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Main Hall to Main St.

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Connecting Campus and Community

December 2001

A father's farewell

Parent of former UM student remembers his fallen soldier

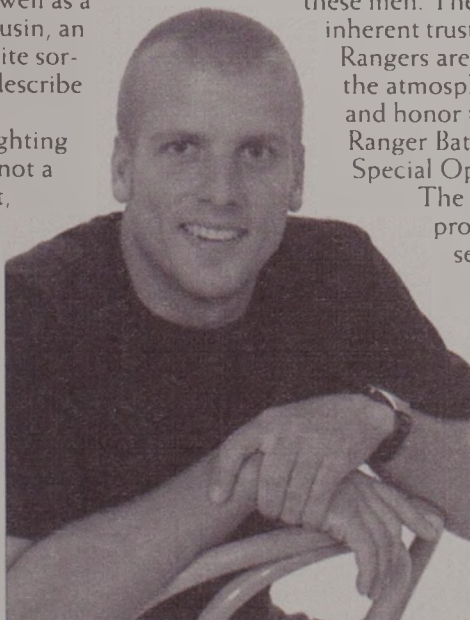
The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks sent shock waves around the world, and subsequent events have claimed one of our own. On Oct. 19, Army Ranger Kris Stonesifer, 28, was killed in a helicopter crash near Afghanistan. He was among the first casualties of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Stonesifer was a University of Montana student from August 1999 to May 2000. He majored in philosophy, maintaining a 3.5 grade-point average, and was top cadet in UM's ROTC program. He left UM one semester shy of graduation to try out for the elite Army Rangers.

In the following article, Stonesifer's dad, Ric, in his own words describes the son he lost.

Thanks for your expressions of support for my family and me. This has been the most difficult time of our lives. No one can be prepared for the sudden loss of a child. Even though Kristofor was a young man of 28 years, he was still our child as well as a brother, a nephew, a cousin, an uncle and a friend. Infinite sorrow does not begin to describe the pain of his loss.

Although Kris died fighting for his country, he was not a flag-waving ultra patriot, at least not on the surface. He had ideals like every young person, but also he had values, honor and character. He acquired these attributes well before he joined the Army, but the Army, especially the Special Operations units, seems to attract young men of similar strengths. How impressive it was to see the bond



A portrait Kris Stonesifer had taken for his mom in July 2001.

between the young Rangers the Army sent to Kris' memorial service. Since all members of Kris' battalion were deployed, 21 Rangers from the First Battalion served as his honor guard. None knew Kris personally, but all knew him as a brother Ranger because of the similar experiences they had shared.

These experiences serve to bond the young men personally as well as to the unit as a whole. When going into harm's way, it's the closeness of this bond, the knowledge that my buddy is depending on me (and I on him) that motivates these men. The teamwork and the inherent trust of their brother Rangers are the factors that build the atmosphere of high character and honor that prevails within the Ranger Battalions and other Special Operations units.

The Army's selection process for Ranger duty serves to nurture these nebulous attributes of honor and character. Much personal sacrifice goes into being a Ranger — desire must be extreme. For example, of the 219 Airborne qualified soldiers with Kris who volunteered for Ranger Indoctrination, a three-week course to eliminate those whose desire



Ric Stonesifer attaches a blue infantry rope to his son Kris' uniform at boot camp graduation.

is not extreme enough, only 21 completed the course to become Rangers. No man failed, but 199 requested to drop out; hence, the term "elite unit." The brotherhood built on shared common experiences grew. Constant training and repeated exercises with the members of the team further contributed to strengthen the concept of teamwork, of protecting your buddy.

So it was with this spirit that Kris and his squad entered into combat. Had he been on the ground with fellow Rangers, doing the job he was trained to do, he might well be here today.

The Army only became part of Kris' life in 1999 when he decided to go back to college. Since his brother had always had a positive experience in the Army, Kris decided to investigate the ROTC program at The University of Montana. As a full-time student, Kris needed the additional cash the Army could supply. As a philosophy major, Kris could graduate in two years and receive a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army Reserves. He excelled as a ROTC cadet, astonishing the instructors with his physical training scores. Academically he also did extremely well but

(Continued on next page)

Farewell — continued

concluded that he wanted to get into the special operations side of the Army. As an officer, he would have to wait until he was a Captain (about four years) before he could be considered for Special Forces; but as an enlisted soldier he could apply sooner. He decided that the Ranger Regiment was the place to start his special operations training. Suspending his college career, he enlisted, finishing Basic the week before Thanksgiving of 2000. Airborne training was next; it was completed before Christmas leave. Then, the challenge began — Ranger Indoctrination.

