Christa Campbell was exactly the kind of student Roger Reisher had in mind when he created the Reisher Scholarships.

Campbell, a 2013 graduate of Fruita Monument High School, had completed her freshman year at Colorado Mesa University with a 4.0 GPA. Her parents had moved to Denver so she was faced with housing costs, and on top of that she was expecting a child during the second semester of her sophomore year.

Now, the single mom and CMU marketing student is a junior and she has no intention of letting any of those problems that might derail other students get in her way. “I couldn’t have done it without the help of the Reisher Scholarship,” she said.

Campbell’s story really began in the midst of the Great Depression in a sod house with no indoor plumbing on the Nebraska prairie. That’s where Roger Reisher was born and where he grew up until he left for World War II.

Like many WWII veterans he took advantage of the GI Bill after the war and went to college, the first of his family to do so. After graduating from the University of Colorado he returned to the Midwest, and began his banking career in Kansas City, Mo. Along the way he met his wife, Margaret.

Colorado beckoned and he and his family soon moved to the Centennial State. In 1963 he got in on the ground floor of what is now First Bank, the largest privately held bank in the state.

Toward the end of his career, Reisher’s thoughts turned to his legacy and what to do with his fortune. He and Margaret soon decided that education was the key to their success and wanted to do whatever they could do to help others become educated.

They eventually settled on the Reisher Family Scholarship. The Reisher program, though, is not like many scholarship programs. For starters, it is not aimed at incoming freshman. It is designed to help sophomores and upperclassmen. It discourages students from taking student loans and it requires a strong academic commitment and community service. It will pay for unmet needs for students at six Colorado public colleges and universities, including CMU. To date $13.5 million in scholarships have been awarded to more than 1,000 Reisher Scholars. Typical awards are from $4,000 to $11,000.

That money in many instances means the difference between staying in school and dropping out.
CMU’s Reisher scholars have overcome challenges and proved they can succeed.

That is certainly the case for Sheila Munch, a mother of four who decided to return to school after being a stay-at-home mom of more than 15 years. Today she is a junior nursing student at CMU.

It hasn’t been an easy road. After she graduated from high school in Meeker, Colo., she followed her husband through various jobs in forestry for the next 15 years and had her four children along the way. Her husband left forestry for the energy industry and the family’s fortunes were left to rise and fall with the price of natural gas. It made for some difficult economic times for the Munch family.

That didn’t deter Munch from pursuing her goal of a college education.

She enrolled at CMU for, among other reasons, the welcoming and helpful staff and faculty, a sentiment echoed by Campbell. Both of them say they can’t imagine a school where staff and faculty are as understanding and helpful as they are at CMU.

One staffer they both mention is Scholarship Student Mentor Rose Willett, who administers the Reisher Scholarships. That’s hardly all she does. When Campbell was pregnant Willett hosted a baby shower for her. When it was finals week and she had problems with day care, Willett babysat. “I can’t say enough about the support from the CMU staff,” Campbell said.

Willet works closely with the Denver Foundation, which administers the program for the Reisher family.

In a recent article in a Denver philanthropy journal, Tom Kaesemeyer of the Denver Foundation said the Reisher Scholarships are not only unique in that they target sophomores and upperclassmen, but the Reisher family was unique in that neither Roger nor Margaret ever sought or encouraged any recognition themselves for creating the program.

Kaesemeyer described Roger Reisher as “efficient and very smart and had no interest in attention or recognition.”

Munch remembers her dream when she was raising kids. “I always said that when my youngest started school, then I’d go back to school. When he was in fourth grade I finally got the guts to go back to school.”

This is her first semester with the Reisher Scholarship. “That scholarship meant to me, no more student loans.”

“I feel like the Reisher is an absolute blessing,” she said. Without it she might not be in school today.