

Scholarship recipient achieves nursing dream

Newly licensed RN gets first nursing job in Chicago

By Pamela Gould, ATSSA Staff



Megan Pirelli has wanted to become a nurse since her first taste of the profession at age 16 when her mother suffered complications from knee replacement surgery.

She went to college, studied nursing, graduated in September and in December passed the national licensure exam to become a registered nurse.

And at the end of April, she accepted her first job on the oncology/chemotherapy floor at Loyola University Medical Center in Chicago.

But Megan, who turned 25 in August, said she couldn't have gotten to this point without the support of the ATSS Foundation and its Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship program.

"The ATSS Foundation and the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship are more than just financial assistance, they are a lifeline to people like me, who are fighting for a better future," she said. "This scholarship didn't just change my path; it helped my dreams come true."

Above right: Megan Pirelli, center, graduated from the Chamberlain University College of Nursing in September. She was attracted to nursing while helping her mother, Beverly Pirelli, recover from knee replacement surgery. With them is her sister, Kaitlyn Pirelli.

Right: Mark Pirelli was killed in a work zone crash on Sept. 9, 2020 while working for RoadSafe Traffic Systems.



Megan's mother, Beverly Pirelli, inspired her career choice but it was her father, the late Mark Pirelli, who inspired her initial desire to work in the emergency room.

Mark Pirelli was a "Halloween fanatic" and loved creating gory décor each year, Megan, his older daughter said. "It was always blood, guts and gore for Halloween so I wasn't afraid to see anything."

She had her initial nursing sights on working in an emergency room to deal with trauma cases because of her father's influence. But that was until she found out entry-level nurses, at least in the Chicago area, don't start in that department.

But Megan only has memories of her "giant teddy bear" of a Dad. He was killed on Sept. 9, 2020, in a work zone crash about two hours from the family's Chicago-area home. He was working on a restriping project for RoadSafe Traffic Systems on Interstate 80

near LaSalle, Ill., when a motorist drove into the construction zone. The vehicle struck 47-year-old Mark Pirelli, who was standing next to his maintenance truck. He died at the scene.

Megan was living at home during what she called "a COVID year break" from college when she heard the knock at the door and was greeted by an Illinois State Police Trooper who asked to speak to her mother. When she heard her mother's distress, she rushed to find out what was going on and learned her father had been killed. She then delivered the grim news to her sister Kaitlyn who was upstairs taking pandemic-era online high school classes.

"That loss shattered my world and left me questioning how to move forward," Megan said in February to participants in the Foundation's Sporting Clays Event, one of two major fundraisers held each year as part of ATSSA's Annual Convention & Traffic Expo. "But as



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many of you know, life doesn’t stop, and I knew I had to keep going.”

She resumed her studies in May 2021, switching to Chamberlain University College of Nursing. But more hardships were ahead.

Four months into those studies, her medical challenges began. In September 2021, she was diagnosed with Cauda Equina Syndrome, a rare spinal condition that demanded emergency surgery to prevent permanent paralysis. Physical therapy followed, all as she worked to keep up with her nursing studies.

Just as she was healing from that surgery, she received another jolt: a thyroid cancer diagnosis. That meant a second surgery in November 2021 to remove the thyroid gland and more than a dozen lymph glands, followed by radioactive iodine treatment to kill any remaining cancer cells.

Through the grief of losing her father, surgeries, cancer and the demands of nursing school, Megan said “the one constant that kept me moving forward was my desire to become a nurse.”

She said that wouldn’t have been possible without the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship she received each year of her studies.

“This scholarship didn’t just provide me financial support, it gave me the peace of mind to focus on my studies while I was battling through my health issues,” she told the sporting clays shooters earlier this year. “It allowed me to continue my education despite everything that was happening in my personal life. Without it, the dream I had of becoming a nurse would have been much more difficult to achieve.”

In February 2022, things started looking up for Megan when she was declared cancer-free. Then last year she got engaged and this year she began her dream career.

She was “ecstatic” to start her first nursing position in June

and thought her own experience with cancer would be an asset in the oncology/chemotherapy unit.

Megan met Michael Chaidez in 2018 and said he and her family helped her through the difficult months and years she has endured in her young life.

As a new phase begins, she is encouraged and thankful—thankful for friends, family and the Foundation.

“The support from this scholarship made a difference,” she said, “not just in my education, but in my life.”

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Above: Megan Pirelli’s fiancé, Michael Chaidez, accompanied her to this year’s Sporting Clays Event, where she thanked the ATSS Foundation for the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarships that helped her achieve her dream career.



Left: Megan Pirelli spoke at the Sporting Clays Event on Feb. 28 in Orlando, Fla., a fundraiser for the ATSS Foundation. While there, she met employees of RoadSafe, some of whom knew her father.