

National Guard: Latest class of Challenge Academy cadets step into future

Posted on Tuesday, Dec 19, 2023

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BARABOO, Wis. — With a festive holiday atmosphere, the Wisconsin Challenge Academy celebrated the graduation of its 51st class during a Dec. 16 ceremony at Baraboo High School. The graduating class included 98 cadets from 33 counties.

This fall, the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy celebrated 25 years of helping young adults in jeopardy of not graduating high school learn the values, skills, education and self-discipline to successfully transition to adulthood. The Challenge Academy is a free, voluntary program with two phases — a 22-week residential phase at its Fort McCoy, Wisconsin campus, and a 12-month post-residential phase where cadets, with the guidance of a mentor, puts their action plan into effect.

Vanessa Torres attended the ceremony to celebrate the graduation of her sister, Thanya Torres-Garcia, from the Challenge Academy.

“My sister struggled with motivating herself before enrolling in the Challenge Academy,” Torres said. “I saw a completely different person when she came home for Thanksgiving. Our conversations were open, honest and positive about her new direction in life. I could see that the Challenge Academy was teaching her how to handle obstacles and move forward mentally and physically toward her goals. We are so proud of her.”

Cadets are immersed in a highly structured environment at Fort McCoy. During their residence at the Challenge Academy, cadets work outside their comfort zones to develop their physical and mental capacities, their abilities to work with peers and

colleagues, and their skills to resolve challenges and problems.

Cadets typically start their highly structured days at 5:20 a.m. and end at 9 p.m. Outside distractions such as TV, cell phones, video games and the internet are eliminated to help cadets focus on their academic and personal objectives.

Keynote speaker Chief Master Sgt. of the National Guard Tony Whitehead, senior enlisted advisor to the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, encouraged the cadets to embrace their new direction in life.

“You decided that who you were was not who you wanted to be, because you recognized your own potential,” Whitehead said. “You wanted more from life, and it required courage and strength to raise your hand and ask for help. Not many people do that, and I applaud you. Today you are surrounded by family and friends, not only to celebrate your incredible transformation, but to support and encourage you as you begin this next chapter in your life.”

Joni Mathews, Wisconsin Challenge Academy director, added words of encouragement for the families in attendance.

“As your daughters and sons come home to you, think about how you can create an environment that will help them grow and evolve,” Mathews said. “The Challenge Academy is only the first step in their transformation. They return to you having learned that discipline, integrity, courage and commitment are the foundation to making the right choices in life. Be there to support them when they stumble. Pick them up and let them show you their resilience and accountability.”

Several cadets were recognized during the ceremony for their achievements over the past few months: Overall Physical Fitness, Devin Skenandore-James of Keshana, Wisconsin; Most Improved Physical Fitness, Marissa Silbaugh of Janesville, Wisconsin; Most Responsible Follower, Lane Villareal of Kenosha, Wisconsin; Best Supply Assistant, Estrella Martinez Rand of Green Bay, Wisconsin; Best Battle Buddy, Maickol Torres Torres of Madison, Wisconsin; Academic Resilience, Sinncerie Hayes of Beloit, Wisconsin; Best Archer, John Brooks of Watertown, Wisconsin; and Distinguished Honor Graduate, Allius White Eagle of Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

Distinguished Honor Graduate Nathaniel Duran from Beloit, Wisconsin offered words of advice to his fellow graduates.

“We leave the Academy as very different people than we first walked through the doors earlier this year,” Duran said. “We endured some long days together. Each of us will face struggles and adversity in the days ahead, but I am confident that we will chose the harder right rather than the easier wrong because of the lessons we learned together.”

Each graduate of the program earned their high school equivalency diploma (HSED) and a minimum of seven free, fully transferable college credits. In addition, one cadet graduated with 10 college credits, one earned 13 college credits and a third cadet earned 15 college credits.

Upon graduation, every graduate is assigned a mentor who will help each cadet follow their post-graduation plans to achieve education, employment, and life goals.

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy conducts two classes per year — January to June, and July to December. The curriculum, developed by the National Guard Bureau, is based on the experiential learning model and consists of eight core components — academic excellence, physical training, job skills, service to community, health, and hygiene, responsible citizenship, leadership/followership, and life coping skills. Character development is integrated and emphasized throughout the curriculum.

