

# UNH Manchester Announces Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts '13 Scholarship Fund

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Wednesday, January 27, 2016

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The University of New Hampshire at Manchester held a reception last night to celebrate the establishment of the Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts '13 Scholarship Fund, which will provide financial support to students who are veterans of military service.

UNH Manchester veteran students and alumni, donors to the fund, Governor Maggie Hassan, Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas and other dignitaries gathered Tuesday evening to recognize the extraordinary heroism that made Pitts, a UNH Manchester alumnus, so deserving of this honor.

"We are proud to establish this scholarship in Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts' name," said J. Michael Hickey, interim dean of UNH Manchester. "In doing so, we honor the memory of those brave men who fought with him and lost their lives in the village of Wanat."

In July of 2008, Pitts and fellow paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade were on the final mission of their 15-month deployment in Afghanistan. On July 13, a burst of machine gun fire broke the morning silence in the village of Wanat. An estimated 200 enemy insurgents launched a full-scale assault on the 48 U.S. service members occupying the outpost, lighting up the valley with small arms fire, rocket propelled grenades and hand grenades. Pitts and his unit, nicknamed the Chosen Few, were isolated and outnumbered.

Despite multiple concussions and critical wounds from grenade shrapnel in his legs and left arm, Pitts continued to fight to defend his position alongside his teammates, call in fire support and radio for reinforcements.

He lost nine brothers in arms that day.

On July 21, 2014, Pitts became the ninth living recipient of the Medal of Honor, an award that he dedicated to his fallen comrades.

"I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for all the guys that I served with," Pitts said during his remarks. "It's an individual award that represents a collective effort."

After departing the active-duty Army in 2009, Pitts went on to receive his [bachelor's degree in business](#) from UNH Manchester. Pitts delivered Manchester's 2013 honors convocation address as well as the [2015 commencement address](#) at the university's main campus in Durham.

Governor Hassan said the scholarship fund embodies Pitts' service to the country, his importance to the UNH community and his contributions to New Hampshire.

"By investing in the education of other veterans, this fund will empower others who sacrifice greatly in defense of our freedom to help climb a ladder of opportunity," Hassan said. "It will foster the sense of leadership that has made [Pitts] such an asset to our workforce and our state, and will pay off for many years to come."

Retired Major General Kenneth Clark served in the N.H. Air National Guard for more than 40 years and as the state's National Guard Adjutant General from 2004 to 2009. He said he is proud to support the fund and perpetuate gratitude to service members.

"I have a real understanding of the kinds of sacrifices that our soldiers are making. When you see a guy from New Hampshire who was involved in an awful firefight and showed incredible valor, being recognized, it's an unbelievable honor," Clark said. "People like me understand how few people like him there are amongst us."

Laurel Skiff is the senior community investment specialist at BAE Systems, which sponsored last night's reception as well as contributed to the fund. Skiff, a 2007 graduate of UNH Manchester's [Communication Arts program](#), said BAE Systems has worked with Pitts on several occasions and is proud to sponsor the scholarship.

"[Pitts] is a wonderful individual and representative for Manchester and for New Hampshire, so we're happy to partner with him on his projects and continue to support our military members," Skiff said.

This scholarship will be awarded each year to a veteran enrolled in an undergraduate program at UNH Manchester who demonstrates involvement and leadership in the campus community.

The first recipient is Goffstown native Sergeant Timothy Labonville, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 2004 to 2009. Labonville is a strong student and is active on campus, bringing the respect, service and standards he practiced as a Marine to the college. He plans to pursue medical school after receiving his bachelor's degree in biological sciences from UNH Manchester in 2016.

"Coming back to school I did not want to rest on the achievement of my time in service, and I don't often speak of it," Labonville said. "So to be honored as the first recipient of this scholarship was literally shocking and a little emotional. I feel privileged to be recognized and very thankful."

Hickey said the scholarship fund supports the college's mission to better serve the students who serve our country, and recognizes Pitts for his contributions both in combat and in the classroom.

"Following his military service, Ryan exuded quiet leadership as a student and mentor at UNH Manchester," Hickey said. "We thank him for his service to our country and to our college, where his legacy will live on through this scholarship."

Pitts' wife, Amy, said the fund is especially meaningful because college played a major role in Pitts' reintegration into civilian life.

"The University was such an important part of his life after the military, and it's an honor for him to be recognized and have something in his name that is going to give back to the school."

Pitts echoed that sentiment in his remarks, saying he hopes the fund will provide other veterans with a better path when they return home.

"Education plays a big part, it did for me when i came back, in finding that new purpose and being able to move forward in my new mission to make progress and replace what I lost in the military," Pitts said. "[UNH Manchester] played a big part in that, and I'm hoping this scholarship will do the same for the other veterans who move forward with their lives after they've given so much for our country."

The fund not only recognizes Pitts' valor and service, but also honors the memory of the Chosen Few who fought beside him.

Spc. Sergio Abad  
Cpl. Jonathan Ayers  
Cpl. Jason Bogar  
1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom  
Sgt. Israel Garcia

Cpl. Jason Hovater  
Cpl. Matthew Phillips  
Cpl. Pruitt Rainey  
Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling

As of Tuesday night, the Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts '13 Scholarship Fund collected donations of more than \$65,000. Donations to the fund are still being accepted:

- Via check, made payable to UNH Foundation with “Ryan Pitts Fund” on the memo line. Please mail check to: Maria Gudinas, UNH Manchester, 88 Commercial Street, Manchester, NH 03101
  - Online at <http://www.unh.edu/giving/>. Select “Other Fund” then specify Staff Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts Fund in the box.
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