

ATSS Foundation support helped Cody Garner reach his dream

Four-time scholarship recipient now works on Capitol Hill

By Emily Freehling for ATSSA



Living and working in Washington, D.C., has been a longtime dream for Cody Garner. The 2021 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Arkansas recently realized that dream when he moved to the nation's capital to start a job in June as a staff assistant for Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.).

Cody is getting an up-close look at the day-to-day duties that keep a senator's office running. He organizes photos the staff take of Boozman with visitors, he helps

constituents who want to have an American flag flown over the Capitol and he keeps staff apprised of who arrives at the office to meet with the senator and his team.

He said he's been drawn to work like this since he was much younger but "I never thought I'd get to do this."

In fact, when he was in high school in Batesville, Ark., he wasn't even sure college was a possibility for him.

In 2014, when Cody was 15 and a sophomore in high school, his

father, John W. Garner, died as the result of a work zone incident.

John Garner, who was 52, was working for the Arkansas Highway Department as a distributor/roller operator. While working on a steep incline, the roller began to flip, fatally injuring Garner, who died en route to the hospital.

Cody Garner's last memory of his father is being dropped off at football practice earlier that day.

"I was a teenager and I remember being annoyed that I was late," he said. "I remember my dad getting out and saying, 'Bye, son. I love you,' and me running to practice."

Later that day—around the same time his father's accident happened at 2:45 p.m.—Cody remembers feeling a strange twitching sensation in his hand.

Shortly after that, he said, "I remember somebody from work coming to the door. He was hesitant. I remember them coming back and knocking. He told my mom, 'You have to go to the hospital.'"

Cody and his mother, Sherry Garner, left quickly, but John Garner had already passed when they arrived.

"I never thought it was going to happen," Cody said. "Nobody does."

Cody, now 22, is the second youngest of five siblings and said the loss was hard on everyone.

"He was the glue that held us together," he said.

While life in the Garner household wasn't always easy, one of Cody's favorite memories of his father came shortly before his death.

"I came out into the living room and remember seeing my dad in his chair and my mom in his lap,

▲ Cody Garner, front, leans on his dad the evening of his younger brother's graduation from kindergarten.

and they are talking and smiling like they are young and in love. I always think about that memory," he said. "I always thought, 'I want to look at my wife like he is looking at her.'"

As Cody continued through his high school career after his father's death, he said he struggled with confidence. Growing up in a family where money was always tight and where none of his parents or siblings had gone to college, Cody was never sure higher education would be an option for him.

His mother told him that scholarships existed to help the children of individuals killed or injured in public service jobs such as road building and Cody began making applications.

Among the scholarships he successfully applied for was The American Traffic Safety Services (ATSS) Foundation Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship. Garner received the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship all four of his years at the University of Arkansas.

Cody was accepted into law school and applied for and received The ATSS Foundation scholarship to continue his studies. He was one of 14 students selected to receive a Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship for the 2021-22 academic year but he chose to defer law school when the chance arose to work for a U.S. senator.

The competitive scholarship program offers up to \$10,000 annually for dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism are eligible to apply for an additional \$1,000, given in honor of Chuck Bailey, a roadway safety member who died in 2002.



▲ Cody Garner, right, graduated from the University of Arkansas this spring and was accepted into law school but deferred his legal studies after getting a job with Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.) in his Capitol Hill office.

"Getting The [ATSS] Foundation scholarship was tremendous," Cody said.

With college paid for, he invested his time in maximizing his four years. He earned a double major in political science and international global studies, with minors in legal studies and agricultural business.

He also pursued internships that would propel him toward his goal of one day working full-time in Washington, D.C. Before graduating, Cody worked internships for Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), Rep. Steve Womack (R-Ark.) and the University of Arkansas Terrorism Research Center.

"The scholarship helped me to be able to focus mainly on my studies and internships," Cody said. "Without that, I would have been working a lot and I probably would not have been able to do most of, if not any, of my internships."

Cody's path also was influenced by the opportunity to attend the 2018 ATSSA Convention & Traffic Expo in San Antonio.

"That was a life-changing experience. I made friends and met incredible people who were willing to see what I wanted to do," he said.

Cody also was invited to attend ATSSA's Legislative Briefing & Fly-In in 2018, held in the nation's

capital. The chance to speak with senate and congressional representatives and to watch industry professionals advocating for roadway safety made a big impression and solidified his goal to work in Washington.

He remembers walking to dinner one night with a member of ATSSA's delegation.

"I remember telling him about my day and him saying, 'I have a feeling you're going to be working here one day,'" Cody remembers. "He was right."

As he gets settled in his new job, Cody knows that his father—who always bragged about his son's accomplishments—is looking on and smiling.

Throughout high school, college and now his professional career, he's always tried to find ways to move on from the tragedy that struck his family and take a positive direction.

"Coming from a very poor socioeconomic household, where we struggled a lot growing up—to be up here now, self-sustaining and working in a place I have always dreamed of working in—I feel I am maximizing what my father gave me and what God has given me," Cody said. //

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