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Youth ChalleNGe offers
high school dropouts a way
to turn their lives around

HB #205
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Co. Youth
Challenge

2nd Chance

By Andrew Waldman

The buildings on a slice of Fort Gordon, Ga., are decades old and showing wear. A coat of paint wouldn't be out of order. Yet the place might as well be Disneyland to Janet Zimmerman, who says, "Magic happens here."

Zimmerman is director of the Youth ChalleNGe Academy at the Army base outside Augusta, Ga. The Georgia academy is part of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, which administers

similar schools in more than two dozen states and territories (box, page 22) nationwide.

Every ChalleNGe academy provides boys and girls ages 16 to 18 with an opportunity to straighten lives that have slipped off course.

"These are the kids who for a whole host of reasons were unable or unwilling to be successful in traditional education," says Zimmerman, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who maintains that rank in the

quasi-military atmosphere of the academy.

Like most attendees of ChalleNGe programs nationwide, some of the youngsters in Georgia haven't been to school in years. Others have been held back time and again. Still others simply refuse to apply themselves at school, seeing no point in learning about the Mayflower Compact or unraveling the mathematical mysteries of Pythagorean Theorem.

"When you're 17 and still a freshman in high school, you're not going to make

CADETS ChalleNGe attracts a diverse group of boys and girls to its 35 academies in 30 states and territories.

it," says Zimmerman, who retired from the Army to open the academy eight years ago.

Many cadets, as they are called, come from broken homes. Some have been physically abused, sexually abused or simply neglected, Zimmerman says. The academy provides a "safe, structured, disciplined environment" for the young people to find a path toward becoming productive members of society.

"They're very resilient kids who want to be given a fair chance," she says.

They get that at ChalleNGe, with results that often shock attendees and bring tears to the eyes of their families.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In a nutshell, ChalleNGe includes a 22-week residential phase followed by one year of continued supervision through a mentor after graduation.

It's aimed at youngsters who are at the point in their scholastic careers where they either make a change or drop out of high school for good. Every cadet is a volunteer.

The program hatched from the fiscal 1993 National Defense Authorization Act as a pilot program with the idea that the community-based Guard has an inherent ability to train adolescents in a disciplined yet caring environment.

Joe Padilla, of the National Guard Bureau's Office of Athletics and Youth Development, says NGB developed the basic curriculum around eight core components: academic excellence, physical fitness, job skills, community service, health and hygiene, citizenship, leadership/followership and life-coping skills. Ten states then signed on to conduct pilot programs.

Each of today's 27 participating states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, still shape their programs to accomplish those core components, says Padilla, who has been with ChalleNGe since it began.

States fund 40 percent of the cost. The federal government picks up the rest. Lt. Col. Anthony Kissik, the chief of NGB's Office of Athletics and Youth Develop-

ment, says there aren't a lot of prerequisites to administering a state program, other than interest and funding.

Both Kissik and Padilla are impressed with the progress that's been made in 15 years. Overall, there are 8,000 cadets enrolled nationwide and the program is so popular in some states that many applicants have to be turned away due to seat shortages.

Their goal, however, is to have a ChalleNGe program in every state and territory and a seat available for every kid who wants one.

That's a tall order, considering more than a million students drop out of high school every year. But Kissik and Padilla are more concerned with the life prospects dropouts face: They're far more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, on public assistance or in jail. They're also far more apt to have children who fall into the same pattern.

And ChalleNGe could be the most economically viable method to combating what many educators call a "Silent

its to graduate with their class.

Kyle Ardery lives outside Morgantown, W. Va. At age 18, his grade point average was so low there was little chance he'd ever get his diploma from Morgantown High School.

Ardery's mother, Terri Sivak, says she had tried "everything" to get her son in an environment where he could learn—public school, private school and back into public school. But his discipline problems and lack of focus remained.

