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FALLEN HOUSTON SOLDIER MEMORIALIZED WITH NATIONAL THANKSUSA SCHOLARSHIP

First Recipient of the Cpl. Tomas S. Sotelo Jr. Award also a Houston Native

Washington, DC -- October 9, 2013 -- Two Houston natives were honored in the nation's capital last month at the annual ThanksUSA Treasure Our Troops gala. There was hardly a dry eye in the audience.

ThanksUSA awards scholarships to the families of U.S. servicemen and at its 2013 gala, the organization awarded the first scholarship in the name of Corporal Tomas Sotelo Jr. who went straight into the Army from Houston's Reagan High School. Corporal Sotelo was just 20 years old when he was killed in one of the first IED (improvised explosive device) attacks in Iraq in 2003.

The young gunner served with Army Lt. Col. Lanier Ward who was wounded in the same blast but survived and returned to duty despite requiring more than 20 operations. Colonel Ward, who was also honored at the event ([link](#)), is the inspiration behind the creation of ThanksUSA.

Ward announced the first "Corporal Tomas Sotelo Jr./ThanksUSA Scholarship" to fellow Houstonian Caitlyn Mitts, a junior studying Forensic Science at Texas A&M University. She is the daughter of the late Staff Sgt. Charles Mitts of the Air National Guard, who passed away after a Blackhawk helicopter crash during a training exercise at Texas A&M four years ago.



ThanksUSA scholar Caitlyn Mitts, Ms. Benancia Sotelo and Col. Lanier Ward together as a Caitlyn accepts a scholarship in memory of Cpl. Tomas Sotelo Jr., U.S. Army.



View of the 2013 ThanksUSA Gala at the Newseum in Washington, DC.

Colonel Ward told the audience about the deadly attack that took the life of Sotelo. "Wherever I went, Cpl. Sotelo and his crew were there in over watch as my guardian angels." In June 2003 he said, "A blast ripped through the stillness and I lost one of my angels, the army an incredible soldier, the nation one of the best of its youth. And for his family, a loss that continues to defy description." With Cpl. Sotelo's mother Benancia Sotelo also on the stage for the award presentation, Caitlyn's voice wavered as she talked about the losses felt by so many military families and expressed her appreciation for the scholarship, "I feel very thankful and blessed because without this I wouldn't be able to go farther into my college career and everything that I want to do," she told the ThanksUSA audience at the national Newseum building just blocks from the Capitol.

Ms. Mitts plans to become a medical examiner and pursue a career with the FBI, in honor of her father who at one time was a Federal Air Marshal engaged in counter terrorism efforts with the FBI.

Ms. Mitts' scholarship is one of more than 3,000 ThanksUSA has awarded nationwide totaling almost \$10 million since the charity's inception in 2005, when two young teenage girls named Kelsi and Rachel Okun were inspired by their neighbor, Colonel Ward, and founded the organization. Each award provides a \$3,000 scholarship based on financial need, for dependents of military personnel.



Caitlyn Mitts with other ThanksUSA scholars recognized at the 2013 ThanksUSA "Treasure Our Troops" Gala, Hannah Solem (left) and Bennett Grooms (right).

– 30 –

About ThanksUSA

ThanksUSA is a non-partisan, charitable effort to mobilize Americans of all ages to "thank" the men and women of the United States armed forces. The organization provides college, technical and vocational school scholarships for the children and spouses of active-duty status military personnel. For more information, visit www.thanksusa.org.