BENTONVILLE, Ark. (Nov. 16, 2012) – Chris Nichols was playing football with some friends when he tore his anterior cruciate ligament. It was a game changer, both for the day’s friendly competition and for Nichols’ path in life.

Nichols was treated for weeks by a physical therapist. “He was amazing and very educated,” Nichols said. “Not only was he able to get me back to my full potential, but he made my experience fun and I looked forward to every treatment. After I completed my therapy, I quickly realized that I wanted to help people achieve the same goals I had through rehabilitation, while restoring a sense of independence as well.”

Nichols, a NorthWest Arkansas Community College student from Springdale, recently received a scholarship named in honor of another physical therapist who made a significant difference.

Sarah Beth Phillips, an academic advisor at NWACC, credits a physical therapist with changing her life. Now she is influencing the lives of others by providing a $1,500 scholarship for a student in the physical therapist assistant program at NWACC.

Nichols is the third recipient of the Rob Jordan PTA Scholarship. Nichols was told about the honor in a surprise announcement in front of this year’s class of physical therapist assistant students.

The Rob Jordan PTA Scholarship is presented in recognition of the physical therapist who worked with Phillips during her childhood and teen years.

Phillips was diagnosed at 18 months with cerebral palsy, a neuromuscular disorder that affects muscle tone, movement and motor skills. As a child, Phillips underwent physical therapy to
strengthen and increase function in her muscles. There were only a couple of physical therapists in the state who specialized in pediatric care, and Phillips’ mom would drive her from their home in Jessieville (near Hot Springs) to Little Rock for physical therapy twice a week. It was a grueling routine for the young child and the family.

When Phillips was 7 years old, the physical therapist who had been treating her suggested she start seeing Rob Jordan, a practitioner who was establishing a clinic in nearby Hot Springs Village, which would be much closer to her home. Jordan’s specialty was in geriatrics, but he was willing to take on a pediatric patient.

Phillips said she believes it was part of a divine plan.

“God prepared Rob’s heart: making him receptive and willing to treat a child, a task he hadn’t thought himself ready for, but he undertook it all the same,” she said. “God prepared my heart as well: letting me have the experiences in therapy I did before Rob entered my life so I would be able to fully appreciate and understand what an incredible blessing Rob was.”

Phillips was apprehensive initially about meeting yet another therapist, but that concern quickly vanished. “I’d never had a therapist like Rob: compassionate and constant,” she said. “He truly cared about me. He saw the person I could be and could become.”

Her attitude toward therapy changed. “It was no longer a place I dreaded,” she said. “Instead, it became a place I longed to be. That’s not to say I enjoyed everything my routine entailed because goodness knows, Rob endured an innumerable amount of my crying episodes, especially when he stretched my hamstrings. I know he probably hated stretching me as much as I hated him doing it because I cried so much, but he dutifully bore it, knowing I’d be in trouble if I wasn’t stretched out.”

She and Jordan persevered, forging a strong friendship. Jordan eventually became what she calls her “second daddy.”

“His steadfast supportiveness of me is overwhelming,” she said. “Whatever I’ve done, or wanted to do, he’s been there rooting for me.”

Phillips said she would not be where she is today or who she is today without him. “I owe him much more than I can hope to repay or thank him for, even if I had 10,000 lifetimes in which to do it.”

The woman who doctors initially said would never succeed graduated high school with a 3.75 GPA, earned her bachelor’s degree from Arkansas Tech University with a 3.96 GPA and completed her master’s degree from Henderson State University with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

She joined the NWACC staff in 2008, and since that time has been active in a volunteer advisory capacity for the physical therapist assistant program. She’s supportive for several reasons, including the great success the program’s alumni have experienced.

Graduates from the College have had a 100 percent pass rate on the state certification exam for the past 13 years, said Sammi Eddie, PTA program director.

“The highest known score received by a NWACC graduate happened this year with a score of 761 out of a possible 800,” Eddie said.

Nine NWACC students scored above the 700 mark. NWACC’s average on the exam in 2012 was 695 out of 800, with the state and national averages at 647 and 656 respectively.

“This makes us at top in the state, and among the top 10 percent nationwide,” Eddie said.
She noted that the Rob Jordan PTA Scholarship provides important program support.

“Our students spend approximately 30 to 35 hours a week in class and devote an additional 25 to 30 hours a week to study time,” she said. “This leaves very little time to work, and students are often left struggling to make ends meet financially. The scholarship has made it possible for students to maintain focus on studies instead of trying to balance school and work, which is an enormous stress reliever for them.”

Phillips said she also supports the program because she’s aware of the difference a physical therapist or a PTA can make for someone and she wanted to support that kind of dedication and professionalism in patient care.

She told this fall’s PTA class that the quality of all of the applications for the Rob Jordan PTA Scholarship made her choice an extremely difficult one. The scholarship selection process includes an essay and an interview.

Nichols was surprised to be chosen.

“Receiving the Rob Jordan PTA Scholarship means so much to me because of what the scholarship is about,” he said later. “It factors grades, recommendations, and participation, but most of all it emphasizes the passion to truly go above and beyond the call of duty to help people gain their independence, while establishing a great relationship with your patients.”

For Nichols, it’s the passion that is the most important quality of all. “Without it, you're just another drop in the bucket of caregivers,” he said. “But with it, you can make a real difference in people's lives. As I stated in my interview for the award, at the end of the day, I want people to remember me as Ms. Phillips remembers and honors Mr. Rob Jordan.”

Photo cutline:

Sarah Beth Phillips, right, congratulates Chris Nichols, the 2012 recipient of the Rob Jordan Physical Therapy Assistant Scholarship at NorthWest Arkansas Community College.

NorthWest Arkansas Community College is a smart choice for students wanting to pursue quality higher education. As an accredited institution through The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, NWACC is a public two-year institution that serves and strengthens its surrounding communities in Benton and Washington counties by helping our students maximize their potential and exceed expectations. With state-of-the-art facilities, NWACC provides excellent academic instruction and workforce training needed to succeed, offering personalized attention from highly respected faculty, staff, and administrators. For more information, visit www.nwacc.edu.