A school administrator told Spivak about the Guard's program, known in West Virginia as the Mountaineer ChalleNGe Academy. After years of frustration and failure, it was a last chance for Ardery to succeed.

Spivak recommends it to parents looking for something to help their child.

"This is the best thing that they can do. It's the best program out there," she says. "There was nothing about this I didn't like."

In every state, students spend their days in classes recovering lost academic

***"I'd still be a freshman if I was in school.
Now I have a plan for the future."***

—Travis Davis

2008 Graduate
Mountaineer ChalleNGe Academy

Epidemic."

According to figures from the National Guard Youth Foundation (*sidebar, page 23*), it costs just \$27 per day per cadet to operate ChalleNGe.

In contrast, the price tag for court-ordered intervention programs and Job Corps can be up to \$87 a day. Adult incarceration, meanwhile, costs the taxpayers about \$162 a day per inmate.

ACADEMIC SUCCESS A CORNERSTONE

Each academy has its own individual character, reflecting the states that operate them. In California, academies attract gang members trying for a new life. In Georgia, kids from inner city Atlanta live alongside dropouts from the country.

One thing is uniform across the nation—program enrollees have dropped out of high school or don't have the cred-

its or improving their math and reading skills. All programs offer some type of academic credential. In West Virginia and Georgia, for example, the General Educational Development certificate (GED) is the standard. In some states, students can recover credits or even earn their high school diploma.

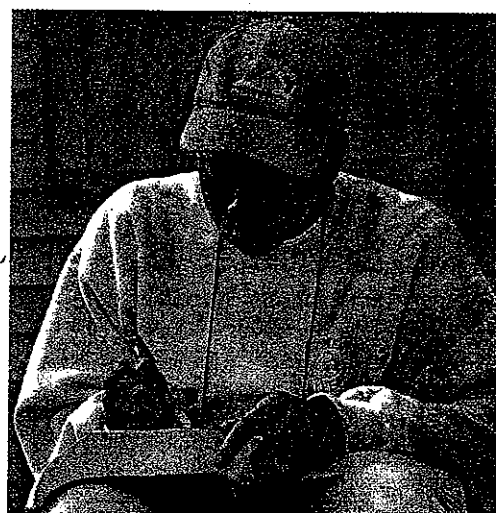
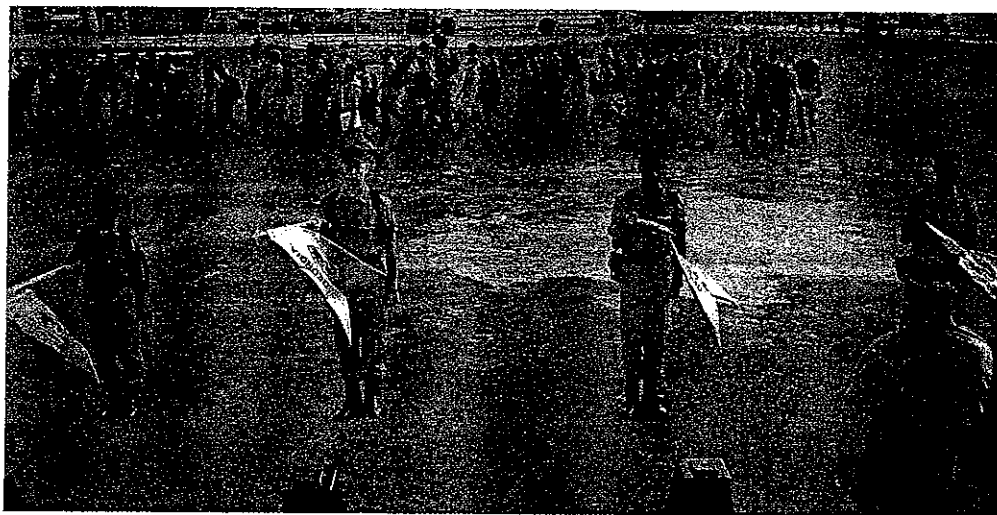
Students in every academy are assessed upon entry using the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), which gives instructors an idea of each student's grade level knowledge. They also take the TABE when they leave. Nearly all show improvement.

