

Heart of a Tiger: How Ryan Funai Found His Calling in the Caves and Classrooms of FHSU

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - In the spring of 2020, the world went quiet. For Ryan Funai, then a high school freshman, the silence of the pandemic was loud with the frustrations of a disrupted education. Like millions of other students, Ryan found himself staring at a screen, relegated to an online modality that felt more like a barrier than a bridge to learning.

Many students waited for the world to return to "normal." Ryan Funai, however, decided to build a new one.

His journey from a 16-year-old GED student to a 2025 FHSU Homecoming King nominee and future PhD candidate is a story of unconventional paths. But more importantly, it is a story that illustrates the soul of Fort Hays State University: the belief that with a bit of grit and a community that cares, there is no limit to how far a student can go.

Resilience is often defined as the ability to bounce back, but for Ryan, it was about pivoting. Recognizing that the traditional high school structure was no longer serving his growth during the pandemic, Ryan approached his mother, Angela, with a bold proposal: he wanted to leave high school, pursue his GED as a homeschool student, and accelerate his path to adulthood.

It was a risk, but it was grounded in a clear-eyed understanding of his own needs. With a comprehensive study guide and a state-mandated prep course, Ryan didn't just pass; he aced all four GED modules on his first attempt. By the time his peers were starting their sophomore year, Ryan had already completed his secondary education.

However, ambition requires as much patience as it does speed. Knowing he wasn't quite ready for the social landscape of a university at 16, Ryan spent what would have been his junior year working full-time. He saved his earnings, gained experience, and by the age of 17, he arrived at Fort Hays State University not just as a freshman, but as a young man with a plan.

Ryan's connection to FHSU began even before his first official class. The summer before his freshman year, he took a job at the Tebo Library. It was here that the "small school" advantage of FHSU first changed his life.

While shelving books and assisting patrons, Ryan began meeting faculty members who treated him not as a temporary summer hire, but as a future colleague. Among them was Dr. Todd Moore, the Department of Geosciences chairman, whose encouragement left a lasting impression. Ryan's 'calling' wasn't just found in books, but in the mentorship of those who saw his potential before he even declared a major.

"Meeting so many people early on encouraged me to get involved," Ryan recalls. "It made college less intimidating."

This early immersion enabled Ryan to shape his college experience. He didn't just join the campus; he became deeply rooted in the university. Now a senior majoring in Geology with a minor in Biology and a Leadership certificate, Ryan has maintained a trajectory of excellence, placing him on track to graduate with academic honors. He is already enrolled in an accelerated master's program at FHSU, eyeing a PhD and a future career as a university professor.

When asked about his academic success, Ryan quickly pivots to the people he serves. This "ethic of care" is a hallmark of the FHSU community, and Ryan brings it to life through his dedicated leadership in the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity.

Serving as the President, Ryan has led his brothers in supporting the WeKan Center, a program of Hays USD 489. The center serves students with intellectual or developmental disabilities who have finished high school but still require support before age 21. For Ryan, this isn't just a "philanthropy project"—it's a manifestation of the SAE creed: being a "true gentleman."

"I think of my fraternity's creed... putting other people before yourself and being honest and being the best person you can be," Ryan says. "That aligns with a lot of the principles of Fort Hays. Putting other people before yourself is a big aspect of what I strive to do."

This semester, his commitment to the Hays community continues through his LDRS 310 (Field Work in Leadership) course, where he and his team are organizing a 5K Run for First Call for Help, a local organization providing vital social services.

Ryan's academic pursuits in Geology are not merely clinical; they are humanitarian. His research focuses on water, specifically within the complex cave systems of southern Kansas.

"I want to be able to help people as much as I can, and water is an essential part of everyday life," he explains. "The desire to help people spreads into all the other areas of my studies and my involvement on campus."

Supported by an Undergraduate Scholarly Experience Grant, Ryan will return to the caves of southern Kansas this spring to conduct advanced research. For Ryan, the dark, damp passages of a cave are a laboratory for the greater good, ensuring that the most essential resource for life is understood and protected for the community.

The FHSU community recognized Ryan's impact by nominating him for Homecoming King in 2025. While the title was an honor, for Ryan, the "unique experience" was the opportunity to meet people from across the university—many of whom he remains in close contact with today.

But perhaps the most personal symbol of Ryan's ethic of care is something many might have missed. In 2020, as he began his unconventional journey through the GED, Ryan started growing out his hair. It became a four-year project that recently concluded at the Hays Academy of Hair Design. Ryan didn't just get a haircut; he donated his hair to organizations that provide hairpieces for children experiencing hair loss. It was a quiet, years-long commitment to a stranger's well-being—a physical representation of his "others-first" philosophy.

As Ryan prepares to transition from an undergraduate leader to a graduate researcher, his goal remains clear. He wants to teach at a university like Fort Hays State.

"I would choose a smaller school so I can make connections with students, considering how impactful that has been for my own education," he says.

Ryan Funai's story is not just about a student who beat the odds of a pandemic. It is about a student who found a university that matched his values. At FHSU, Ryan didn't just find a degree; he found a platform for his resilience, a laboratory for his innovation, and a community that shared his heart for service.

As he heads back into the caves of Kansas this spring, he does so not just as a geologist, but as a Tiger—grounded in the earth, but reaching for the stars.

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