

# Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

## Paying it Forward

Q&A with Coleen Ellis, president of Two Hearts Pet Loss Center

***Courage. Leadership. Success. They're all buzzwords if they lack purpose.  
Find your purpose, your why. Live your why. Every day.***

For pet loss pioneer Coleen Ellis, these are more than just words on a classroom wall at her alma mater, Fort Hays State University. They are also an apt description of Ellis' personal and professional lives. It was the love of her dog, Mico, that spurred Ellis to start her own business, a pets-only funeral home in 2004 – the first of its kind in the country. Today, she is president of Two Hearts Pet Loss Center, past co-chair of the Pet Loss Professionals Alliance, and current executive director for the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care. Maybe not as well-known is Ellis' involvement with her alma mater, Fort Hays State University. Since graduating, she has found ways to support the Hays, Kansas, school in ways big and small. The biggest may have just been the serial entrepreneur's December announcement of the Coleen Ellis Career Enhancement Scholarship, an annual full ride for a junior, senior or graduate student attending FHSU. We recently caught up with Ellis to talk about her college days, entrepreneurship, the importance of paying it forward and more. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

### **How did you come to select Fort Hays State University?**

I grew up in a very, very small community in Western Kansas (population 150), and Fort Hays State University was close by. It just seemed like a very natural choice to attend from a distance from home perspective, not to mention I liked the size of the university as well. As I was getting ready to graduate from high school, knowing I would be responsible for paying for my own way to college, I was being awarded more and more scholarship dollars from FHSU, so it made even more sense! To this day I do not regret that decision in the very least.

### **Tell us about your time at Fort Hays State University.**

It was the best four years of my life! I completely immersed myself in

the university and activities on campus, getting involved in clubs and extracurricular intramural sports. I became friends with many of my professors, and truly tapped into them and their experiences and knowledge to make not only my learning but my education there the best it could be. You know, there is a huge difference between the classes and the education when you're having an experience like "college." I made sure it was amazing! While I had an incredibly memorable and robust college experience, many of my scholarships had grade point average requirements so graduating magna cum laude was also something I was very proud of.

### **You graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in marketing ... what type of career did you envision for yourself?**

I didn't know what I didn't know back then. I knew I was intrigued by sales, and I loved the creative aspect of marketing. Outside of that, I didn't really have a clue what my options could be! I do remember being as anxious as the next person graduating about my first job, however I also knew I was open to the mystery of what was out there, and I was good to explore those options. From my first job of selling Bibles in the funeral industry to Forethought Life Insurance and now pet loss, my career has been very rewarding.

### **You have said that even after you graduated from Hays you felt liked you "belonged." Can you talk a little bit about being a member of a family, a tribe?**

Even though Western Kansas is representative of half of a state, that

area is almost entirely comprised of small towns, of which everyone seems to be connected, or you know someone who knows someone! Furthermore, some of my professors I had while at FHSU are still there, and the campus will always have that same familiar feel. It's the feel of "I'm home" when I step foot on those grounds. Given the size of the town and the size of the college, it's tough to not be connected or to very quickly reconnect with the staff, professors, and alumni of FHSU.

**You've also spoken about getting that first donation call as an alumni and the importance of giving back. Why was giving back so important to you?**

We grew up with a sense of philanthropy, even though we grew up without much money. My mom always taught us how important it was to give in all areas of time, talent and treasure. And, since I had done those fundraising calls as a student on campus, I knew how exciting it was when you "made a sale!" I certainly didn't want to deny one of my fellow Tigers that opportunity of being able to add to their tally sheet when they called me! While I was so proud to give even that first year as an alumnus, what I was bummed about was that I couldn't give \$100. As a caller for the fundraising calls, when you received a \$100 pledge you got to ring a bell, and everyone cheered! But I did what I could do, I think it was \$25, and I just cheered for myself!

