Turning grief into purpose: A UCCS alumna's mission to heal through mental health advocacy

September 3, 2025 Abigail Beckman

Michael Wilfong, Deborah's son

Deborah Wilfong, a 1979 graduate of UCCS, has spent her life in service – first through the military, then in defense contracting, and now through a deeply personal mission: mental health advocacy.

After the tragic loss of her son, Michael, to suicide in November 2023, Deborah founded the Fong Cares Foundation (FCF), a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness and promoting education around mental health, especially among veterans, seniors, legal professionals and first responders.

"My son has helped me open more doors to help others," she said. "Not only the people suffering from mental health challenges, but also those who are the survivors from such a situation."

Originally from northwest Wisconsin, Deborah grew up in a small dairy-farming town. Her early love for nature and the outdoors was shaped by long summer days exploring forests and helping her father build a cabin on the Flambeau River. After serving two years in the Army's Chemical Corps at Fort Carson, she earned an Army Active-Duty Scholarship and chose to attend UCCS for its welcoming campus and strong ROTC program.

"I was stationed at Fort Carson," she said. "UCCS offered the subjects which most interested me—biology, environmental issues. The campus was small, comfortable, and friendly; it embraced you as a student as well as an ROTC student."

Her military service continued for eight years, including four as an officer. She later transitioned into defense contracting, working with Hughes Aircraft and other firms in Arizona and California. Her career spanned engineering, program management and government contracting, but it was the loss of her son that shifted her focus entirely.

Michael Wilfong was a public defender in Clark County, Nevada, known for his compassion and commitment to justice.

"He was very gifted, very caring," Deborah said. "He sacrificed, in some ways, his own health or his own needs for the benefit of others. His goal in life was to help others through the system."

After his death, Deborah channeled her grief into action.

FCF was founded in early 2024, with the mission of turning personal tragedy into community healing.

"Helping others to cope with their personal tragedy is my mission in my remaining years," she said.

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"If I can help others to recognize the signs, the stigmas, and direct them to help—then this is worth every minute, second, hour, I devote to this mission."

FCF is now active in both Nevada and Colorado, with plans to expand to Arizona. The foundation partners with organizations like UCCS and UNLV to develop workshops, breathing techniques, and educational events.

"We're promoting community goodwill," Deborah explained. "We don't provide mental health services, but our focus is to provide educational awareness, promote workshops, and help other organizations be sustainable."

Deborah with her son, Michael

Looking ahead, she envisions FCF becoming a regional force for mental health education and support.

"Eventually, our foundation wants to spread to Arizona," Deborah said. "But right now, we will stay in two states—Nevada and Colorado—where we already have strong roots."

Deborah is also focused on building a sustainable model that can return up to 70 percent of net revenue back into the community through grants to other nonprofits. Her long term goals include expanding the team, increasing fundraising capacity, and developing more partnerships with universities and community organizations.

"We're in the concept phase with UCCS to develop projects that benefit the community," she said. "It's really exciting to do this because I feel that we can go with any path that we want. All we have to do is make sure we're sustainable."

Despite the emotional weight of her work, Deborah said she stays grounded through time with her grandchildren, hiking Colorado trails, and reading—especially poetry and self-help books. She's also a member of WildConnections.org, which supports environmental restoration and education.

Through FCF, Deborah continues to honor her son's legacy, creating space for healing, dialogue, and hope.

"Michael is constantly in my thoughts," she said. "He's helping me to be a better person and to be a spokesman for mental health awareness."

If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available. Visit https://recwellness.uccs.edu/mental-health-services for resources offered by UCCS. The 988 Colorado Mental Health Line (dial 988) is another way to be immediately connected with a trained specialist for emotional, mental health, or substance use concerns. 988 offers free, immediate, confidential human support 24/7.

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