

***Texas Tech Grad and Mother of Three:  
“My Life and My Family History Has Changed, All Because of One Man’s Kindness”***

**By Sondra Williamson**

Former Chancellor Kent Hance has been a one-man recruiting squad for Texas Tech University for decades, at least since he graduated with a BBA from Tech in 1965. Under his leadership as chancellor from 2007 to 2014, the TTU System broke all previous enrollment records and doubled in size, growing from two universities to four. A significant portion of that growth and Tech’s continued expansion over the past eight years has stemmed from Hance’s tireless personal recruiting efforts, one conversation and one prospective student at a time.

Much to the benefit of his alma mater, the Chancellor Emeritus is big on recruiting. And he has never met a stranger.

So, the scene that unfolded on a Southwest Airlines flight from Dallas to Austin one June day in 2016 will surprise no one who knows Hance well. The plane was still at the gate, the final group was boarding, and the crew announced the flight was full. With only middle seats remaining and all those in front of him taken, Hance saw two passengers enter the plane. One was a dark-haired young woman, petite and well groomed; the other was a big, brawny man who easily could have been a defensive lineman for the Dallas Cowboys. Clearly, it was a time to be proactive: “Would you like to sit here?” he asked Erica Flores, indicating the seat beside him.

Erica took one look at the gentleman with the kind, welcoming eyes, dapper in his sweater vest and newsboy cap, and accepted the offer. A conversation ensued that changed Erica’s life and the life of her family forever. Looking back on that day, she realizes the entire 45-minute flight was a recruiting pitch.

Hance quickly learned Erica was a 34-year-old single mother of three who lived in Dallas and had been doing economic development work for the Dallas Regional Chamber for twelve years. She had two sons and a daughter attending three different schools — Isaiah, a freshman in high school; Isaac, a middle schooler; and Layla, an elementary student. She was bright, articulate, and obviously capable.

At Erica’s request, Hance told her a little about himself, including that he was a lawyer and a former chancellor of Texas Tech University. Inevitably, he asked her where she had gone to college, and Erica said she was not degreed. Working a full-time job and caring for three children left little time for continuing education. She confessed the college question routinely dogged her, and despite her career success, she never knew quite how to answer it.

Characteristically, Hance had a solution and felt a little coaxing was in order. “Why don’t you just take one course at Tech?” he asked. “Even if that’s all you do, whenever anyone asks you where you went to college, you can always say you went to Texas Tech. You’re a Red Raider! And who knows? You might like it and keep going.”

Erica agreed, and Hance went to work. Within days, his recruiting team contacted her, and she began the admissions process. When the phone rang in those early days, it was often the Chancellor calling to ask if she needed anything, to be sure she had dotted this “i” or crossed that “t,” and generally making sure everything was on track. In fall 2016, only three months after that fateful meeting on a Southwest flight, Erica began online classes, doing her coursework on nights and weekends.

"I think my first class was public speaking," Erica said. "Online students had to submit videotapes of themselves giving speeches to prove they weren't talking to an empty room. I would wrangle up coworkers, my kids, my mom — anyone I could find to provide an audience for my videos. I had already done a lot of public speaking for my job, so I was surprised to be so nervous making those tapes for class."

Asked what made her continue her education after that first semester, Erica replied without hesitation: "First and foremost, the fact that the Chancellor believed in me was a major motivator and gave me great confidence. Plus, I'm a self-proclaimed nerd. I like learning, exercising that muscle. Before I met the Chancellor, I had checked out some online classes at other universities and found nothing interesting or potentially helpful to my career or my future. It was pre-Covid, and not much was available. But Texas Tech's distance learning curriculum was ahead of the curve; I was intrigued by the online classes offered." In fact, in its inaugural "Best Online Learning Schools 2022" list, *Newsweek* ranked Texas Tech the number one school for an online education.

The format of Texas Tech's distance learning program was also an energizing factor. A bachelor of general studies degree path, it provides challenging, rewarding options for students who need flexibility in their course of study. As an interdisciplinary degree, it is not based on a specific major or minor. Instead, each student chooses courses from three areas of concentration selected from established minors. Erica's first three areas of concentration were English, technical communications, and sociology, which eventually morphed into psychology, sociology, and human sciences.

"I just sort of got into the rhythm of it, you know? I would take a class and feel so empowered by everything I had learned that I would get super-excited about the classes available in the next round!"

In 2018, Erica left her job at the Dallas Regional Chamber to work for United way. For about two years, she paused her studies to focus on her career transition, never doubting she would resume. Then came Covid. Erica was laid off and did not work at all for about thirteen months. During that period, she resumed online classes, loading up on coursework to make up for lost time. Chancellor Hance generously provided letters of recommendation to Texas Tech's English department that helped her win scholarships allowing her to continue her studies, despite being unemployed. In December 2021, she began a new job as manager of business attraction for the Frisco Economic Development Corporation, continuing her online studies.

As the time for graduation neared, Erica emailed Chancellor Hance to say how much it would mean for him to be there. He not only arranged his schedule to attend but set aside a VIP section for her family and took them to dinner the night before. It was an emotional occasion. Although they had spoken by phone many times, Erica had not seen the Chancellor in six years. "I think it's good I got a few tears out of the way that night, so I wouldn't embarrass myself onstage."

On Saturday morning, August 6, when Erica strode across the commencement stage, she became one of more than 200,000 students to receive undergraduate and graduate degrees from Texas Tech University since its first graduation ceremony in spring 1927. But on that day, she was in a league of her own — the only one to reach out and grasp the hand of Chancellor Emeritus Kent Hance, who smiled down at her with tears in his eyes like a proud father. Dressed in the red and black ceremonial robes of a former chancellor — which Hance's grandson says makes him look "important and goofy" — Hance whispered, "Congratulations, Erica. I never doubted you for a minute. I'm proud of you."

Erica's mother sat proudly in the VIP section, flooded with emotion at seeing her daughter become the first in their family to earn a college degree. With Erica's graduation, she wrote the first chapter in a new family story. Isaiah and Isaac are Texas Tech students now, and Layla will all follow in their footsteps, each adding their own account of learning adventures, hard work, achievement and reward.

As for Erica, she plans to keep in touch with Hance and adopt a new role of Texas Tech recruiter, paying the Chancellor's kindness forward. She hopes there are other single mothers out there who think college is only a dream but will change their minds after reading her story.

"Sharing my story isn't just about me; it's about inspiring others to do what they believe isn't possible," Erica said. "And it is a legacy story for Chancellor Hance and his connectivity and kindness as a person — something his grandchildren and others will know about him for generations to come. He is a powerful man, and he has used that power for good."

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