Sometime after his first two years of college Kris developed an interest in wilderness survival and nature. He discovered Tom Brown's Tracker School in Asbury, N.J., where Tom and his instructors teach tracking, nature awareness and wilderness survival. An explanation of the Tracker School is needed. As a child, Tom Brown was greatly influenced by his best friend's grandfather, an Apache Indian elder, medicine man and scout. The boys would accompany "Grandfather" into the woods of the Pine Barrens and learn the art of survival, how to track and the way of nature. Tom Brown has since authored 16 books and established the school to teach and perpetuate the philosophy, methods and techniques of the Apache scout. Although Kris never directly said it, I would tell people that his ambition was to become an Apache scout. I would then explain about Tom Brown and the Tracker School.

From the seven classes Kris took, he acquired the ability to move silently and unseen through the forest; he learned the means of concealment that allows one to become part of one's surroundings; he learned animal tracking and track identification; and learned survival skills: finding water and food, building shelter and fire; trapping, making tools and primitive tanning. There are debris huts from Pennsylvania to Ohio to Montana that he constructed and used that are testimony to his dedication and to his commitment to nature. He did this as a vegan vegetarian. In addition to not eating meat, vegans don't eat dairy products or food with dairy or animal ingredients (including honey), nor do they wear clothing made from animal products (wool or leather). He and his longtime girlfriend, Erin Lorch, the sister of a close high school friend, adhered strictly to these beliefs for a number of years, but due to the need to stay healthy and fit (the Army vegetarian diet was not sufficient as a Ranger), Kris reverted to the more conventional diet as did Erin for similar health reasons.

Whenever Kris came home to

Doylestown, Penn., whether to take another Tom Brown class or just to see Mom and Dad, he would spend time in Peace Valley Park honing his stalking and camouflaging skills. To his chagrin, he found that some animals in the park were two-legged. They were either very noisy, tending to frighten the four-legged variety away, or very, very, quiet, not wanting to draw attention to themselves. The quiet ones would find what they thought was a secluded spot only to be startled by the thump of Kris abandoning his tree perch or by a disembodied voice out of nowhere suggesting that this spot was taken. Direct confrontation was the least recommended



Photos courtesy of Ric Stonesifer.

Kris Stonesifer graduates from basic infantry training, November 2000.

procedure; the stealthy retreat was often better, but often proved impossible.

In the early fall of 1998, Kris took me into the mountains along the Appalachian Trail near the Delaware Gap. Halfway on our four-hour hike, he stumbled upon some wildlife communing with nature in a firebreak — a wide-open area cut in the trees to inhibit the spread of a forest fire. These were the two-legged variety in plain view of the trail we hiked on. The Appalachian Trail runs from Georgia to Maine for more than 2,000 miles and is considered very public. The indiscrete couple, focusing so intently on themselves that they didn't notice us, continued on as we passed by following the blazes on the trees that marked the trail. Kris and I wondered how many other hikers had the same encounter and resisted reaching into the couple's pickup truck and hitting the horn button. We hiked another two hours until we found a suitable campsite. Our provisions consisted of a canteen of water, a blanket and a pocketknife. Our optional provisions were cornmeal for Kris and a camera for me. I, of course, recorded the "survival" outing while he prepared ash cakes for us to feast on. About three times during the night we

awoke to forage for firewood and brush off the spiders. It was cold! There was no need to build a debris hut because it wasn't cold enough (according to my guide). Our breakfast the next morning was ash cakes again baked on the hot coals of the fire.

Where the Delaware River cuts through the mountains the trail descends to civilization — a town in this instance that had a bakery with many freshly made baked goods. This was a fine place for a carnivore, but had few tasty items for vegans. Kris found a Snapple while I devoured milk and a coffee cake made with lots of dairy. He didn't seem hungry — he must have eaten tree bark and leaves during the hike back to the staging area that morning.