**There is a moment when you realized that you wanted to step up and contribute in a bigger way. Can you describe what prompted your decision?**

I knew at some point I'd be stepping back from the day-to-day operations with my pet death-care business. While a fleeting thought of mine was to get more active at Fort



**Coleen Ellis with her dog Ellie. (Photo courtesy of Coleen Ellis)**

Hays State, it wasn't until I received an invitation for a social function here in Dallas where those thoughts started gelling. During this event, I began a conversation with one of the couples in attendance from campus who were very active in the foundation and in the alumni association. They were masterful in laying the groundwork for the various ways I could contribute. The more we talked, the hungrier I got to do more for the institution who gave so much to me. In one of our conversations, they shared with me the Hansen Hall initiative and the new Entrepreneur studies program. It was then I began to fully see how and where I wanted to contribute and personally focus my efforts, being an entrepreneur myself and knowing the impact a more formalized education program in this discipline could have for students.

**You had the opportunity to name a room in Hansen Hall after your dogs. Can you tell us about that?**

I am so proud of Hansen Hall and the work they are doing for the budding entrepreneurs at Hays. Hansen

Hall is a scholarship hall, providing educational rooms, labs and living space for 33 students pursuing studies in entrepreneurship. When Hansen Hall opened, I was so excited to be invited back to take part in the dedication. And I knew what I wanted for my part in financially supporting this new hall was for my dollars to support something meaningful and pointed to my mission and passion of what's important to me. Of course, that's my animals! Right now, I have two dorm rooms in Hansen Hall named for my dogs: Mico's reTreat and Harry's Home. We're ready to have a third room named for Crisco and Ellie.

I'm also very proud to have a quote on one of the classroom walls in Hansen Hall: "Courage. Leadership. Success. They're all buzzwords if they lack purpose. Find your purpose, your why. Live your why. Every day."

**You said that with the room naming you could point to something that you are incredibly proud of because it ties everything together that you are passionate about. Why was this so important?**

I think for things to be impactful, they must be meaningful. I want my legacy when I die to be my dedication and commitment to animals. Therefore, whether it's the naming of these rooms, or the teaching and mentoring I do with the students, I want it to point to my passion. And for everyone who sees those rooms or is a part of the work I do with the students, I want them to know without a shadow of a doubt, I am passionate about the pet industry, and my "why fire" is all things animals. I want that to be an inspiration for the students in demonstrating and modeling to them how important it is to find your "why fire" and to walk within that passion every day. Life is too short to not live with a fire in one's belly for something!

**You've talked how you don't want one contribution to fit all things, but rather ask "What do you want?" How did you find your way to this kind of thinking?**

I think people frequently believe monetary assistance is the only help people need. I certainly think it's one area. However, as a young student and graduate getting ready to make one's way into the world, there are so many life lessons that can be shared through coaching and mentoring.



As I matured into my career, I started to reflect on those support services I could have really used. I was incredibly blessed to be awarded enough scholarships throughout my time at FHSU where financial need was not a worry of mine. However, what I could have used was a coach, a mentor, a guide.

I don't like to believe that I have all the answers because I don't. With that, the direction I like to take with the students who turn to me for mentoring and coaching is to ask them the questions. To help them round out some thoughts, to be open to the mystery of not having all the answers right now, and to lean into these first few years out of college to find the things that rock their world, and the directions and specialty disciplines they can work toward so they too can live their why!

**It's very important for you to know where what you donate goes ... why so?**

I want to be a part of a journey. I want to watch a student take this one financial worry off their mind and now be able to concentrate on what they need to focus on for their schoolwork and the journey they are preparing to embark on with life. And I don't want that to stop after they've graduated or my time with them financially is over.

Let's face it, we all need a sounding board, we all need a coach. I don't care at what level you are in life or your professional career, we need someone in our corner who can cheer for us or who can pick us up when we've fallen. I want to be that for someone, and I want to physically watch those successes happen!

**When did you join the university's foundation board of trustees? Why?**

In 2017. I was incredibly honored to be asked to join. It was just one more way for me to step up and take on a role in a much larger way for the foundation and the larger purpose of the university. I see being a member of the board of trustees as one of the most prestigious leadership roles I'd ever aspire to. Therefore, when I joined, I immediately stepped up to be a part of the nominating committee so we can continue to bring rock stars onto the board and lead this university into a solid and successful future.

Adding to this for me, in 2018 I was selected as a FHSU Alumni of the Year, an incredible highlight for me! After that I was even more excited when the university asked me to help produce a video for fundraising for the university. The video turned out amazing, and I know it has been used in a variety of ways to raise awareness for donating and supporting the college. I'm so proud to share my passion for giving and making a difference and am honored when my alma mater approaches me to help spread this word!



