

# Heart of a Tiger: Bright lights and big dreams

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - On a cold Saturday night in February, the lights dimmed at the Beach/Schmidt Performing Arts Center. The crowd grew quiet. Three college students were prepared to take center stage as stars of the show.

Every year, the Hays Symphony holds a major competition, the Young Artist Competition. Student musicians at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) compete for a chance to perform as soloists, standing in front of the orchestra and playing the lead part.

In the spirit of hard work and a love for music and community, Samantha Zimmerman, Alison Walker, and Dawson McNeal turned their disciplined practice into a masterpiece.

Samantha Zimmerman is a scientist who plays the violin. Samantha comes from Beloit. She didn't always plan on coming to Fort Hays State. However, her high school teacher used to drive her to Hays every week to rehearse with the Hays Symphony. During those rehearsals, she fell in love with the music.

"I loved the orchestra so much," Samantha said. "I knew I wanted to be a part of it."

Samantha is a senior biology major. She spends much of her time researching and studying the environment. Even though she loves science, she couldn't leave her violin behind. She decided to minor in music so she could stay active in FHSU's music community.

At the Young Artists Competition concert, Samantha performed a piece by composer Max Bruch. Usually, Samantha likes to stay in the background, so being a soloist was a bit scary at first. "I don't usually want to be in the spotlight," she admitted. But she practiced hard and did a wonderful job.

Now a May graduate, Samantha is off to work in the wilderness to help fix hiking trails in Oregon. Even though she will be busy with nature, she hopes to join a new orchestra. For Samantha, music is all about teamwork. She says that in music, everyone works together to make something beautiful. I couldn't agree more!

Alison Walker is a sophomore who loves to sing. She grew up in Nebraska. When it was time to pick a college, she visited three different schools. When she got to Fort Hays State, she knew it was the right place.

"I felt like the professors took the time to get to know me," Alison said. She loved talking to other students and learning about their lives.

Alison is a mezzo-soprano, a mid-range singing voice—not too high or too low. Her featured performance was a composition by Gioachino Rossini. Alison has always loved music, but for a long time, she wasn't sure if she could make it a career. Her parents were the ones who encouraged her to follow her dreams.

Winning the competition was important to Alison. "It means that the work I am putting in is being seen and heard," she said.

Alison is very busy. She sings in the choir, plays in the marching band, and is part of several music clubs. One day, she wants to have her own teaching studio where she can help others learn to sing. She also wants to keep performing on stage.

Dawson McNeal is a trumpet player and a "people person" with a great sense of humor. He grew up in Holyrood, Kansas. His high school was so small that his graduating class had only 15 students. His school band was tiny, too. It had four members. Sometimes Dawson had to play different instruments, such as the euphonium, and cover other instrumental parts as needed for the music selection.

Because his school was so small, it was sometimes difficult to find music teachers. This made Dawson want to become a music teacher himself. He is currently a student teacher at Hays Middle School and Hays High School.

"I threw myself into everything I could," Dawson said about coming to college. He wanted to learn as much as possible so he could be the best teacher for his future students.

At the concert, Dawson played a modern piece on his trumpet called "Centennial Horizon." He loved it because he felt like he could "talk" through his instrument. To Dawson, music is just another way of speaking.

Dawson graduated in May with a degree in Music Education. He is also in our military program and, upon graduation, became a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

The "Winter Classics" concert featuring these students was a combination of stretching, growing, and celebrating. Professor Ben Cline, the symphony's conductor and program chair of our school of visual and performing arts, said that working with these young artists is his favorite part of the year. He loved seeing them move from the small practice rooms to the big stage.

The Hays Symphony Guild helps make these concerts possible. Joan Crull, the president of the Guild, says the energy the students bring is "contagious." When the students are excited, the audience gets excited, too!

For Samantha, Alison, and Dawson, music is a huge part of their lives. Samantha uses it to find balance with her science studies. Alison uses it to connect with her community. And Dawson uses it to express his feelings and prepare for his career as a teacher.

These three young artists prove that if you work hard and follow your passion, you can achieve great things. Whether they are blazing new trails through the wilderness, teaching kids to sing, or serving in the Army, they will always have their music to guide them.

The next time you hear a violin, a trumpet, or a powerful singing voice, remember these artists. They didn't just play the music; they conquered the stage, one disciplined note at a time.