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Suicide of Marine veteran, student affects many at UWGB

By [Kelly McBride](#)

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The Scott Nichols his friends knew was the life of the party, the kind of gregarious guy who's tough to forget.

It's how they want to remember the man they knew as Scottie, a 32-year-old University of Wisconsin-Green Bay senior who killed himself Jan. 22.

But with the smiles and the goofy stories they'll also recall a troubled former Marine, a sometimes-reclusive friend who struggled with depression and ultimately took his life at his off-campus apartment. Nichols' death has reverberated throughout this campus community of 6,100, affecting a sizeable number of people who knew him — and even some who didn't. More than 100 people gathered Wednesday to remember Nichols in a memorial service at UWGB's Ecumenical Center.

"We're not a huge campus, and he was well-known," said Greg Smith, director of counseling services at UWGB. "As a student he was pretty engaged in a number of organizations, and I think he had some pretty solid friends on campus. ... There's the grief factor."

Trying to reconcile the outgoing guy they knew with the actions that ended his life has been especially tough for Nichols' friends at the Fourth Estate student newspaper, a sort of surrogate family built around common interests, deadline pressure and kicking back after hours.

"Basically, the newspaper was his home base," said Fourth Estate Editor In Chief Dan Whelan. "He had worked in kind of a student organization finance office as well, but he spent most of his time with us at the newspaper, if he wasn't out with friends. Whenever he



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Hannah Johnson, left, and Dan Whelan, both friends and co-workers of Scott Nichols at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay student newspaper the Fourth Estate, and Nichols' aunt Joan Fusillo from Arizona mourn Nichols' death Wednesday outside UWGB's Ecumenical Center. Johnson is a part-time copy editor for the Green Bay Press-Gazette and former reporting intern. Corey Wilson/Press-Gazette

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talked about something very vividly, very proud of (it), he was talking about the newspaper.”

Nichols had worked on the student paper for four semesters, feeding his passion for photography and ultimately rising in the ranks to serve as co-managing editor, Whelan said. He’d struggled with suicidal thoughts and made at least one attempt to end his life last semester, missing work and class, Whelan said.

Nichols never showed up this semester, Whelan said. At one point, he took off to Arizona, where an aunt lives, and then New York, presumably to visit his mother’s grave.

Friends often tried to contact Nichols with little success. They knew he was struggling but found it difficult to reach him.

Nichols endured a tough breakup last year, Whelan said, and he seemed to be doing better for a time before sinking back into depression.

Nichols also struggled with alcohol, said Victoria Goff, UWGB associate professor and Fourth Estate adviser. “I think it’s getting missed,” Goff said. “It’s a problem for younger students but that doesn’t mean it’s not a problem for older, returning students either.”

It’s unclear how Nichols’ time in the Marines affected his mental state, but his friends and Veterans Administration records confirm he was injured during an overseas tour of duty.

“He’d been a Marine, and that was a big part of who he was,” Goff said. “I think sometimes he found school a little more challenging than even being a Marine — I guess you have your own kind of boot camp in college. But he was proud of it. He was proud of his service.”

Nichols served tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Whelan said, though he didn’t talk too much about the military.

That’s common for veterans returning from a war zone, said Andy Hendrickson, a Sister Bay native and registered nurse who is working with the Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom outreach program with Veterans Affairs in Milwaukee.

“It’s not a real comfortable thing,” said Hendrickson, who served in Afghanistan, “and then, also, people want to know things (like) ... ‘how many people did you kill?’ ... You can’t just go from talking about your war situations to homework or your next exam.”

Recently returned veterans are assessed for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and suicidal or homicidal thoughts at a primary care clinic, Hendrickson said.

“It’s maybe six months or a year or longer down the road where people start to feel different,” he said. “They can’t sleep at night, the insomnia, the nightmares ... sometimes alcohol and drug issues. ... War is not for the faint of heart.”

Nichols’ friends were determined to celebrate his life — rather than mourn his death — on Wednesday, Whelan said. Friends this week recalled good times inside the office and out, from antics at conferences to a Scottish-accented nickname of “Great Scott.”

“If there was something that needed to be done, Scottie would make sure it would happen,”

said Ben Rodgers, Nichols' co-managing editor. "He could ... bark orders out and he would scare writers into, you know, doing their jobs. (But) away from that there was this kind, fun-loving — just a great person. You could see both of those sides."