

[Spotlight on SOWF Graduate]

# HELPING OTHERS through fitness and nutrition



SOWF graduate Stephanie Matos with SOWF President John T. Carney, Jr. at a fundraising event in Wyoming

by Mike Hennessy

Poised, self-assured and goal driven are just some of the descriptions that come to mind after speaking to Stephanie Matos. It's hard to believe that she was anything but the self-assured young woman who's working toward her Master's Degree in Physical Education at the University of Central Florida.

But Stephanie says her father's death during a parachute training exercise when she was 13 years old left her psychologically adrift.

"I was just kind of a lost soul. I wasn't really sure of what to do with my life. I hadn't gone to school at all."

That all changed when 10 years after her father's death, a family friend put her in touch with the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. Her father was in the Army's elite Special Forces, making her eligible for assistance from the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. Unfortunately Stephanie had moved several times and it took a decade for one of her father's comrades to spot her name on a list of persons the Foundation was trying to find.

"When they contacted me, I realized it was a really great opportunity. So I said, 'well let me just sign up for classes, because if I don't that's just...stupid. I would

have to be a really dumb person not to take advantage of this opportunity.'"

After struggling in high school, Stephanie had some doubts about college. However, she found that she could handle the challenges of college and ultimately graduated from the University of South Florida in 2006 with a degree in exercise physiology.

Today, she's putting that knowledge to work at Orlando's Human Performance Institute, helping athletes hone their natural abilities as well as teaching high ranking business leaders learn to improve the quality of their lives and their on the job performance with better fitness and nutrition.

Asked her feelings about the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, Stephanie doesn't hold back.

"I think it's just a completely amazing foundation. When they started the foundation, it was strictly out of compassion and wanting to do what was right for their comrades. I literally had no future in sight until the foundation came into my life."

Stephanie points out that the Foundation doesn't just hand money to young people for college and move on.

"They become like a little family to you. You're not just a number. You're a person who's gone through a great loss and they understand that."

To other children of special operators who have lost their fathers in the line of duty, Stephanie says "although you never forget, it does get better; your life will not be full of just pain. You get to a point where you think, 'my dad did so much stuff for everyone and did all this stuff for the country and nobody cares.'"

Stephanie says the support from the Special Operations Warrior Foundation showed her that people do care and they understand that surviving family members are in pain and need help.

Stephanie is more than willing to spread the word about the Special Operations Warrior Foundation.

"So many people have never heard of the Warrior Foundation and I would love for more people to become aware of the Foundation."

Stephanie acknowledges the grim reality that as the War on Terror continues more special operators will make the ultimate sacrifice and the need for the help the Special Operations Warrior Foundation supplies to the surviving children will grow.

"This is an awesome foundation that needs the support of many as individuals as possible to help as many children as they can."