This has been a quick look at a very complex, warm and sensitive young man who loved life and loved nature. He could discuss abstract philosophical concepts with university professors or drink beer with his buddy Luke and crack jokes, closing a different Key West bar every night of their vacation. He was not a fanatical, love-it-or-leave-it American. He was a quiet patriot. He was ordinary in so many ways, but special in so many other ways. He knew he was loved and was able to share his love.

We miss him so much it hurts. With time I'm told the pain will dull, but the memory will always be sharp of my 3-week-old son rooting around my biceps waiting for his Mom and latching onto my skin, sucking so hard that it raised a red welt the size of a quarter. His poor nursing mom!

I will also miss one of the most cherished sounds a father hears when his son comes home: "Hello...Dad!"

Again, thank you for your expressions of sympathy and condolence, your prayers and thoughts. We hope that Kris' spirit will live on in his new nephew, Kristofor, born on Oct. 14.

Ric Stonesifer
Nov. 6, 2001

Kris Stonesifer has received some moving tributes since his death. First, his older brother, Ric Stonesifer Jr., named his newborn son for Kris. Then Gary Herbig, a UM ROTC cadet who graduated in 1969, had music composed in Kris' honor. Herbig works on the WB television program "Seventh Heaven," and he asked the show's composer, Dan Foliart, to write and dedicate some music for the fallen Ranger. The music features Herbig on soprano sax, and it was used in a Nov. 5 episode titled "Mary Comes Home." Ric Sr. said, "The music is only 44 seconds, but it's haunting."

Ric Stonesifer Sr. lives in Pennsylvania, where he works as chief test engineer for a company that designs software for the Department of Defense. A former Navy pilot, he retired from the military as a captain in 1999 after 27 years and 3,500 hours of flight time. 🐾

Artist's giant pots adorn campus

A trio of striking ceramic vessels that grace the UM campus are both a paean to the recuperative powers of art and a son's tribute to his father.

The three elegantly massive pots crafted by Great Falls native David Pledge are anchored on the lawn next to UM's Skaggs Building, where they stand sentinel over students and other passersby, a visual respite in a landscape of brick and concrete and grass. With classical shapes, vibrant earthtones and whimsical markings, the salt-fired pots are round-bellied and tall as a woman, taller still — 11 1/2 feet — on their steel pedestals.

The pieces evolved out of Montana's Percent for Art program, which requires a fraction of the budget for state-funded buildings to be spent on public art. When the Montana Arts Council put out a call for submissions, Pledge had a vision.

He had just completed his UM

master's thesis show, which included several large-scale pots.

"I got this mental image," Pledge said. "After my thesis exhibit, it seemed natural to increase the size further to a more architectural scale."

Pledge has a history of taking calculated risks. A 1983 graduate of Great Falls High School, he emerged from a youth he describes as "misguided" into the responsibilities of marriage, parenthood and work. In 1990, he enrolled in the art program at Montana State University in Bozeman, earning his degree in 1996. He then spent two intensive months as a resident artist at Helena's famed Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts before moving to Missoula to enroll in UM's master of fine arts program.

(Continued on back page)



Artist David Pledge works with one of his massive creations.

UM photo by Todd Goodrich

Journalism Scholar

—Jonathan Weber, former editor-in-chief of *The Industry Standard*, will be UM's first T. Anthony Pollner Distinguished Professor. Weber is the founding editor of the highly regarded weekly business magazine that covered the Internet economy from 1998 until August. Before joining the magazine at its inception, Weber was technology editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, preceded by stints as a business writer in the *Times' New York* and *San Francisco* bureaus. The visiting professorship was created by the family and friends of T. Anthony Pollner, a 1999 UM journalism graduate who died in an accident near London in May. It will bring to the school a distinguished working journalist for one semester each academic year. The professor will teach and work closely with the Montana *Kaimin*, the University's student newspaper, where Pollner worked as a reporter and Web designer.

Indian Education

—American Indian Business Leaders, a group with national headquarters at UM, has received the largest gift in its six-year history — \$130,000 from Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc. AIBL will use the award to implement a financial literacy project designed to teach American Indian high school students about personal budgeting, money management, credit reports and loan applications. The AIBL project will train educators who teach on or near U.S. Indian reservations. It will adapt the skills Native people traditionally have used for resource management, as well as promote wise management of contemporary financial resources. In cooperation with the First Nations Development



Bear Briefs

Institute, AIBL plans to implement the financial literacy project early next year.

