

Occupational Therapy Major Does It Her Way

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CADET JENN ASPINWALL (4TH FROM LEFT) WITH FELLOW AFROTC CLASSMATES

Jenn Aspinwall's future has been shaped by her two brothers. One is a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. The other has special needs. She calls both men her best friends.

The occupational therapy major had started thinking about joining the military when she was in high school. Older brother Jeff is a warrant officer in the Army and she'd always wanted to be like him. But she wanted to do it her way. During her senior year, after being accepted at UNH on early admission, Aspinwall traveled up to Durham to check out the Air Force officer training program, feeling pretty certain she'd sign up.

But she chickened out.

Then, once she was a student here, every time she saw someone in uniform, she'd turn around and head in the other direction. She felt guilty, she says, for not going through with it. After awhile, she found she wasn't running away anymore. In January 2009, when she came back to campus after the winter break, it was as Cadet Aspinwall.

Now she is paving the way for future cadets as the first OT major to secure an award through the Armed Forces' Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) to complete her master's degree in the field.

"There are only 14 OTs in the entire Air Force," Aspinwall says. "I'm number 15."

Previously, the HPSP scholarships were reserved for those entering traditional medical roles: doctors, nurses, dentists, physician's assistants. While the Air Force has many graduate school opportunities for its officers, the OT field isn't one of them. And to get an OT license requires a master's degree.

If Aspinwall hadn't received the scholarship—which covers tuition, books and most fees and includes a monthly living stipend—she would have had to wait until her tour was up to pursue further education.

"Getting this scholarship was a combination of excellent leadership and luck," Aspinwall says. "I'm the luckiest person in the world."

She praises Lt. Col. Patrick Testerman, commander of the Air Force ROTC at UNH, for his leadership. The pair spent several months emailing weekly, trying to figure out a way for Aspinwall to get her advanced degree and be able to practice OT in the Air Force.

"I was shot down by everyone," says Aspinwall, who earned the Top Gun designation—the top cadet—during her field training. "I didn't want to give up but it wasn't looking good."

In the meantime, she learned she had been assigned to space and missiles operations, an area that had nothing to do with her undergraduate studies.

"It's all physics and math. I was scared, but I was willing because I knew what I'd signed up for," Aspinwall says.

Then, an opportunity presented itself when she went to a military dinner attended by Brig. Gen. Eden Murrie, director of Air Force Services. Aspinwall spoke with her about her situation, and Murrie listened without comment.

"She didn't say she could help but I think she must have taken up the case and sent it up to her bosses. And I think someone realized the problem the Air Force was facing in getting OTs," Aspinwall says. At the same time, the OTs already in the Air Force were advocating for the HPSP to be available to OTs as well.

Shortly after the dinner, Aspinwall received an email saying whomever she had talked to must have been the right person because she was being encouraged to apply for the HPSP scholarship. On Feb. 8, Testerman came into her ROTC class and announced she'd gotten it.

Once she completes her schooling, Aspinwall wants to work with returning soldiers, amputees and those suffering from PTSD.

“There are so many people coming home with invisible injuries. I really want to be part of the healing for those individuals,” she says. “There is some amazing research being done. I’m really hoping to be able to be in that sphere.”

Meanwhile, when she graduates in May, she will spend part of her summer back in Kenya, where the Air Force sent her last year to learn Swahili.

“I hope someday I’ll be able to use that experience as well,” Aspinwall says. “This is a crazy career I’m trying to carve out and I’m so excited to have the opportunity. I’d like to be able to help as many people as I can.”

Photos courtesy of Jennifer Aspinwal

360 EXPERIENCE



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