

A Sense of Purpose

Air Force major earns master's degree

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Traditionally, the stories featured in UNH Today's "The Places They'll Go" are all about where new graduates are headed. Not so for Whitney O'Connell '21. By the time she received her master's degree in May, she was already gone.

Then a captain in the U.S. Air Force, O'Connell came to UNH in 2016 as an ROTC instructor. In 2019, she was transferred to MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, which meant she had to complete her thesis remotely. Her degree is in [sociology](#).

"Luckily, I didn't have any classwork to finish once I moved," says O'Connell, adding she routinely met virtually with members of her thesis committee to provide updates on her

progress. “I wouldn't have been able to complete it without the support of my faculty. I easily could have been out of sight, out of mind, but my mentors made sure to check in often, which kept me engaged and driven despite the distance.”

O’Connell grew up in New Orleans and received her undergraduate degree — two, it turned out — from Louisiana State University (LSU).

“I've kind of wound my way through an academic web, starting with my bachelor's degree,” she says. “I majored in psychology but was so interested in so many of the topics offered by the sociology program that when I was a junior, I learned I had taken enough courses to earn a dual degree. So I actually graduated with a B.A. and a B.S.”

She joined ROTC while a sophomore at LSU after a friend who was in the Air Force ROTC there invited her to a military ball and she “just really fell in love with the structure, the community and the sense of purpose I felt.”

Her first assignment was Edwards Air Force Base in California. While there, she obtained a master's degree in forensic psychology from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology's Los Angeles campus. The blended program — part online, part in-person on weekends — met the needs of students like O’Connell who were working full time.

Next she was transferred to an Army psychological operations unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That stint saw her deploying twice to Afghanistan. During one deployment, she learned that her future husband's mother, who lived in Kittery, Maine, was terminally ill. After her marriage, the Air Force granted O’Connell a “humanitarian reassignment” so the couple could move to the area to take care of her during her last days. The move brought O’Connell to UNH.

“UNH was the closest assignment to where she lived, and I lucked out that they had an open position for an ROTC instructor,” O’Connell says. “So really, all of the stars just aligned. It was an incredible assignment for me, both professionally and personally. I knew as soon as I arrived that I wanted to take advantage of being around academia to continue my education,” she says. “I looked at both psychology and sociology to try to figure out which was the best fit. And I was just drawn to the research the professors in the sociology department were working on. I'm now in the process of applying for a Ph.D. in social psychology, continuing to blend my interests in those two fields.”

She doesn't yet know where that process will take her, but she knows the Air Force will support her.

“I'm applying to the advanced academic degree program in the Air Force. If I'm selected, my full-time job in the military will be to earn a Ph.D. — basically my dream job,” O’Connell says. “The Air Force is committed to educating our force with higher education degrees that are relevant to their career field. So for me, that falls into the social sciences, and really either psychology or sociology. The caveat to this amazing opportunity is that you only get three years to do it, including dissertation. So, I have to find a program that will allow me to work with that expedited timeline.”

On June 30, 2020, O’Connell was promoted to major. The induction was set to take place July 1, the day she was scheduled to give birth to her daughter. To avoid the conflict of events, her colleague came to her house the day before and held the ceremony with just her family.

“It was a crazy time in the middle of COVID, but definitely a date to remember,” says O’Connell, who has served for 11 years. “Every assignment I’ve had has been so fulfilling. I’ve been so lucky to have incredible mentors and people who believed in me along the way. I’m so grateful for the benefits and the lifestyle it’s provided for my family.”

And she is grateful for her time here.

“My experience at UNH was amazing,” she says. “I just can’t say enough good things about the university — about the beautiful campus, about the professors I had the chance to work with, about the CSDC, (Child Study and Development Center) where my son went from the time he was 3 months old until we moved to my new assignment in 2019, and about the students — especially my cadets. Having the opportunity to mentor our future Air Force leaders was absolutely a highlight of my career.”

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