

Unexpected scholarship helps make dream come true

By Andrew Setterholm

PINEDALE – College is on the minds of many of Sublette County's recently graduated high school seniors. As the school year wound to a close, visions of the next step ran wild. For some, the option to continue a post-secondary education was a recent choice. For others, though, it was a goal aspired to for longer, taking concentration and focus through years of secondary school.

For Pinedale senior Keira Peterson, who graduated with her class last Friday, pursuing a degree at the University of Wyoming (UW) is part of a bigger goal, one that she's held on to for the duration of her young adult life.

"It's been my childhood dream to go to the University of Wyoming," Peterson said in a recent interview with the *Roundup*.

That dream didn't come without challenges, though.

Born in Jackson and raised in Pinedale, Peterson's life started on a meandering path when she was in eighth grade. Midway through the school year, her family moved to Arizona. After a year in the Southwest, the family changed locale again, this time heading to Portland, Ore.

While in Portland, school counselors and advisors tended to push students toward Oregon State University or the University of Oregon. Peterson was determined to get back to Wyoming and head for UW. She even had a program in mind, and a career planned after that.

The family returned to Pinedale where Peterson finished out her senior year. Despite jumping between schools in different states, her goal never wavered, though almost everything else in her life did.

"My dad was addicted to meth most of my childhood," Peterson explained, composedly. "He ended up being incarcerated. I want to use that to help. I want to be a counselor for kids with addicted parents. I'm using what was in my past to help society."

While juggling a challenging home life, school, and often work on the side, Peterson kept her eyes on her goal of getting to UW. Like many of her peers, she pursued a Hathaway Scholarship to make her college aspiration a reality.

Peterson's path was jolted again, though,

when she found out she was ineligible for the Hathaway. Not having stayed in one school for her entire high school career, she graduated a half credit short in science and one point too low on the ACT to meet the scholarship requirements.

Peterson decided one piece of bad news was not going to derail her dream. Even if it meant shouldering the difference in debt, she was going to UW.

Working with Pinedale and Big Piney high schools college advisor Alex Edwards, a new opportunity popped up. Susan Thomas, co-founder of the Craig and Susan Thomas Foundation with her late husband, the Wyoming senator, visited Pinedale to discuss a scholarship opportunity offered through the foundation.

The Thomas Foundation scholarship provides assistance for 14 Wyoming students each year and one of the main eligibility criteria is that the student is not Hathaway-eligible.

"I immediately thought of Keira," Edwards said, after meeting Thomas and hearing about the scholarship opportunity. "Keira was not going to let anything stop her from achieving her dream of going to UW, even if that meant taking out more student loans. I knew this scholarship would help her pay for it without going further into debt."

Peterson and Edwards worked quickly, with just a week to meet the deadline for Thomas Foundation applications. On Wednesday, May 22, Peterson got a phone call from Thomas.

"Susan called me personally to congratulate me [on receiving the Thomas Foundation scholarship]. She told me it was her personal cell phone and to save the number. I was really surprised," Peterson recalled.

As excited as Peterson was to be receiving the financial aid that would help her realize her dream, Thomas was just as excited to have found such a perfect candidate for her foundation to support.

"I'm very excited about her," Thomas told the *Roundup*. "She is one confident, capable young lady. She's the kind of person we look for, who has been dealt a tough hand, but she's ready to go on."

With the scholarship in hand, Peterson



Andrew Setterholm photo

Keira Peterson is headed to UW to pursue a degree in social work and psychology, though it hasn't been an easy route to get there.

will head for UW this fall to begin her undergraduate degree in social work with a minor in psychology. She'll also have Thomas as a personal mentor checking in on her progress, part of the unique package offered by the Thomas Foundation.

"I'm excited," Peterson said, looking ahead. "A little bit nervous, but excited. It's just a change."

She'll head on to college with the support of her friends, family and the people she's met along the way.

"Keira's life goal is to help people so that

the world can be a better place – if that isn't the greatest goal in the world, I don't know what is," Edwards said, a quote she used in her recommendation letter for Peterson's Thomas Foundation application.

Considering her dedication and perseverance to reach this goal, there is little doubt Peterson will tackle her education at UW with the same passion, and come out ready to make a difference in the world. ■

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