

Running toward her future

Scholarship motivates student-athlete to embrace opportunities

By Andrea Russell for ATSSA



At age 13, Mary Sollars' life in the close-knit community of Rocky River, Ohio, was changed forever.

Mary's father, David Sollars, was striping lanes in a work zone near Cleveland when he was struck by a vehicle. Five days later – on April 2, 2019 – he died from his injuries.

Sollars, 54, was an employee of TraffTech and left behind his wife Shelley and their three children: Mary, now 19; her brother, Ethan, 21; and her sister, Madeline, 17, a high school senior.

Mary said her father was fun-loving, family-oriented and always "lit up the room."

"My parents would always say my favorite place in the house was in his lap," she said, admitting she was a "daddy's girl" when she was younger.

Though his job demanded much of his time, Mary said her dad was very invested in his family.

"He did so much for us," she said. He built the children a treehouse and on snow days took them to the city park for sledding. He also took them on ski trips in Ohio and elsewhere, and he was always supportive of Mary at her track meets.

And then, suddenly, he was gone.

"It happened so fast and it was a huge adjustment for everyone," Mary said. "And then the next year was COVID, so there was just so much change happening so fast."

Despite the upheaval, Mary stayed focused on her goals. She graduated from Rocky River High School in 2024 with a 4.324 GPA. And on the track, she set school records in the 200 meters, the 100-meter hurdles and the 400



relay, served as team captain and earned MVP honors twice.

Today, Mary attends Elon University in North Carolina, where she competes on the school's NCAA Division I Track & Field Team with a partial scholarship.

She is also a two-time recipient of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship, awarded by the American Traffic Safety Services (ATSS) Foundation. The competitive scholarship offers up to \$10,000 annually to dependents of roadway workers who were killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism may also receive \$1,000 given in honor of Chuck Bailey, a roadway safety advocate who died in 2002.

"I'm just so grateful that I received the scholarship and I feel so honored because my dad was so big on road safety," Mary said. "I feel like with this scholarship

and the hard work I'm putting in at school and track, I think he'd be proud."

Mary learned about the ATSS Foundation's scholarship through her brother, a 2023-24 recipient. Ethan is now focusing on the landscaping business he founded at 13 and is pursuing a firefighting career.

"The Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship is important because it is a way to honor Dave and remember his work," Shelley Sollars said. "He enjoyed his work and the fact that my children have received scholarships that represent him, I feel like that honors his life and work. He would be very proud of his children and their accomplishments."

Mary's eagerness to succeed has always come from within — and from the example her parents set.

"I'm a very goal-oriented person, so achieving my goals brings me a lot of joy," she said.

▲ The Sollars family enjoys time at Ohio's Lakewood Park. Pictured are, from left, Mary, her father David, sister Madeline, mother Shelley, and brother Ethan.

"Also, just the way my parents raised me and seeing them and how they're very hardworking people motivated me to want to make them proud and also make myself proud."

That internal drive helped guide her college decision. Though drawn to Elon because of North Carolina's milder climate, she chose the school for its welcoming community and competitive — but balanced — track program.

"I knew I wanted the balance between academics and athletics. That was extremely important to me," she said.

Now a sophomore double majoring in finance and accounting, Mary said her goal upon graduation is either to work at a major accounting firm or in wealth management. She said her first year at Elon couldn't have gone better.

"You have to [discipline] yourself because it's less class time and more schoolwork outside of class, but it hasn't been a huge adjustment because I've always been someone who likes to make my own schedule," she said.



Mary said Elon's track program provides the flexibility she sought.

"I think they have a sense of trust in us so I don't feel like it's as aggressive as some schools or other sports might be," she said.

During her first year on the team, Mary set a personal record in the 100-meter hurdles and made progress in one of the most demanding races: the 400-meter dash.

"The 400 is really physically and mentally challenging. Just running the 400, that used to feel so long to me. Now ... it's become so much easier than it used to be, I think I'm proud of that too," she said.

When she's not studying or on the track, Mary enjoys hiking, yoga and lifting weights. Travel is another passion, and she recently visited Sorrento, Italy, as part of a summer study abroad program through Elon.

"The whole experience was amazing," she said, including an unforgettable solo trip to Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius despite nerves about traveling alone. "I think my biggest takeaway is when I'm abroad, just make the

most of it and do things out of your comfort zone."

As the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship helps propel her college experience, Mary carries her father's legacy and a message of roadway safety.

"I think even before the accident I was extremely aware of work zone safety and driving safety, because I knew [my dad] was working on the roads," Mary said. "I think after the accident, I was just more aware of road safety in general ... because I realized how quickly a life-changing accident could occur, and I would just never want to inflict that on someone."

Knowing people donated to the ATSS Foundation so she could receive a Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship inspires her to continue diligently pursuing her goals.

"I think it motivates me to make the most out of college and really put in the work and take advantage of every opportunity I have." //

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Above: Mary Sollars, an athlete at Elon University in North Carolina, competes in the 400-meter hurdles her freshman year. Elon's Women's Track & Field team was this year's conference champion for the NCAA's Coastal Athletic Association.

Left: Mary Sollars visits Positano, Italy, this year as part of Elon University's Summer Travel Abroad program.

