

Scholarship recipient is motivated to care for others

Pirelli sisters were recipients of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship

By Emily Freehling for ATSSA



Halloween will never be ho-hum for Megan Pirelli and her family.

Megan and her sister, Kaitlyn, have renamed the fall holiday “Mark-o-ween,” in honor of their father, Mark Pirelli, a roadway worker who was killed in September 2020 in a work zone crash outside of Chicago.

“He was a Halloween fanatic,” Megan Pirelli said of her father. “He went all-out every year decorating everything.”

Megan and her sister completed the decorations their father had been working on in 2020 as a tribute to him, and plan to keep decorating every year in his honor.

“My sister and I have made it our duty to go all-out for Halloween for the rest of our lives,” she said.

The ritual helps them remember the creativity and ingenuity Mark Pirelli brought to the task of crafting zombies, clowns, werewolves and more from everyday materials like PVC pipes.

“He made everything from scratch,” Megan Pirelli said. “He could take a pile of garbage and turn it into something amazing.”

While her father’s affinity for gory Halloween décor, his pet tarantulas and his tough-guy appearance may have made him look intimidating to strangers, Megan said Mark Pirelli was “such a giant teddy bear.”

“He was just so loving and caring to everyone,” Megan Pirelli said. “He had a heart of gold.”

Caring as a career

Megan hopes to take that same caring spirit into the workforce as a registered nurse.

This spring she is completing her second year of nursing school at Chamberlain University College of Nursing in Chicago.

She was one of 14 recipients of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship awarded by The ATSS Foundation for the 2023-24 academic year. This is the third year she has received the scholarship.

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.

Nursing first appealed to Megan as a career when she was 16 and her mother, Beverly, had knee replacement surgery.

Beverly Pirelli suffered multiple infections during her recovery and Megan learned from a home-health nurse how to administer antibiotics through an IV line, how to flush out the wound and make sure everything stayed clean.

“That sparked my interest in becoming a nurse, because I enjoyed helping in that way,” she said.

Megan said she is leaning toward working as a trauma nurse and plans to sit for the certified nursing assistant (CNA) exam as soon as she is eligible so that she can work in the field as she completes her coursework toward becoming a registered nurse (RN).

In the future, she may continue her studies to become a nurse anesthetist.

Megan is preparing to enter the nursing field at a time when hospitals across the country are reporting crisis-level shortages of nurses. But the need for good nursing care hits even closer to home for her.

In September 2021, just a few months into her nursing education, Megan woke up on a Sunday

▲ Megan Pirelli, left, and her sister, Kaitlyn, were photographed with their father, Mark Pirelli, at a wedding in July 2020. It was the last event the entire family attended before his death in a work zone incident in September 2020.

morning barely able to move her legs.

"It hurt so bad even sitting down," she said. After a visit to her doctor and multiple visits to the emergency room, she was rushed into emergency spinal surgery to treat Cauda Equina Syndrome, a spinal nerve condition that can lead to paralysis if not treated quickly.

Just a few weeks after her spinal surgery, Megan received the results of a biopsy on a lump she had detected in her neck. She was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer. In November of 2021, she had surgery to remove her thyroid and 14 lymph nodes—12 of which were cancerous.

Megan had radioactive iodine treatment in January 2022, and on Feb. 4 of that year, got the call telling her she was cancer-free, although she continues to need medication to replace her thyroid hormone and regulate her calcium levels.

The nurses who helped care for her during all of these treatments made a lasting impression on Megan.

"When I was discharged after my spinal surgery, I remember the nurse saying to me, 'You are doing amazing,' and being so nice and encouraging," she said. "That's the kind of nurse I want to be. I want my patients to find comfort in me."

Family is a comfort

In the years since she lost her father, Megan Pirelli has found comfort in the closeness of her extended family, who she said came together to support the Pirellis after the tragedy.

Mark Pirelli was working on a re-striping project for RoadSafe Traffic Systems on Sept. 9, 2020, on Interstate 80 near LaSalle, Ill., when an 84-year-old man drove

a van into the construction zone. The van struck Pirelli, 47, who was standing next to his maintenance truck, and he died at the scene.

The driver, Robert Dale Bowen, was charged in Bureau County, Ill., with improper traffic lane usage. Prosecutors dropped the charge in November 2021, according to online court records.

Pirelli was working two hours from his family's Chicago-area home that day and it wasn't until three hours after the incident that an Illinois State Police trooper came to the Pirellis' home.

Megan remembers rushing to her mother's side when she heard her begin screaming on receiving the news.

"I remember my heart dropping. I was frozen," she said.

Her sister was upstairs in the middle of pandemic-era virtual high school classes when Megan went to tell her.

Extended family immediately came together, Megan said.

"They were here making sure we were OK, making sure we were eating, bringing us food every day. Without all their help and all those who prayed for us, I don't think we would have made it," she said.

When RoadSafe reached out to make the Pirellis aware of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship, both Megan Pirelli and her sister, Kaitlyn, applied.

Kaitlyn was offered the scholarship for the 2022-23 school year for her studies at Loyola University Chicago toward a biology major in the pre-medicine track.

For Megan, the scholarship has allowed her to stay focused on her goal of becoming a registered nurse, even as health challenges have intervened.

"I am able to focus on my schooling and not have to worry about working a



Top: Megan and Kaitlyn Pirelli renamed Halloween as "Mark-o-ween" in honor of their father who was a "Halloween fanatic," Megan said.

Bottom: The staff at RoadSafe Traffic Systems erected this permanent memorial to Mark Pirelli on the grounds of the company's Romeoville, Ill., location.



full-time job," she said of receiving the scholarship.

As she presses on toward her goals amid both loss and health setbacks, Megan is thankful for her sister, her mother, her boyfriend and everyone who has sent encouragement her way.

"I just thank my little prayer warriors who help me get through everything," she said. "Without them, I don't think I would make it." ///

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