

Dept. of Military Affairs: Challenge Academy graduates ready to face their futures

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STEVENS POINT, Wis. — In the words of a former Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy cadet, it was a great day to be a Challenge Academy graduate.

Warrant Officer 1 Vanessa Pederson of Reedsburg, Wisconsin — the distinguished honor graduate and command sergeant major for Class 17 in 2006 — said she did not hesitate to accept the invitation to address the 71 cadets of Class 48, which graduated from the 22-week residential phase of Challenge Academy June 9.

“I felt that feeling of pride you should all be filled with right now,” Pederson said. She described her teenage years as shaped by shared custody between divorced parents, and attending four high schools. She said she lacked consistency in her life and motivation to complete her education, and dropped out of high school around the same time she was placed in juvenile detention in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

“If I did not make the choice to change from the person I slipped into, I can’t even imagine who and where I would be today,” Pederson said.

The Challenge Academy program uses a structured military-style environment and state-certified teachers and counselors to reshape the lives of at-risk 16-to-18-year-olds. Pederson recalled some of those military-style memories, and told the graduating cadets she was “thrilled and proud” to have made it to the end of the residential phase.

“But that’s where I was wrong,” Pederson said. “Today is not the end of this journey for you — today is the day you make another choice, you take on another

challenge, and you remember who you have become.”

She explained that after graduating the Challenge Academy with honors, she fell back into the old crowd and old behaviors.

“All the time and commitment I had worked so hard on, and all the goals I set, I could see starting to slip away again,” she admitted. “I stopped and took another hard look at myself. I said, ‘Vanessa, we’ve been here before — we know what this looks like.’”

Pederson spoke of the importance of being surrounded with people who will move you forward, not hold you back, even if that means one’s circle of friends becomes smaller.

“Some people in your life are only meant to be there for a moment in time — it is okay to outgrow them,” she said. “Seek out those who will say your name in a room full of opportunities.”

One of those people was her mentor. Pederson said her mentor never gave up on her while she stumbled after graduating Challenge Academy. Cadets select mentors before entering the 22-week residential phase at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, and then continue that connection for 12 months after graduating. Mentors remind cadets of the core values they learned at the Academy, and help them keep to their post-residency plan.

Joane Mathews, Wisconsin Challenge Academy’s director, said the role mentors played in the lives of graduating cadets could not be overstated.

“We now pass our graduates on to you,” Mathews said, “so you can continue to help them shape their lives as successful, responsible citizens. You are a critical link to their success.”

Matthew Young of Rhinelander, Wisconsin is one of those mentors. A U.S. Army recruiter, he met Cadet Evan Wantlin of Eagle River when Wantlin was interested in enlisting.

“He ended up coming under some difficult circumstances, and he came here to the Challenge Academy,” Young said. “He reached out to me and asked if I would mentor him, and I couldn’t pass up that kind of opportunity.”

Young shared pertinent experiences from his 22-year military career with Wantlin.

“I’ve definitely seen him go from being kind of anxious about being here to being ready to crush every challenge they put in front of him,” Young said.

Cadet Mekhi Phiffer, the Class 48 distinguished honor graduate, acknowledged that the past few months have not been easy.

“I mean, it’s kind of in the name ‘Challenge,’ so being here now as graduates means something,” Phiffer said. “Bettering yourself is a lifelong task, and although we’ve all made changes, some might not be as immediately visible as others. A support system is crucial in sustaining and improving on the pace we’re currently at — especially at this time of life where many of us were just newly introduced to certain aspects of living healthy.”

Pederson’s post-residency plan included joining the Navy and going to college to become a respiratory therapist. However, she left college before completing her first semester, But, she did join the Wisconsin Army National Guard almost two years after graduating Challenge Academy.

“That was the second-best decision of my life” after joining Challenge Academy, Pederson said. She earned an associates degree, and sought a full-time position with the Wisconsin National Guard.

“I was offered a position that set me up for a very successful career, as long as I stayed disciplined and put in the work,” she told the cadets.

She earned a bachelor’s degree two years ago and reached the rank of sergeant first class before transitioning to the warrant officer corps.

“This did not follow my plan to a T, but my plan kept me moving forward,” Pederson said. “The foundation was there, and I was able to look back at it to regain direction. I kept doing the work that needed to be done.”

She warned the graduating cadets that they would not always be motivated, especially when the going gets tough. That’s where discipline comes in.

“I believe you all have learned a thing or two about self-discipline,” Pederson said. “Small and consistent actions result in the greatest changes.”

Mathews said all 71 cadets earned their high school equivalency diploma, and 41 have earned their high school diploma. Other cadets will receive their high school diplomas in the coming months. Additionally, all 71 cadets earned seven college credits through a partnership with Western Technical College. One cadet earned 10 college credits and another two earned 13.

“At the Academy we expose cadets to many opportunities, from the trades, vocations and apprenticeships to Job Corps, AmeriCorps, technical colleges and post-high school education opportunities,” Mathews said. Perhaps owing to the military influence of Challenge Academy, 21 cadets have a plan to enlist in the military in the first year after graduation, and another 12 plan to enlist sometime in the future.

“Fingers crossed,” Young said of Wantlin.

Mathews reminded the graduating cadets that successfully navigating life requires character.

“Your character guides your thoughts,” Mathews said. “Your thoughts guide your choices. Your choices guide your actions. Character is what will continue to open doors of opportunity in your future. But always remember that it is fragile, and it will always be challenged and tested. It is your job to continue to strengthen your character when you leave today.”

Pederson agreed.

“Remember, you can always improve,” she said. “Do everything with a purpose, remember little by little becomes a lot. Be consistent and you will only fail when you quit.

“Who you are is entirely up to you.”