

Growing Legacies

A special scholarship fund helps the children of fallen Guardsmen achieve their college dreams

BY ELAINE ABBOTT



NOT FORGOTTEN Kayci Owen (*below*), who is studying archeology on a Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship, wears a constant reminder of where she lost her father.

THE ALPHANUMERIC STRING “42S WC 55792 44180” engraved on the memorial bracelet that Kayci Owen wears on her wrist means so much to her.

They are the Military Grid Reference System coordinates for Paktya province, Afghanistan, where her father was killed when she was 12 years old.

Kayci keeps a favorite photo of her dad on her nightstand. He is etched in her heart. “I miss him. I hope he would say he is proud of me,” she says, if he could talk to her now. “I want to do the best I can in life.”

On Aug. 2, 2011, Staff Sgt. Kirk Avery Owen, a member of the Oklahoma Army National Guard’s 1st Battalion, 279th Infantry Regiment, died from wounds he suffered when insurgents attacked his unit with an improvised explosive device.

Now 21, Kayci is a senior at the University of Oklahoma studying archeology. Her father would have loved that. He and Kayci liked to watch the Indiana Jones movies together, which are based on a fictional professor of archeology and sparked Kayci’s interest in the subject.

She is able to pursue her studies thanks in large part to the Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship Fund, which is administered by the National Guard Educational Foundation.

“The scholarship means so much to me,” Kayci says. “It’s incredible what they do.”

This is the 10th year of the fund, which awards college scholarships of up to \$6,250 a year to the children of Guardsmen killed in the war on terror. There are seven recipients this year, and 88 scholarships totaling nearly \$450,000 since 2011.



“The scholarship means so much to me.”

—Kayci Owen,
Daughter of the
Staff Sgt. Kirk Avery Owen

“The sons and daughters of our National Guard men and women who have been killed in the line of service to our country are the children of all Americans,” says Joseph Militano, the senior vice president for communications and public affairs at Leonardo DRS. “We are proud to sponsor the Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship Fund to send the children of America’s heroes and heroines to college, and we encourage others to join the effort to help them lead happy and healthy lives.”

Luke Guthrie, the director of the NGEF, which was established to preserve and share all 384 years of the Guard story, says the scholarship program has become the foundation’s “most important work.”

“We are humbled, that together with Leonardo DRS, we have helped dozens upon dozens of families over the past decade that have given so much to the defense of our freedom,” he says.

“This scholarship has meant the world to me,” says Kayci’s mother Tiffany. “They have taken away that burden of how do we make this happen financially, while at the same time, giving us the emotional support.”

Kayci was able to apply her education as a summer intern at the National Guard Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., handling artifacts and studying history. “I not only learned things I will be doing in my future, but also, why my dad felt called

to National Guard,” she says. “It was one of the greatest experiences I’ve ever had.”

The museum features a memorial wall with the names of the fallen. “My dad’s name is on there,” Kayci says. “It feels special he’s being honored at this place, and I got to honor him by working at the National Guard Memorial Museum.”

Kayci’s older sister Kylie, who attended Oklahoma State University, is also a recipient of the scholarship. Kylie graduated in 2018.

“The National Guard Educational Foundation scholarship holds a special place in my heart as my dad was extremely proud to be a citizen soldier and exemplified daily what service to God, family and country meant to him,” she says. “By providing this scholarship, the NGEF is helping my dad’s legacy, along with many others, live on and reach further than they probably could have ever imagined.”

Nearly 800 Guard soldiers and air have made the ultimate sacrifice since Sept. 11, 2001. The NGEF believes they left behind more than 1,000 children.

Amari Felder was only 4 years old when her father, Capt. Arthur L. Felder, a member of the Arkansas Army Guard’s 39th Support Battalion, was killed April 24, 2004, when mortar rounds hit his camp in Taji, Iraq.

Her lasting memory of him is how much he loved her. She remembers walking out of the house, and her father, standing outside waiting for her, “began to smile and sing ‘The Most Beautiful Girl in the World,’ and he was holding his arms out for me,” she says.

Now 20 years old, Amari is a junior at Spelman College in Atlanta, where she is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology to fulfill her dream of becoming an OB-GYN doctor to help women. “I want to be in the health field because I am a humanitarian at heart,” she says.

“Spelman has been my dream school since the age of twelve due to their rankings in academics and being the No. 1 HBCU [historically Black college or university] in the nation for over a decade now,” Amari says.

“I am very grateful for this scholarship and the thoughtful contributors behind it,” she says of the Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship that helps her attend Spelman.



2020 Recipients Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship Fund

Keely Schild—\$6,250

South Dakota State University
Son of Sgt. 1st Class Richard Lee Schild
South Dakota Army National Guard

Amari Felder—\$6,250

Spelman College
Daughter of Capt. Arthur Felder
Arkansas Army National Guard

Koby Schild—\$6,250

Mitchell Technical Institute
Son of Sgt. 1st Class Richard Lee Schild
South Dakota Army National Guard

John Kelly—\$6,250

University of Dayton
Son of Col. Paul Kelly
Virginia Army National Guard

Savannah Robbins—\$6,250

Mississippi State University
Daughter of Sgt. 1st Class
Christopher Lee Robinson
Mississippi Army National Guard

Kayci Owen—\$6,250

University of Oklahoma
Daughter of Staff Sgt. Kirk Avery Owen
Oklahoma Army National Guard

Devin Arnold—\$6,250

Lafayette College
Son of Staff Sgt. Daniel L. Arnold
Pennsylvania Army National Guard

For more information about the Leonardo DRS Guardian Scholarship Fund, go to the Get Involved section at www.ngef.org.

After her father’s death, Amari says, “My mom never showed her struggles, but I know it was hard on her,” adding that her perseverance and focus on education was inspiring.

“It was motivating to be in a single parent-home and not let my circumstances define me,” she says.

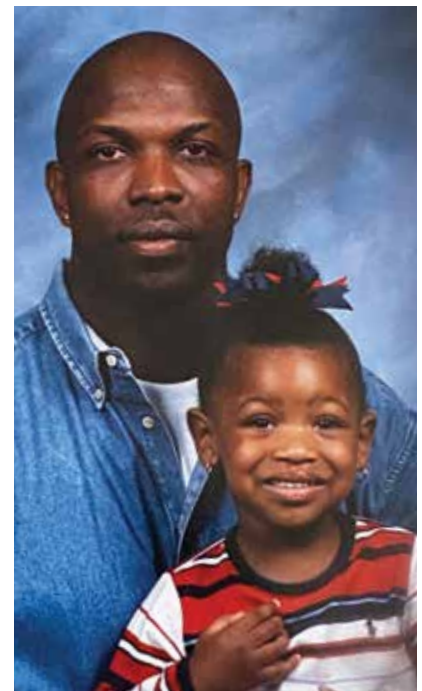
“I believe he would be very proud, Amari says, if her father could see her now. He appreciated the importance of education.

Amari keeps her father close in spirit by “the flag they gave me when he passed, his class rings, and a teddy bear with his photo.” She has photos of him on her phone — pictures of her dad with her when she was a little girl, along with her father’s military photos.

“He wanted to support his family and do something honorable,” she says of her father’s decision to serve his country.

In her own life, Amari also hopes to make a positive difference for others. She cites the Spelman College motto: “It’s a choice to change the world.”

The author is a Richmond, Virginia-based freelancer. She can be reached via magazine@ngaus.org.



DADDY Amari Felder, now 20 years old and a scholarship recipient at Spelman College, is never without an image of she and the late Capt. Arthur L. Felder.