

New scholarship honors helicopter rescue program pioneer

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College of Engineering Website
Posted: January 12, 2023



(from left) Pilot Col. Bob Orr, nurse Jean Reid and trauma surgeon Dr. Stuart Roberts stand in front of the first Army National Guard helicopter used in 1967 to transport and treat accident victims and critically ill patients to The Ohio State University hospital.

Prior to 1967, people had a better chance of surviving a serious injury in the jungles of Vietnam than on U.S. highways, said Biomedical Engineering Professor Cynthia Roberts. That began to change when her father, Dr. Stuart S. Roberts, developed the world's first hospital-based medical helicopter rescue program at The Ohio State University.

Professor Roberts and her husband, Dr. Robert Small, made a \$100,000 gift to establish the Stuart S. and Letitia Roberts Flight and First Responders Education Scholarship. It honors her father's pioneering efforts to create the helicopter rescue program in collaboration with The Ohio State University, Ohio Highway Patrol, Ohio National Guard and former Ohio Governor James Rhodes.

The scholarship supports students pursuing a flight education degree—with a preference to candidates interested in first responder training or helicopter rescue—as well as majors in biomedical engineering, aerospace engineering, and electrical and computer engineering.

Seeing a need to quickly transport and treat accident victims and critically ill patients, in 1967 Dr. Roberts arranged to use Army National Guard helicopters and pilots to transport patients from accident scenes or remote community hospitals to The Ohio State University hospital, Professor Roberts explained. Her father, a trauma surgeon and Ohio State College of Medicine professor, also coordinated volunteer surgeons and other medical personnel who provided in-flight treatment.

The rescue program was based at The Ohio State University Airport.

“My dad said if you take the lessons of battlefield medicine—which is number one, instant treatment, number two, rapid transport—and apply those to civilian trauma, it would revolutionize survival. And it did.” explained Roberts. “It’s an incredibly important contribution.”

Dr. Roberts took a leave of absence from Ohio State in 1970 to voluntarily serve in Vietnam as chief surgical consultant during the Vietnam War. After returning to the university, he resumed his position as the first Robert M. Zollinger Chair of Surgery for which he was initially recruited in 1967.



Professor Cindy Roberts (left) and Dr. Robert Small made a generous gift to establish the Stuart S. and Letitia Roberts Flight and First Responders Education Scholarship.

Professor Roberts and her husband, who met while pursuing master's degrees from the College of Engineering, hope the scholarship advances her father's vision and dedication to the convergence of engineering and medicine.

"They had people who would never have survived their trauma if the helicopter hadn't picked them up," said Roberts, who remembers taking pizzas to the rescue pilots and crew with her father, and helping clean the helicopters between flights. "I think a lot of those people didn't realize how fortunate they were that their critical injury happened at the very birth of this trauma care program. It's been inspirational to me since I was a child."

The scholarship is already providing inspiration and financial support to inaugural recipient Tristan Moczynski, a third-year aerospace engineering major. Intrigued by the developments in reusable rockets, he served on the 2021 Ohio State Design/Build/Fly team that placed fourth in the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics' annual competition that year and hopes to work in the space industry after graduation.

"As an aerospace engineering student, it meant a lot to me to receive this support," Moczynski said. "I'm doing everything that I can to maximize my education at Ohio State, inside and outside of class, to be a higher value engineer when I graduate."

In addition to honoring Professor Roberts' father, the alumni couple describe their scholarship gift as "the best investment you can make in the future." They also know firsthand the transformational impact of higher education. Roberts is the Martha G. and Milton Staub Chair for Research in Ophthalmology and a professor of biomedical engineering, ophthalmology and surgery at Ohio State. Dr. Small is a professor emeritus of anesthesiology and biomedical engineering.

"My husband has trained many medical students and residents. I've trained many graduate students and scientists. Your legacy is the young people that you mentor and help in whatever way you can. They are the future," Roberts said. "The scholarship was important to us and we wanted to honor the idea for the combination of rescue and aviation, because Ohio State is the birthplace of that cooperation, that merging."