

Wisconsin National Guard: Challenge Academy cadets complete first step of new journey

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by Vaughn R. Larson

NECEDAH, Wis. — Cadet Taylor Nowinski of Abrams, Wisconsin, was expelled from high school and had no real options until Challenge Academy offered her the opportunity to improve herself. During the early days of the 22-week resident phase, she said she was the candidate most ready to go home, counting down the days until A-Day, when at-risk teens either took the Challenge Academy oath and applied themselves to completing the resident phase, or left the program.

Her certainty about quitting turned into taking that oath. Many weeks later, she found herself giving a commencement speech as the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy Class 42 distinguished honor graduate during a June 22 graduation ceremony at Necedah High School.

“Looking back now, I realize that having no choice at all saved me,” she told her fellow cadets. “I could have stayed at home and taken the easy road to nowhere, but this was the time I needed to change, to do better in my life and do something my brothers and sisters would be proud of — and of course, my dad, too.”

Since 1998, the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy has offered an alternative education program to instill in teens at risk of not graduating high school the values, skills, education and self-discipline necessary to succeed in adult life. The academy is open to teens between the ages of 16 years, nine months and not

yet 19 who are not on parole or adult probation and have never been indicted, charged or convicted of a felony. Cadets must also be legal residents of the United States.

There are two phases to the program. The first is a 22-week resident phase at the Challenge Academy campus at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, where cadets live in a military-style environment with class uniforms, barracks housing, regimented schedules and assigned tasks, physical fitness training, and a strong emphasis on building values and life skills. The second, 12-month, phase begins after the resident phase, and the cadet navigates his or her life plan developed during the first phase — this could include completing high school, entering college, getting a job, moving out, or enlisting in the military — with guidance from the cadet's mentor.

Challenge Academy is a voluntary program, meaning cadets can opt out if they wish — which is why graduating the resident phase is celebrated.

“Cadets, we did it,” Nowinski said. “But I want you to remember to be the person you are right now. Be strong. Don't give up. When you experience failure, it's all about the bounce back.”

Brig. Gen. Robyn Blader, Wisconsin's assistant adjutant general for readiness and training, was the ceremony's keynote speaker. She congratulated the 101 cadets from across the state for this milestone.

“You've worked hard for this day,” Blader said. “You've endured five and a half months of long, grueling physical and mental hard work to get here today. And you should relish today, because no one but you earned it.”

She acknowledged the dedication of the Challenge Academy staff, and invited families and friends to applaud the cadets. Those in attendance responded with a standing ovation, punctuated with cheers and whistles.

“Five and a half months ago you made one of the most important decisions that you'll ever make in your lives — you made the decision to change course in your life,” Blader told the cadets. “I can assure you, you will never regret making that decision, and we here today could not be prouder of you for making that decision.

“Continue stepping up,” Blader continued, “and continue down the path that you

are on.”

Since 1998 the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy has graduated 3,902 cadets. One of those cadets was Caleb Jones, an 18-year-old plumber laborer in Stoughton. Last year he wanted to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps, but his school attendance record stood in the way.

“I had a problem with not really going, not really caring,” Jones said.

But he began to care once he learned that his attendance would prevent him from entering the military. A school counselor recommended Challenge Academy. Jones was reluctant, but ultimately was persuaded to attend by his mother and girlfriend, and graduated Class 40 in the summer of 2018.

“I think it was the best choice I could have made,” Jones said.

Beyond meeting the academic requirements to allow him to enlist in the Marines, he said he learned skills that helped him at boot camp — self-discipline, attention to detail, moving fast and such military skills as how to move while marching and how to stand in formation.

“It definitely helped a lot,” Jones said. “It gave me a step above all the other recruits.”

Jones is now an infantry rifleman in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, stationed at the Armed Forces Reserve Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

“If I could do it again, I would,” he said of Challenge Academy.

Little League coach Randy Matteson of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, a Challenge Academy mentor, was on hand to watch Cadet Juldán Aylesworth, also of Fond du Lac, graduate.

“This was a good step for him,” Matteson said of Aylesworth. “He’s changed a lot. He’s learned a lot of respect. He didn’t have the guidance in his life that he should have. [Now] he has a path in life, people that are guiding him in that path right now. And that’s what this school is all about — the guidance. Somebody who is telling you what is right and what is wrong.”

Applications are still being accepted for the next Challenge Academy class, which



begins July 18.