

Dept. of Military Affairs: Challenge Academy prepares at-risk teens for new challenges

Posted on Thursday, Jan 6, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

FORT McCOY, Wis. — “I now see myself successful, instead of a failure.”

That is how Cadet Chloe Halbrooks of Walworth, Wisconsin, described the impact the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy has made on her life.

Halbrooks was among 71 cadets from 38 counties who graduated from the Challenge Academy’s 22-week residential phase Dec. 22 at the program’s Fort McCoy, Wisconsin campus. Challenge Academy uses a structured, military-style environment, and state-certified teachers and counselors, to reshape the lives of at-risk youth ages 16 to 18 by developing academic abilities, character, self-confidence and personal discipline.

“My life looked bad,” said Cadet Alyssa Carlin of Green Bay, Wisconsin. “I was going down the wrong path, and by coming here I’ve learned that it’s okay to make mistakes — it’s how you pick yourself up that matters. Knowing that, I am able to move forward with my career, knowing that if I make a mistake I will pick myself up without beating myself up.”

The Challenge Academy program has two phases. The residential phase is followed by a 12-month phase during which cadets follow a post-residential action plan they developed during the residential phase that includes such goals as graduating high school, getting a job, enrolling in college, moving into an apartment or enlisting in the military. Cadets were introduced with mentors from their area during the residential phase, and work more closely with those mentors in the second phase.

Cadet Lucille Godejohn of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, credited the post-residential action plan with setting her up for success after graduation.

“It makes me feel like we can be on track and have our life planned for when we graduate,” Godejohn said. “Challenge Academy gave me resources and skills I can use when I grow through life. I am now able to begin my nursing career and college because of Challenge. It has motivated me to become better and more successful.”

Cadet Angel Taylor of Bloomer, Wisconsin, said she had no idea what she wanted to do with her life prior to attending Challenge Academy.

“I was so behind in school and I didn’t know what to do — I was on a path of not being able to graduate high school,” Taylor said. She said the Challenge Academy inspired and motivated her.

“I want to go into the Navy and cook for a living,” she said. “I found my career. The Challenge Academy was my savior — it taught me how to succeed.”

Cadet Angela Phillippi of Delevan, Wisconsin said Challenge Academy provided her with confidence and direction.

“Before coming to the Academy, I didn’t really care about how my future ended up,” she said. “I was okay with an easy job doing easy things and living cheaply. Now, I see myself going far. I know I have potential, and all I have to do now is take action.”

Cadet Zabrianna Mitchell of Beloit, Wisconsin, said Challenge Academy taught her not to look back.

“Do not focus on your past — your choices will dictate your future,” she said.

Other graduates also praised what Challenge Academy provided during the residential phase.

“The Academy sets you up on a path for you to follow for the rest of your life,” said Cadet Kimberly Egerer of Hartford, Wisconsin.

“The Challenge Academy gave me the greatest gift — a new beginning to make my life easier,” said Cadet Erykah Gustafson of Hustusford, Wisconsin. “They picked me up, brushed me off and gave me a better understanding of what I can do to make

my life better and smarter.”

Brig. Gen. Joane Mathews, Wisconsin’s deputy adjutant general for Army, addressed the graduating cadets as keynote speaker. She opened with a traditional Ojibwe protocol greeting — in Ojibwe.

“Hello, greetings,” Mathews said, translating the greeting into English. “My Indian name is North Wind. I am Fish Clan. I am from the place of the Torch People, or Lac du Flambeau in French. I live in Sun Prairie today, and I am also known as General Mathews.”

Mathews said she began with speaking in her native tongue to give the cadets a sense of where she came from — the Lac du Flambeau band of Lake Superior Chippewa. She shared fond memories of her childhood, attending pow-wows and helping her father tap trees for maple syrup.

“I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be commanding one of the most respected organizations in our nation as the first female to serve in my current role — and the first female Native American National Guard general officer,” Mathews said. “I was once your age, wondering what to do with my life, and I am here to tell you, you can do anything you put your mind to.”

Mathews spoke of being bullied in grade school for “not looking Native enough,” and then being bullied in high school for being Native American and hanging around with other Native Americans.

“Throughout my time growing up, and sometimes even in the military, I was met by doubters who didn’t believe I could do something because I was a female, or Native, or for any number of other reasons,” Mathews said. “But those doubters only motivated me to work harder and dream bigger.

“I’m telling you this because being bullied or discriminated against didn’t stop me from accomplishing my dreams,” Mathews continued, “and it doesn’t have to stop you from accomplishing yours.”

She was one of just a few women to attend flight school in the 1980s, which led her to join the Army Reserve Officer Training Class on campus. She became an aviation officer in the active-duty Army, and flew helicopters in northern Iraq in the months following Desert Storm.

Mathews said that being bullied in her past diminished her confidence growing up, but facing and overcoming challenges in her military career helped her gain confidence.

“I challenge each of you to set goals,” she said. “Put yourself in those uncomfortable and unfamiliar positions that will force you to improve yourself, to learn and to grow. You have obviously proven you can succeed where others may have doubted you, or you doubted yourself. I urge you to continue to challenge yourself, believe in your own abilities and be confident.”

Cadet Gaven Yager of Black River Falls, Wisconsin was the distinguished honor graduate for this class of graduates. He described Challenge Academy as one of the hardest choices he'd ever made, but also one of the best.

“I know I made one good choice,” he said during the graduation ceremony.

But in truth, Yager made that decision twice. He said that one weekend when he was considering leaving the program, a team leader pulled him aside and asked him what he was at the Academy for.

“I thought about it for a second,” Yager told his fellow graduates. “I replied, ‘To make a better future for myself, and show my family I can succeed.’ That’s when I found my motivation.”

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy begins its next class Jan. 27. Applications for future classes are available by calling the Challenge Academy at 866-968-8422 or online at www.challengeacademy.org.

Graduating cadets hail from Chetek and Prairie Farm in Barron County; De Pere, Denmark, Green Bay and Oneida in Brown County; Bloomer and Chippewa Falls in Chippewa County; Poynette in Columbia County; Prairie du Chien in Crawford County; Madison and Sun Prairie in Dane County; Hustisford and Lomira in Dodge County; Menomonie in Dunn County; Fairchild in Eau Claire County; Princeton in Green Lake County; Black River Falls in Jackson County; Mauston and New London in Juneau County; Aniwa in Langlade County; Kiel in Manitowoc County; Wausau in Marathon County; Cudahy, Milwaukee and West Allis in Milwaukee County; Sparta and Tomah in Monroe County; Appleton in Outagamie County; Plover and Stevens Point in Portage County; Racine in Racine County; Beloit and Janesville in Rock County; Reedsburg and Wisconsin Dells in Sauk County; Hayward in Sawyer County;

New Richmond in St. Croix County; Hillsboro, Ontario and Westby in Vernon County; Lac du Flambeau in Vilas County; Delevan, Lake Geneva and Walworth in Walworth County; Spooner in Washburn County; Hartford and West Bend in Washington County; Hartland and Menomonee Falls in Waukesha County; and Clintonville in Waupaca County.