Navy family member benefits from new STEM program

A new national program, Pathways for Patriots, is focusing on helping military families fill the gap in qualified applicants in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math, otherwise known as STEM, and one of its beneficiaries is a Virginia Beach Navy family member.

The Pathways for Patriots program pairs corporations that are struggling to hire STEM workers with military spouses and family members who are interested in pursuing post-secondary degrees, certifications and careers.

It is a program of ThanksUSA, 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 to the children and spouses of military personnel. Since 2006, ThanksUSA has awarded nearly 4,000 scholarships for a total value of $12 million. Pathways is aimed at helping these scholars find careers in industries with employment and talent gaps.

With the help of a Pathways scholarship from ThanksUSA, Nato Ebreo is a 19-year-old mechanical engineering student at Virginia Tech University and the daughter of a retired Navy Chief Nato Ebreo of Virginia Beach. She is interested in a career in military aviation after an internship with GE Aviation. Natalie credits her father and his career for inspiring her major.

Nato Ebreo immigrated from the Philippines to the U.S. when he was 19 years old and immediately joined the U.S. Navy to thank the country that was offering him such a great future. He became an electrician in the Navy and rose to the rank of Chief, retiring after 20 years. Natalie has two siblings, also focused on succeeding at college, and her mother, Catherine, is a nurse.

Natalie was featured on March 7 at an event on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. that honored military families.

"Your generosity has made a profound impact on my life and my future," Natalie said. "The ThanksUSA scholarship has provided me the opportunity to join organizations and broaden my horizons in college. I have grown so much as a result and would like to sincerely thank you once again for your kind consideration and support!"

College affordability is now one of the greatest burdens facing military families.

According to ThanksUSA:
- 2.9 million military family members in U.S. don't wear the uniform but "serve" too
- 560,000 service members claim 1.1 million children as dependents
- There are more than 100,000 military children ages 17-22 in active-duty households
- Service members have received below-average pay raises for the last three years, compared to the private sector and most military families depend on a single income

- Benefits for service members have dwindled in 15 years of a war still being fought
- Military spouse unemployment is calculated, at the high end, at 21 percent compared to 4.4 percent for civilian spouses
- Many spouses who are working are underemployed or earning less than 20 percent of the average of their peers with the same major or occupation.

Kevin Schmiegel, president of ThanksUSA and the architect of the Pathways for Patriots campaign, is a retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel and the founder and former executive director of Hiring Our Heroes.

"With corporations struggling to find skilled workers and fill jobs in disciplines such as science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), nursing and hospitality management, Pathways for Patriots will provide pipelines of talent.

Natalie Ebreo was honored on March 7 at the Pathways for Patriots Reception on Capitol Hill. She is pictured at the reception with Congressman Scott Taylor.

From ThanksUSA