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FLYING HIGH: Brad Fitzpatrick, a U.S. Coast Guard aviation survival technician, was among 28 students receiving assistance from a \$1 million fund commemorating Keiser University's 30th anniversary. Photo courtesy Brad Fitzpatrick

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Bravery, service earn student a scholarship

By Beth Feinstein-Bartl

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Reading through scholarship applications, Belinda Keiser noticed one resume that didn't just stand out. It soared.

The qualifications listed by Brad Fitzpatrick, an aviation survival technician in the U.S. Coast Guard who won a medal for saving lives in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, quickly earned him a spot among 28 students receiving assistance from a \$1 million fund commemorating Keiser University's 30th anniversary.

Fitzpatrick's feat of bravery in helping airlift nearly two dozen people out of storm-ravaged New Orleans went beyond the criteria for leadership and promise, said Keiser, the school's vice chancellor of community relations and student advancement.

"I was touched by his compassion for others and military service," said Keiser, who also served on the scholarship selection committee.

The university announced its slate of winners from across the state in August. Fitzpatrick attended an official presentation ceremony in December for recipients from Broward County.

He said the full tuition scholarship will allow him to continue studying for an associate's degree in criminal justice.

Fitzpatrick began taking online courses in 2006 through Keiser University's main campus in Fort Lauderdale. But he had to withdraw last year because of a lack of money. The scholarship allowed him to re-enroll this fall.

Now, he said, he can realize his goal of getting a diploma. His dream was initially put on hold after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when he quit the University of Maine at Orno in 2002 to enroll in the Coast Guard.

"I was watching news reports of the tragedy, and it put some perspective on my life," said Fitzpatrick, 26. "I felt it was my obligation to do something for my country."

Fitzpatrick lives in Coral Springs with his wife, Shannon, an attorney. He serves at the Coast Guard Air Station in Opa-locka. Fitzpatrick's job as an aviation survival technician often involves being lowered into storm-tossed seas by a cable attached to a harness wrapped around his wetsuit. He also has made free-fall jumps into the ocean.

Entering New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was different. "I had never seen a city with that much devastation," he said.

Fitzpatrick said the aircraft had to weave between trees, debris, homes and downed power lines. He was able to pull 28 residents from their homes, earning the Coast Guard's honor for heroic achievement during aerial flight.

"The parents were willingly passing their children to me through windows," he said. "I could see mothers with tears in their eyes. They were so grateful to us for being there. When I signed up for this job, this was a shining moment for me, to have the opportunity to help people and save lives."

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