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TOP STORY

WKU ROTC honors alumnus killed in Afghanistan

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Evelyn Smith, 5, the granddaughter of Western Kentucky Army ROTC Al the newly-renovated Western Kentucky University Army ROTC cadet lounge made bourbon barrel flag made in honor of 1st Lt. Eric Yates, a 2008 WKU alumnus who was killed in Afghanistan on September 10, 2010, at the end of the ceremony naming the lounge in Yates' name. (Photo by Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

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SLIDE SHOW:
Renovated
WKU ROTC
cadet lounge
opened in
honor of
alumnus killed
in Afghanistan

Every day, Kathy Yates does something to honor the memory of her late son, 1st Lt. Eric D. Yates, a 2008 Western Kentucky University graduate who was killed in action while in Afghanistan.

After his death in 2010, it meant creating a scholarship in Eric Yates' name, so far granting 21 awards of \$3,000 each to support WKU Army ROTC cadets in their studies.

On Tuesday, she attended a ribbon-cutting that celebrated the renaming of the ROTC program's newly renovated cadet lounge in honor of Eric Yates. Speaking to students and ROTC program staff there, she hoped to convey who her son was and how much WKU meant to him.

"He was curious about the world ... and he truly cared about the world," Kathy Yates said of her son, who was 26 when a blast from an explosive device killed him while on patrol in Afghanistan.

“We miss him so much,” she told the Daily News.

Kathy Yates described her son as a quiet, thoughtful man who had a vision of who he wanted to become. After serving in the Army, he planned to eventually go into politics and possibly serve in Congress. But as a certified social studies teacher and a lover of history – Roman history, in particular – Eric Yates also wanted to teach.

Eric Yates also loved bourbon. When he wrote his own eulogy to his family – as service members are often directed to do before going into combat – he made a point of writing that “liquor is better than beer” as one of his parting pieces of advice.

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After he was killed in action Sept. 18, 2010, the funeral drew a long line of mourners, with a visitation that was extended into a second day to accommodate them all. Some didn't even know Eric Yates but were drawn to his story, his mother said.

"It was just the community," that showed up for her son, Kathy Yates said, describing the awe she experienced at the time.

On Tuesday, WKU ROTC students, program staff and members of the Yates family filled the student lounge in Diddle Arena.

The highlight of the event: the unveiling of an American flag assembled from the staves of a Woodford Reserve bourbon barrel, which was Eric Yates' favorite bourbon.

Created by Cruise Customs, business co-owner Chris Cruise said he initially offered to donate the flag when Kathy Yates ordered one specifically for the new student

lounge in the WKU ROTC offices, but she wanted to personally commission it as a way of honoring her son.

“I just love the genuine nature of wanting to honor her son in that way,” Cruise said. “You just could tell her was a special guy.”

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

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