Geography Geniuses—Six UM students triumphed over teams from seven other universities to win the Great Plains-Rocky Mountain Division of the Association of American Geographers' annual Geography Bowl. The bowl was part of the division's annual meeting held in Omaha, Neb. The winning team members are Willard Gustafson of Billings, Brian Hall of Browning, Mahlon Patrick Manson and Lee Macholz of Frenchtown, Beth Hartsoch of Kirkland, Wash., and Stephanie Berg of Rock Springs, Wyo.

Forensics Support—An endowment for the University's Forensics Program has been established as a memorial to UM alumna Paula Jean Jellison. Jellison died of Hodgkin's disease in 2000. She was 38. Started by her parents, Dean and Joan Jellison of Kalispell, the endowment will support members and coaches of UM's newly reactivated Forensics Team as they prepare for speech and debate meets and travel to competitions. In only its second year back, the Forensics Team has placed in regional competitions, including taking second place at the Western States Tournament.

Library Locomotion—Big changes are afoot at UM's Mansfield Library. To keep pace with growing library holdings, collections in literature, languages and linguistics are being moved from Level 4 to Level 2. Also, Archives and Special Collections and Montana state documents are moving from inadequate quarters on Level 1 to new digs on Level 4. In addition, new shelving is being installed on several levels to accommodate the growing holdings. (The total number of items owned by the library has passed the 1.2 million mark.) For regular updates of library activities and construction, visit the Mansfield Library Web page at www.lib.umt.edu.

Helping Hearts—UM Office of Public Safety personnel completed training this month that gives them a better chance to help students, visitors to campus and UM staff and faculty members in emergency situations. "All officers are now certified to use the AED (automated external defibrillator), a device that comes into play when someone has a heart attack," said Kenneth Willett, Office of Public Safety director. An AED is a portable device about the size of a laptop computer that analyzes the heart's rhythm and, if necessary, tells the user to deliver a shock to a victim of sudden cardiac arrest. The shock, called defibrillation, may help the heart to re-establish an effective rhythm of its own. UM's Curry Health Center and the Office of Public Safety recently purchased UM's first AED, Willett said. He is working to get financial support to purchase more for the University.

UM Calendar

Holiday—Dec. 25, Christmas Day, UM offices closed.

Basketball—Dec. 28, Lady Griz Holiday Classic with UM, Idaho, St. Louis University and Providence. Idaho vs. St. Louis University, 6 p.m.; Montana vs. Providence, 8 p.m. **Dec. 29**, consolation game, 6 p.m.; championship game, 8 p.m., Adams Center. Call 243-4051 for tickets.

Basketball—Dec. 30, Grizzlies vs. Loyola Marymount, 2:05 p.m., Adams Center.

First Night Missoula—Dec. 31, events all day, University Theatre. Call 549-4755 for ticket and other venue information.

Holiday—Jan. 1, New Year's Day. UM offices closed.

Intersession Courses—Jan. 7-25, Monday-Friday.

Meeting—Jan. 10, Clark Fork Chapter of the Montana Native Plant Society, 7:30 p.m., Gallagher Building L114. Learn about "Vegetation Restoration" with Peter Kolb, extension forester. Free and open to the public.

Basketball—Jan. 11, Lady Griz vs. Eastern Washington, 7:35 p.m., Adams Center.

UM Vocal Competition—Jan. 12, upper division music majors and minors, 7 p.m., Music Recital Hall. Call 243-6880 for information. Free and open to the public.

Basketball—Jan. 12, Lady Griz vs. Portland State, 7:35 p.m., Adams Center.

Basketball—Jan. 18, Grizzlies vs. Weber State, 7:35 p.m., Adams Center.

Performance—Jan. 19, "Winterfeast: A Performance for the Senses," an evening of performances by cancer survivors, their families, friends and health care providers, 7-9 p.m., University Theatre. For more information, call 549-5329 or e-mail livart@montana.com.

Basketball—Jan. 19, Grizzlies vs. Idaho State, 7:35 p.m., Adams Center.

Holiday—Jan. 21, Martin Luther King Jr. Day. UM offices closed.

Basketball—Jan. 25, Lady Griz vs. Northern Arizona, 7:35 p.m., Adams Center.

(A full listing of UM calendar events can be found online at www.umt.edu/urelations/calendar.)

Campus Art — continued

After years of working in various artistic media, he had found his calling in ceramics.

