hays State University's online Master of Social Work program and was accepted.

Going back to school is not easy, especially with a full-time job and two kids at home. Jennifer had tried before to get scholarships, but nothing worked out. Then a friend told her about the Northwest Kansas Learn and Live Scholarship, funded by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation. She decided to give it one more try.

Weeks later, Jennifer was at a big health conference in Los Angeles when she checked her email. There it was. She had been selected to receive the scholarship.

"I cried. I cried and cried. I gasped so loud that my coworkers looked at me and asked if I was okay," Jennifer says. "I said, 'My life has changed forever.' It was a very genuine, raw reaction, overwhelmingly thankful. It was very powerful."

The scholarship did more than help Jennifer pay for school. It helped her whole family.

"It changed my kids' lives too, not being so incredibly stressed about paying for school on top of everything else," she explains. "The financial stress is heavy while you're taking classes. If you have that, it can sometimes affect your ability to learn. Being able to focus more on content is really meaningful."

It took Jennifer three years to finish her online degree while working full-time. Today, she is the chief development officer at the Central Kansas Mental Health Center, the very place where her career began back in 2010. She now leads several important programs that help people in her community get the mental health care they need.

One of her proudest moments happened while she was still an FHSU student. As part of a practicum, Jennifer had a chance to build something brand new.

She had stayed connected to Kansas Wesleyan University for years, even serving on its board. She knew the school had been trying to figure out how to support students' mental health for a long time. So, Jennifer offered to bring free therapy services to Kansas Wesleyan students.

After the program's first year, she gathered information on how well it worked and what students thought of it. She shared that information with the school's leaders. They were so impressed that they asked her to keep doing it - and this time, they wanted to sustain it long-term.

"Now they are supporting two therapists on-site to see students for free," Jennifer shared. "It is so cool. That's what my community means to me. You see a problem, and you figure it out. I love being here."

Jennifer isn't slowing down. She recently studied her community's needs and is working to secure a grant to launch a brand-new perinatal and postnatal initiative.

Jennifer says the reason she loves her work — and her home — comes down to the people around her.

"It seems like that's what Kansas is all about in terms of community," she says. "You can really see the impact your work has. People truly care."

She also has kind words for Fort Hays State University, where several of her coworkers have followed in her footsteps by joining the Master of Social Work program. They share textbooks. They talk about classes. They support each other.

"Fort Hays does such a great job of keeping people connected," she says.

From a young girl who moved often to a leader who has made Salina her permanent home, Jennifer Kaufman has spent her life building things that help other people. One program, one person, and one small act of courage at a time.