In 1998, the Challenge Academy welcomed 68 cadets into its first residential program at Fort McCoy. Since then, the Challenge Academy has been conducting two sessions a year. To date, more than 4,500 Wisconsin residents have graduated from the immersive program.

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy is still accepting applications for its 52nd class, which will begin Jan. 24, 2024.

Class 51 graduates come from 33 Wisconsin counties:

Brown (Donovan Davis and Trey Stiles, De Pere; Preston Phillips, Dominic Frechette, Alanna McFarlane, Miguel Flores, David Acevedo-Martinez, Jack Luedke, Vanessa Sanchez, Valeria Baez, Diego Mora Sanchez and Jeremiah Morales, Green Bay)

Calumet (Timothy Hyatt, Brillion)

Clark (Precious Funmaker, Merrillan)

Crawford (Reed Jacobsen, Steuben)

Dane (Alianna Scott, Deforest; Gavin Barefield, Stoughton; Elizabeth Toquinto, Windsor)

Dodge (Aiden Simpson, Juneau; Matthew Behling, Lowell)

Eau Claire (Arianna Gibson, Eau Claire)
Fond du Lac (Trey Muzquiz and Jordan Tscheschlok, Fond du Lac)
Grant (Cassen Womack, Platteville)
Jackson (Peyton Pettibone, Black River Falls; Jessy VanMeter, Taylor)
Jefferson (Gavin Huffman and Alvaro Zaragoza, Watertown)
Juneau (Daniel Bender, Elroy; Jason Denter, New Lisbon)
Kenosha (Trixia Sevela, Kenosha)
La Crosse (Zachariah Moran, La Crosse; Elsa Huber, Onalaska)
Manitowoc (Mark Brinkman, Manitowoc; Alycia Ullman, Newton)
Marathon (Jaden Garneau, Stratford; Sonya Torrens, Wausau)
Marquette (Adam Tipton, Neshkoro; Kamryn Beaudry, Westfield)
Menominee (Peter Hawpetoss, Keshena)
Milwaukee (Lizbet Palomino Gonzalez, Greenfield; Alexander Wech, Asabi Agoro, Qemora Thompson, Mikhail Meeks, Adriannah Phimmady, Nye'mah Hedrington, Thanya Torres-Garcia, Jeremy Torres Cruz, Jonathan Tun, Yafete Santiago Torres, Jordan Spencer Pratt, Alexis Suarez Davila and Jimmie Evans, Milwaukee)
Monroe (Maryjane Fulton and Kaelen Bonner, Sparta; Antani Evans-Halverson, Tomah)
Outagamie (Ethan Smith-Whitby, Appleton; Sean Hegge, Hortonville)
Portage (Ethan Terry, Plover; Michael Slayton, Damian Palmgren and Ananda Rubenzer, Stevens Point)
Racine (Jade Williams, Noah Anzalone-Thomas and Khalyze Oriz Madrid, Racine; Isabella Concepcion, Waterford)
Rock (Trinity Torres, David Vallin, Jaxon Teague, Nathaniel Duran, Sevastian Torres Bolanos, Mark Anthony Martinez, Betzy Garcia-Hernandez, Adriel Carrera-Montes and Lindsey Barajas, Beloit; Demetrius Cooper, Alexsandra Avendano-Velasco, Giovanni Pantoja, Austin Mayo and Jonathan Slaughter, Janesville)
St. Croix (Dominik Gillis-Stoddard, Arkdale; Morgan Kohls, Emerald)
Sauk (KayMarie Grant, Baraboo; Lorenzo Dominguez, Wisconsin Dells)
Shawano (Aaliyah Pyatskowitz, Christian Norman and Gunnar Majewski, Shawano)
Vernon (Steven Burrows, Viroqua; Jarren Schroeder, Westby)
Vilas (Braxton Towne, Eagle River)
Washington (Kyle Young, Allenton; Ella Hommel-Schultz, West Bend)
Waukesha (Riley Dunn, Hartland; Noel Untereiner, Pine River)
Winnebago (Lilie Coopman-Schmidt and Brenquan Renfro, Oshkosh).