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Though Collin was too young to remember his father's service in the U.S. Navy, it helped pave the way for his college education at Gardner-Webb, where he would find a community to strengthen and support him in the wake of his father's untimely death.

When Collin Helms thinks back on his childhood, he remembers two distinct phases. In his early childhood, his father—a former U.S. Navy Corpsman who then contracted with the Navy as a biomedical engineer—was healthy and involved.

“He loved sports,” Collin remembers. “He coached every one of our baseball, basketball and soccer teams that he could.”

As a teenager, though, Collin's father began battling a disability that forced him in and out of Veterans Affairs (V.A.) hospitals. The sheer amount of time and energy involved in his treatment forced Collin to be more independent, to take on more responsibility in support of his father.

“I didn't grow up on a base or deal with my dad being deployed,” Collin says, “but I definitely experienced what life is like for veterans post-service.”

While his father's involvement with the armed forces was increasingly limited as time passed, he remained proud of his service, attending veterans events with Collin's grandfather, who served in the U.S. Air Force.

One source of pride for Collin's father was that his service provided dependent benefits for Collin's education. Little did they know that the school where Collin would apply those benefits would end up sustaining him through one of his life's most difficult seasons of grief.

Gardner-Webb actually wasn't Collin's first choice, but just weeks before starting college, he changed directions.

“It's difficult to explain,” Collin says. “I just felt convicted that I had been approaching this huge decision based on what I wanted and not on what God wanted for my life.”

Now thriving at Gardner-Webb, Collin says he could not have made a better choice.

“The sense of community here is just incredible,” he says. “We have amazing, qualified professors who not only teach us in the classroom but invite us to share our goals and aspirations outside the classroom. We have a campus full of people of faith who genuinely care about knowing God more deeply and growing spiritually. It’s just an amazing community.”

Sadly, that community manifested itself most powerfully for Collin when tragedy struck. During the summer after his sophomore year, his father passed away, having never been physically able to visit campus and see his son at college.

“No other university would have gone to the lengths Gardner-Webb did to support us,” Collin insists. “It was summertime, but I still received hundreds of emails from faculty and staff saying they were praying for me. The campus ministers came to his funeral. We even received flowers from Dr. Bonner and Mrs. Flossie. There is just no other place where people would have cared for me like this.”

With every year, Collin says, his sense of belonging at Gardner-Webb has only grown deeper. “I really feel like it comes down to three words—family, community, and home. I think those are things that any military dependent can appreciate. Gardner-Webb just feels like home.”

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