

Heart of a Tiger: A Tiger's summer of service

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By Tisa Mason

Hays, Kan. - These Heart of a Tiger stories remind me why I love this job. This one is about a young man from a small Kansas town who went home for the summer with purpose and passion to make a difference. By fall, he had changed his town a little, and his town had changed him a lot.

Kyan Offutt grew up in Beloit, Kansas. He is a student at Fort Hays State University. Next May, he will graduate with two degrees. One is in marketing. The other is in management.

Last summer, Kyan joined the Nex-Generation Internship Program. That program helps students find paid summer work. Kyan landed a marketing internship with Discover Mitchell County.

Once hired, he did not sit still. His list of responsibilities was long: he helped run an 8-man All-Star tournament, wrote press releases, raised money, set up a Madden video game tournament for kids, ran social media, organized a photo contest and a summer scavenger hunt, and helped plan a bell tour for America's 250th birthday. He was, in the truest sense, everywhere at once.

He came up with an idea called "Tip Tuesday." Every week, he posted short videos. In each video, he shared a tip to help small businesses. "In Beloit, almost everyone is a small business owner," he said.

He also worked on a project called the Mitchell County CLIP (Community Leadership and Incentive Program). This program offers financial assistance to people who move to Mitchell County and the nearby counties of Jewell, Osborne, Cloud, and Lincoln. A worker signs on for a full-time job, stays two years, and can earn thousands of dollars in bonuses along the way. Graduates of a Mitchell County high school and Fort Hays Tech | North Central can also earn a little extra. "It is a super good initiative to get young people back," he said. "I was so grateful to be a part of this initiative."

As part of the Mitchell County CLIP program, Kyan went to the local high school to spread the word. "I wanted to make sure high school students knew that staying in Beloit after graduation could be a good option," he said. "A lot of people don't really want to leave. It is important to keep some of the talent that we grow here."

Kyan also tried something new. He wrote a grant proposal. It was his first one ever. He sent it to the Solomon Valley Foundation, requesting funds to grow tourism in Mitchell County. He received a \$2,500 grant to help Discover Mitchell County build a digital tourism app called Driftscape. Driftscape will help travelers find restaurants, attractions, outdoor fun, and museums in Mitchell County. Kyan's enthusiasm for the app is infectious.

"I could talk to you all day about how it is so much cooler and more beneficial than just a brochure," he said. "It is interactive. It's about getting people to stay to see another attraction. I think it will be huge for our tourism. It will bring the county into the future and out of the past."

In August, Kyan led a Lunch and Learn program called "Working Smarter with AI." He showed business owners how to leverage AI to become more productive. "I wanted to give them ideas to help them save time," he said. "I showed them AI wasn't scary." About 35 people came. It was the biggest Lunch and Learn the group had ever held. "The people were engaged, asking questions," he said.

For Kyan, the whole summer was a gift. "Every day I was doing something new, and I loved it," he said. "I don't think there's any other job where I could have learned as much as I did. I was involved with boards and committees, teaching about AI, grant writing, and social media. It was a taste of everything. It was the experience I needed for what I want to do in the future."

Kyan is quick to thank his professors at Fort Hays State, including Ronald Christian, Mary Martin, and Stacey Smith. "They have all really helped me," he said. "Mary Martin is the reason I know so much about AI. She rewrote her class to make it Marketing with AI."

Kyan will graduate from FHSU in May with two degrees and a summer's worth of experiences he can carry into any career. But perhaps the most important thing he brought back to Fort Hays State was a renewed sense of purpose. He went home to help his community build its future. In the process, the people of his hometown reminded him that where we come from can remain an important part of where we are going.