

FHSU, 4-H both provide opportunity to change lives, community – and the world

Fort Hays State University exists to improve lives. Our alumni, engaged citizens leaders, use their education and improve the lives of others. This pay-it-forward mission makes our world better. Whether a teacher, banker, nurse, artist, or physicist, our alumni are dedicated professionals who transform their fields and their communities.

In a couple of weeks, the FHSU Alumni Association will honor seven remarkable change agents. I love listening and learning about their journeys and the remarkable impact they have made on our world.

As I walk across campus, stopping to talk with several students, I find myself also thinking about these seven award winners' beginning steps and how Tiger Nation nurtures talents and self-discovery. I think about Maya Angelou's statement that making a living is not the same thing as making a life. I think about the amazing students who have passed through our "halls" and those who are in the middle of figuring it all out right now. One of those is junior Hannah Dechant.

Hannah grew up in Goodland in northwest Kansas. For 13 years, her life was shaped and nurtured by her involvement in 4-H. She has shown sheep and dogs, done art and crafts, photography, and foods and nutrition.

"Growing up in my small town, agriculture is a way of life for us, so being in 4-H and doing so many things was not uncommon," she said. "However, it was about a lot more than just all of the ribbons and awards I would receive. For me, it was about helping others achieve their goals and dreams."

You may be guessing this accomplished 4-H'er came to campus to study agriculture. I did. Heck, Hannah even works on our university farm. As often is the case, there is more to Hannah's story.

When Hannah was 5 years old, she was diagnosed with Amblyopia; she is legally blind in her left eye. That meant that throughout her K-12 years, she would navigate education via disability accommodations. As Hannah would say, there is an extra layer of challenges for those children who grow up with a disability. Her experiences as a person with a disability shaped and fueled her passion to become a special education teacher. At FHSU, Hannah is an elementary education major with a minor in special education.

"I have always had a heart for young kids, and 4-H only expanded on that more," Hannah said. "Because I have been through the journey of living with a disability, and all the paperwork that comes with it for school, I will be able to help students with exceptionalities better."

What I love about Hannah's story is how she combines her love for agriculture with her calling to assist others with special needs.

"In 4-H, I have been able to help and teach students who have special needs reach their goals. I have been able to help those children feel like any other child," she said. "For the past three years, I have been able to help a young girl who is unable to walk – or talk – show a lamb by

training a lamb to walk by a wagon with her riding in it. I have also been able to help two children with a disability learn how to cook and bake.”

Hannah looks forward to the day she has her own classroom. She can't wait to integrate different kinds of activities that will focus on all that agriculture has to offer.

“I feel that every student should understand agriculture and where our food comes from,” she said. I also want the children to know that livestock are not scary when you handle them the correct way.”

Hannah's vision for her life is truly inspiring. Through that vision, I know her life will be rich, and those lives that she touches will be even more enriched.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, there is no doubt in my mind that a Fort Hays State education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world. Thank you, Hannah, for your passion and the unique way you will make our world better one child at a time!

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