

Daughter of fallen airman gets full college scholarship

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2009-11-25 13:55:31

FORT WALTON BEACH — Melissa Walters remembers attending a finance planning course with her husband, Howie. The Air Force tail gunner was asked if he died tomorrow, what he would want for his family. He said a home, a car and a college education for his kids.

Six years after his death, Melissa has ensured Howie's wishes will be realized.

The family reached a milestone this fall when Kalie, the oldest of four daughters, started her freshman year at the University of West Florida.

Tech. Sgt. Howard Walters, a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom, died when Kalie was 13. The last time she saw him was on her birthday, Sept. 13 when the family saw him off at the airport.

This week marks the anniversary of the MH-53J helicopter accident. The Afghanistan crash also claimed the lives of two fellow air commandos from Hurlburt Field's 20th Special Operations Squadron and two other servicemen.

Kalie was awarded a scholarship from Freedom Alliance "for being the daughter of a military hero," said a release from the organization. All of Kalie's undergraduate expenses have been covered by scholarships from Freedom Alliance and the Special Operations Warrior Foundation.

Melissa said many families who qualify for the Freedom Alliance scholarship are not aware that it exists. The scholarship is available to the children of anyone killed or permanently disabled as a result of an operational mission or training accident or who is currently certified as a prisoner of war or missing in action.

Without the scholarship, Melissa could not afford four college educations.

"It's helped a lot. We haven't had to pay for anything," Kalie added.

Though the scholarships covered dorms, meal plans, a laptop, printer and books, Kalie

says she is looking for a job to cover the fuel it takes for her frequent trips home.

The Walters sisters spent last Sunday morning baking a pumpkin pie that had little to do with Thanksgiving.

Howie always made Sunday breakfasts with the radio tuned to country music.

Since his death, the family has tried to keep his traditions alive.

“If you don’t purposely make time, it doesn’t happen,” Melissa said.

The Walters will share Thanksgiving with friends and family. Melissa said she only had one “bah, humbug” holiday, opting for dinner at a restaurant over the family traditions. Losing Howie has made the time together more important.

“I didn’t ever want that to pull us apart,” Melissa said.

She exchanged a look with her daughter. They each wiped away tears, smiled and blamed each other for the outpour.

“War took him, I didn’t want it to take my family,” Melissa continued. “I didn’t want this to be the defining moment in their lives.”

The Walters have moved from the base housing they had when Howie was alive. The staircase of their two-story home displays family photos.

Howie’s photos have free reign, displayed prominently throughout the family rooms. There used to be more of them but Melissa did not want the home to feel like a shrine.

Inspirational quotes are scribed on walls and peek out from corners – “Hope” on the side of the refrigerator, framed words of Mother Theresa on the counter, a sticker with encouraging words from Ghandi.

One quotation followed Kalie to college, “Stand up for the right thing, even if you’re standing alone.”

The messages are meant to encourage the family to be positive regardless of life’s circumstances, Melissa said.

Melissa said Howie would have kicked her butt if he saw how long it has taken her to heal.

“It took me five years,” she said. “It’s only been a year since I kind of woke up, so to speak, and thought maybe there is life without Howie.”

Her father’s death influenced Kalie’s career path.

After the crash, the avid reader found solace in Lurlene McDaniel books. The collection of novels is about kids who face life-threatening illnesses and do not always survive.

Kalie plans to earn a bachelor’s in psychology and become a child life specialist, counseling children with chronic diseases at area hospitals.

“I think she’ll be good at it. She understands what they’re going through,” Melissa said. “The loss is different but it’s all the same pain.”

Now that Kalie has started school, she thinks about her dad’s desire for her to get a degree. The Walters always made their expectations clear to the girls.

“It’s not if you are going to college. It’s when you’re going. They’ve all been brainwashed on the college idea,” Melissa said.

Kalie wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Especially now, with all of the benefits,” she said. “It would be a waste.”

Melissa agreed, “Like he died for nothing.”

To find out more about the Freedom Alliance scholarship, go to www.freedomalliance.org or specialops.org.