Ardery's TABE score, for example, jumped from 9.5 to 11.2, a leap of almost two grade levels.

In Georgia, completing the GED is one goal for most of the cadets and 87 percent do so, says Richard Faulhaber, a

Challenge States & Territories

Alabama
 Alaska
 Arizona
 Arkansas
 California (two sites)
 District of Columbia
 Florida
 Georgia (two sites)
 Hawaii
 Illinois
 Indiana
 Kentucky
 Louisiana (three sites)
 Maryland
 Michigan
 Mississippi
 Montana
 New Jersey
 New Mexico
 North Carolina
 Oklahoma
 Oregon
 Puerto Rico
 South Carolina (two sites)
 Texas
 Virginia
 Washington
 West Virginia
 Wisconsin
 Wyoming



DAILY REGIMEN The Challenge curriculum stresses physical fitness and academics within a quasi-military structure that includes uniforms, marching and formations.

retired Marine gunnery sergeant, who is deputy commandant at the academy where he wears the rank of captain. Another 5 percent eventually complete it after leaving the academy, motivated, no doubt, he says, by the progress made at Fort Gordon.

Mike Royal, the math teacher, has been at the Fort Gordon academy since it opened in 2000. He says 85 percent of his students pass the math portion of the GED, which is impressive given the backgrounds of many students.

"I've got kids in this program 19 years old that have not been in school for five years," he says. Students who enroll at age 18 may turn 19 while in the program.

Some academies offer additional high school credit or are accredited themselves to offer a diploma. At the Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy in Los Alamitos,

Calif., 2008 graduate Carolina Cardozo picked up some credits and now plans to finish her diploma at a new high school.

"They gave me discipline. They gave me encouragement," says Cardozo. "I know I'm good now. [Sunburst] showed me that I *could* do things."

Lt. Col. Chad Vogelsang, director of the Sunburst program, says, "Just because they are high school dropouts does not mean that there is any kind of educational deficit there. They are incredibly bright. Sometimes maybe that's part of their real issue, too. They are too bright and get bored. But they do well here."

It doesn't happen overnight, he says, but eventually, "cloistered" from iPods, cell phones outside influences and distractions, they begin to see life and themselves differently.

Programs include field trips. Students

in West Virginia visit monuments and museums in Washington, D.C. In California, cadets get to see local cultural attractions, such as museums.

"You would never experience [the museums] because as you're growing up you're like, 'Are you kidding me? It's a museum. It's boring,'" says Noemi Arvizo, a former gang member and a 2008 graduate of Sunburst. "But once you get there and you see all these things, you're like 'Wow!'"

STRUCTURE TO UNSTRUCTURED LIVES

From joining gangs to using drugs to just not getting in the traditional high school classroom, most Challenge cadets are missing the necessary structure to have success in their lives.

The academies provide that structure with a semimilitary routine. Like Army

Basic Combat Training, students go through a multiphase training regimen.

"It's not a boot camp. We don't beat them up. We don't lay hands on them. We don't abuse them," Vogelsang says. "But it's very structured."

Cadets frequently march in formations led by a uniformed cadre known by military ranks. They rise at 4:30 a.m. and make their beds neat enough to satisfy any drill sergeant. Physical training is next, followed by breakfast before cadets gather in formation.

After classes end and the evening meal is finished, cadets have some time on their own to study, work out or simply take it easy before lights go out at 9 p.m. Just like boot camp, cadets live in open-bay barracks where bunk beds line the walls. Students have wall lockers to keep clean, floors to mop and toilets to scrub.

Students eat "chow" together as a unit. In Georgia, for example, no one sits until the entire squad is present and talking is not allowed in the cafeteria. One finger is raised for pepper; two for salt.

