Arnoldsen Scholarship keeps student’s spirit of giving alive

There are few events in life—if any—that parallel the grief of losing a child. Several scholarships at Nevada have been created by grieving parents and friends as a way to carry forth their child’s memory and find meaning in the midst of tragedy.

In 1993, Aaron Arnoldsen was in his junior year at the University when he was killed in an accident a few blocks from campus while returning from a Nevada basketball game. Aaron’s Sigma Nu fraternity brothers, Mike Dillon ’94 (political science) and Ty Windfeldt ’95 (health science) approached the Arnoldsens with the idea of hosting a memorial golf tournament each year, with the proceeds going to a scholarship endowment in Aaron’s name.

“When Aaron passed in 1993, my husband, James, wished to do something in his memory,” says JoAnn Arnoldsen, Aaron’s mother and wife of the late James Arnoldsen ’67 (social psychology). “Mike and Ty got together and quickly came up with the idea of the tournament—it fit perfectly with Aaron’s spirit of giving and zest for life.”

Since 1994, the Aaron Arnoldsen Memorial Scholarship fund has awarded more than $80,000 to 76 Nevada students, and the annual Aaron Arnoldsen Memorial Golf Tournament has become one of the area’s most popular and enduring charitable events. Now in its 18th year, the scholarship committee still includes Aaron’s immediate family, including his younger sister Alisa Armon ’96 (management), and Aaron’s friends from Reno High School and the University.

Mike Dillon recalls brainstorming with Windfeldt about the tournament and scrawling the idea down on a cocktail napkin.

“We had no idea how successful the tournament would become,” Dillon says. “Aaron’s family started the endowment, and this tournament is about their wishes and their goals of supporting young Nevadans who need a little extra help in obtaining a world-class education.”

Arnoldsen Scholarship recipient Jeanette Drisdale, Class of 2012, says the story behind the scholarship has deepened its significance.

“The Arnoldsen family has gone through so much, and it makes it that much more important that I live up to the scholarship and Aaron’s legacy,” says Drisdale, a community health sciences senior.

Jenn Emkjer, Class of 2012, says receiving the Arnoldsen Scholarship has encouraged her to “pay it forward.” Last year she was the lead organizer for a major blood drive in Reno, and in December, she helped raise $1,000 for local children and families who receive assistance from the Children’s Cabinet.

“Words cannot express how appreciative or thankful I was, and still am, for this scholarship,” Emkjer says. “I found out more information about Aaron Arnoldsen’s family and the hard work they put into raising funds to provide scholarships for students, and let’s just say I truly am moved by what kind-hearted people they are.”

—Roseann Keegan

To learn more about supporting student success at the University of Nevada, Reno, please contact Keiko Weil, ’87, director of donor relations, (775) 682-5964 or kweil@unr.edu.