**At the end of 2021, you announced the establishment of the Coleen Ellis Career Enhancement Scholarship. How did this scholarship go from a dream to a reality?**

My husband and I were finally in a position where we could financially commit to the scholarship, and I'd have the time to dedicate to the student selected. It's been fun to be asked back on campus to speak to the business classes and to take part in campus projects, but I wanted more! THIS is more! I am so excited to hopefully BE the change for someone! Throughout the years I've been honored to contribute to larger amounts to the college, but this was my way of making a single contribution and being able to point to a specific place I personally impacted.

In announcing the scholarship, you said, "I wanted to BE the change for someone! I wanted to not only pay it forward but to reach back and pull someone up!"

I love being able to pay it forward. However, this scholarship for me is more about reaching back and grabbing someone's hand and pulling them up. Giving them an opportunity for not only having a full-ride scholarship to remove the burden of tuition, room, board, books and other expenses associated with college, but to also have a cheerleader along the way. Should it be this person is then put in a position to do the same thing at some point in their life, then I was able to pay it forward through them. But I want to grab that hand and pull this person up and say, "Let's go rock this and do it!"

**What kind of student are you looking for in the inaugural recipient?**

I want someone who is dedicated to their education in a marketing or entrepreneur career path. I want someone who has made sacrifices to be doing what they are doing and know the power of hard work and commitment. I want someone who

has their eye on the prize of a rewarding career because they have wrapped their mind around all it will take in being devoted to the work needed for success. I want someone who has not had it easy in their financial world and has taken those extra steps to apply for every scholarship they can find to make this part more bearable. With all those attributes, I know this person will make sure there is an ROI with the gift they've been given, and I can imagine they'd be also gracious and grateful!

I think about if this were me, and if I was chosen as a winner of the Coleen Ellis Career Enhancement Scholarship. First, I'd be a bawling mess! And, secondly, I'd be eternally grateful for this gift of financial and physical/mental/emotional support that could truly be a trajectory change in so many areas.

**Mentorship is included in your full-ride scholarship. How important are mentors for students?**

I think mentors are incredibly valuable to students. What I believe the mystery of this is for a student is knowing HOW to use a mentor. Gosh, I could assure you if I had a mentor as a college student, I wouldn't even know where to begin with an "ask" of that person.

And that's what I tell the students. You don't know what to ask me, you just know you need some guidance. Call me, and I'll ask the questions. And, with that we can get to the heart and core of where you're struggling. Possibly it's with a resume. Maybe it's viable companies to send a resume to and look for a job. Maybe it's how to network in this world of work from home. Countless things that could be at the heart of the issue, however the student doesn't know how to put it into words.

**Not everyone can provide a full-ride scholarship, but everyone can do something. Why is this such an important message?**

I think "doing something" is such a powerful reminder that we are all in this together. As I'd said earlier, doing something does not always have to be monetarily. Be a guest lecturer at a college, or even a high school. Ask if there's a student who needs a mentor or a bit of coaching or even just support as a cheerleader. Open your business for externships or days a student can shadow a team member. There are so many other areas where people can offer their services.

I'll never forget back in my Pet Angel days (when) I was called by a pet mommy we'd just assisted. It was Take Your Daughter To Work Day and her junior high school daughter had decided after my work with their family that she, too, wanted to be a pet funeral director. She came to work with me and was given a deeper understanding of what that profession could look like. How many kids out there are wondering the same things about areas of interest they have? That's powerful, right?

**How exciting is it for you to have that opportunity to give back?**

It seriously makes my heart swell with pride, and my eyes well up with tears! My husband and I are so blessed in our world, and to be able to share that with others is almost too overwhelming. And there are times that it still feels very surreal! It's truly an honor!

**Off topic, but what was it like being a Fort Hays Homecoming Queen?**

Oh, my goodness! I love this question! I had a blast! This was yet one more way I fully immersed myself into the campus and was able to do some really cool outreach work for the university. That's what I really loved! Hosting receptions with our university president, being a spokesperson for all that was/is good about FHSU and being able to be an even bigger evangelist for the institution that I wholeheartedly love! •