

Heart of a Tiger: A custodian's new beginning

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Susan Relaford is the kind of person you want to hug. She has a big personality, a warm heart, and a word of encouragement ready for anyone who needs one.

For 11 years, Susan worked as a custodian here at Fort Hays State. If you played volleyball or basketball in our coliseum, you probably knew her. If you took classes on the Education floor of Rarick Hall, you probably knew her, too. She swept floors, but she also swept people up in her care. She became a friend, a cheerleader, and even a stand-in parent to many students.

"I wanted to spread my love to everybody," Susan says.

But Susan had a dream sitting on the back burner. About 20 years ago, she worked as a pharmacy technician. She loved it. She thought about going back to school to make it official. Then life got busy, and hard. Her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Then COVID hit. On top of that, she was busy raising kids and celebrating weddings.

Turning 50 gave Susan a new kind of courage. She looked around and realized the time to chase her dream was now, not someday. So, she signed up for classes to become a certified pharmacy technician.

That decision changed everything. Susan found out that one of the benefits of working for Fort Hays State is free tuition for employees. And thanks to FHSU's affiliation with Fort Hays Tech | North Central, that free tuition is extended to that school as well as to Fort Hays Tech | Northwest. So, at 50 years old, while still working full days as a custodian, she enrolled in classes at Fort Hays Tech | North Central.

Free tuition for employees is one of Fort Hays' best-kept secrets. Many universities and companies across Kansas offer something similar. If you have never asked your employer about tuition help, it might be worth a phone call. You might be surprised by the doors that could open for you.

For Susan, that benefit was the key. She could keep working her custodian job, keep paying her bills, and still take classes toward a brand-new career. It was not easy. She was older than most of her classmates, and she still had a full-time job to manage. But she showed up, week after week, balancing homework, shifts, and family, determined to finish what she started.

"You never know what you can do unless you put your mind to it," Susan said.

That kind of grit is something I see in a lot of people here in Western Kansas. Life throws hard things at us - sickness, loss, responsibilities that pile up faster than we can handle them. But so many folks keep pushing forward anyway, a little at a time, until one day they look up and realize they made it.

Susan made it. Her hard work paid off, and she earned her certification as a pharmacy technician. Today, she helps people get the medicine they need to feel better. It is a new job, but the heart behind it is the same. Susan is still spreading her love, just in a different way.

“Never give up. Keep trying. If I could say one thing to people, that’s what I would say. I was going to give up, but I decided to do it, and proved to myself and others that I could do it.”

I think about all the students who walked past Susan in the hallways over the years: some having a rough day, some far from home and needing someone to check on them. Susan gave that to them without being asked. Now, as a pharmacy technician, she will keep giving that same care to those who need it at Hays Med.

I share Susan's story because it shows exactly what Fort Hays State is all about. We are not just a place where students earn degrees. We are a place where every person on our campus, from professors to custodians, can dream big and reach for more. Our employee benefits are not just numbers on a page; they are real chances for real people to change their lives.

Susan's journey also teaches a lesson we all need to remember. It is never too late to start over. She was 50 years old with a full plate of responsibilities. She could have stayed on the back burner forever. Instead, she chose to try, and now she has a brand-new career that she loves. Education can change a life at any age and in any job. Susan did not need a fancy office title to deserve a chance to grow - she was a custodian doing important work every day, and she had a dream worth chasing. Fort Hays State was glad to help her chase it.

To employees and everyone else reading this column: if you have a dream sitting on a back burner, know that Fort Hays State wants to help you reach it. Our employee education benefits are available to all our employees, just as they were for Susan. For all others, remember that our affordability is part of what sets us apart from other higher education institutions.

Congratulations, Susan. Thank you for spreading your love across our campus for so many years, for showing us what courage looks like, and for reminding all of us that it is never too late to become who you were meant to be.