"Going to college changed my life," he said. "It turned my life around. Finding something to be passionate about really made a difference for me."

Still, he battled constant doubt. Was he wasting his time chasing art degrees? Would he be better off quitting school and working full time?

"Sometimes it seemed ridiculous — I had a kid to support, bills to pay — but then I'd sell a pot and it would reaffirm what I was doing. It's a vote of confidence."

His pots now are in collections across the country. One of his biggest fans is Maggie Mudd, director of UM's Museum of Fine Arts. Pledge pots from the museum's permanent collection adorn a number of UM offices.

"We have bought quite a few of his things," Mudd said. "He's immensely talented — he has a feeling for clay and the wheel that is just remarkable. He has as refined an aesthetic as I've seen in a potter who throws in a traditional vein, and yet he does something that is not traditional."

"There's a congruence of materials and concept," she added. "His ideas and his ability to work the material are matched, which is really the definition of a masterwork. All of it works together to produce exquisite pieces."

Pledge's work has been shown at the Archie Bray Foundation and the Museum of the Rockies and will be in an upcoming exhibit at Missoula's Sutton West Gallery. Last year, his entry in the Strictly Functional Pottery National brought home the Best of Show award.

He humbly shares the credit with his mentors: Josh DeWeese, director of the Archie Bray Foundation; UM art faculty members Beth Lo and Stephen Connell; and UM Professor Emeritus Rudy Autio.

Earning his MFA degree in 1999, Pledge stuck around UM's art department in order to create the pieces for the Skaggs Building, which houses the School of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences.

The committee that selected his work included the building's architect and pharmacy school administrators.

"It had broad public appeal," said Lori Morin, pharmacy assistant dean for student affairs. "We liked the fact that it was unique and different, and we had a small piece [of Pledge's] in our office that we liked."

After his proposal was selected, Pledge began the process of creating the enor-

mous pieces, which pushed the limits of traditional pottery. He started by building custom "bats" — circular trays that fit on a potter's wheel — reinforced to hold 350 pounds of clay. He made the pots themselves in "coils," sections of clay carefully joined to one another. The pots were so heavy it took four men to move them.

"I tried to make them as large as I could and still fit them in the kiln," he said.

After the first firing — in a soda kiln Pledge built while in school — the pots were glazed and fired again before being installed in spring 2000. They rest on rectangular steel pedestals, which were powder-coated for an enamel-like finish, and bolted into concrete slabs.

Reminiscent of Japanese temples, Chinese porcelains and Greek urns, the unusual sculptures are a captivating diversion from the backdrop of brick buildings and Mount Sentinel. Although he didn't plan the vessels' pharmaceutical symbolism or the way their colors perfectly complement their surroundings, he did envision their visual impact.

"Public art is a mental break," Pledge said. "You're walking along and it interrupts your thought process for a minute."

Reflecting on the installation, he said it is an honor to have his work so publicly displayed. And, he pointed out, it is another layer in his family history, since both his parents also graduated from UM. His mother, retired high school teacher Vivian Pledge, still lives in Great Falls, and his father, businessman W.J. "Bill" Pledge, died in 1990.

After his father's death and his own painful divorce, pottery became a refuge for Pledge. He threw himself into making pots, he said, and because it got him through a tough time, he felt he owed a debt to the field. With his majestic display at UM, perhaps that debt has now been repaid.

"If I had the option of dedicating it to someone, it would be my dad," he said. "He died before this project got going, but I thought about him a lot while I was working on it."

Pledge now is in the process of setting up a home studio in Missoula, where he plans to stay for at least a few more years, until his daughter, Ashley, graduates from high school. He pays the bills with a combination of art, cooking and landscaping jobs, and hopes he eventually will be able to focus full time on pottery.

Mudd awaits that day, too. "I really look forward to the future of David Pledge because I think he's only just scratched the surface of what he's going to be able to produce. Over time I think we're going to hear a lot about him." 🐾

—Patia Stephens
University Relations News Editor



The University of
Montana

Main Hall to Main Street is published by University Relations at The University of Montana. Send questions, comments or suggestions to Cary Shimek, editor, 330 Brantly Hall, Missoula, MT, 59812, or call (406) 243-5914. Photos are by Todd Goodrich, Brenda Day, Rita Munzenrider and Patia Stephens are contributing editors and writers. The newsletter is online at www.umt.edu/urelations/MainHall.