But this is not the military. Zimmerman says, "The military supplies the structure, but we do not treat these kids like soldiers."

Indeed, the traditional Guard soldiers and airmen who serve as cadre are far more patient and nurturing with cadets than they are with subordinates back in their units. Otherwise, Arvizo, the California cadet, would probably not have been saying in December, "I am going to miss it after I graduate. This has been my home."

OPENING DOORS INTO A NEW WORLD

Travis Davis enrolled in the Mountaineer Challenge Academy after he'd heard about it from friends. He wasn't motivated at Morgantown High School to succeed, and he admired the military lifestyle. He thought he might enlist someday.

After the 16-year-old finished the program, he decided to go to college. He plans to take the American College Testing exam and enroll in ROTC.

"I'd still be a freshman if I was in school," says Davis. "Now I have a plan for the future."

Davis wasn't even aware that he could go to college and become a military officer. Similar realizations strike students at

the other Challenge academies.

"My thinking before was, 'Live life to the fullest. ... You don't need school,'" says Andrew Chinchilola, a December graduate of Sunburst. "But now, it's like, you need it. You need education if you want to get a good job, if you want to be successful. I don't want to be stupid in the world. I want to have knowledge."

Leaving it all behind, however, is not always easy. Faulhaber discovered that some cadets weren't trying to earn certain ribbons awarded for academics, behavior or physical training because they were the color adopted by a rival gang back home. He had to design new ribbons with a mix of colors to make them more attractive.

Staff members enjoy sharing the change they see in the cadets from the

time they first step off the bus as scared teenagers to the time they graduate as confident young adults.

"You have to see them cross that stage," says Royal in Georgia. "Their heads are up. Their chins are up. When they cross that stage, that's the best feeling in the world. For them and me."

SUCCESS OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

Does it work? Zimmerman says the majority turn their lives around. A minority fall back into their old ways once they leave the structure of the academy, but very few.

"Most of the time, they will check themselves," she says.

But the best advocates are the cadets and former cadets. Clarence Jones, 18,

Foundation Helps Tell Challenge Story

The Youth Challenge Program's expansion has been fueled, in part, by a congressional breakfast club that can attract former presidents and A-list celebrities to the cause.

Greg Sharp, National Guard Youth Foundation (NGYF) president, wrote the organization's charter 10 years ago. He sat in regularly on the informal breakfast meetings of lawmakers from the states that sponsored the original Challenge pilot programs.

Sharp says the group saw the need to help the program "on the front end and back end." The "front end" basically was getting the academy started in a number of states; the "back end" was providing opportunities for graduates to get jobs or college degrees.

The breakfast club members determined that a formal organization was the best way to accomplish those goals and also promote the program to others on Capitol Hill, the public and private institutions.

NGYF has two boards. Its main board of directors includes retired government officials, education experts and former National Guard Bureau chiefs. A board made up of celebrity

members helps promote the effort.

The annual NGYF gala, scheduled for Feb. 24, attracts many big names. This year's headliners are NASCAR star Dale Earnhardt Jr. (below), fellow driver Jeff Gordon and musical artist Kellie Pickler.

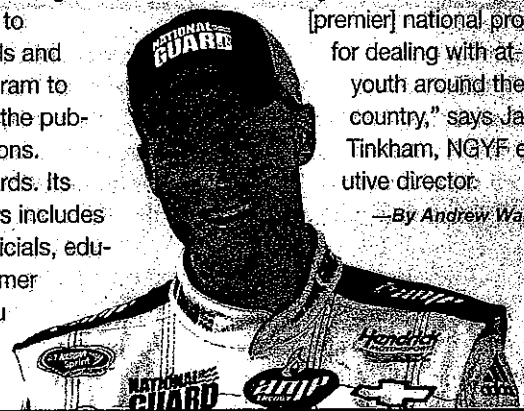
Aside from its promotional efforts, NGYF provides money for scholarships and other post-academy programs.

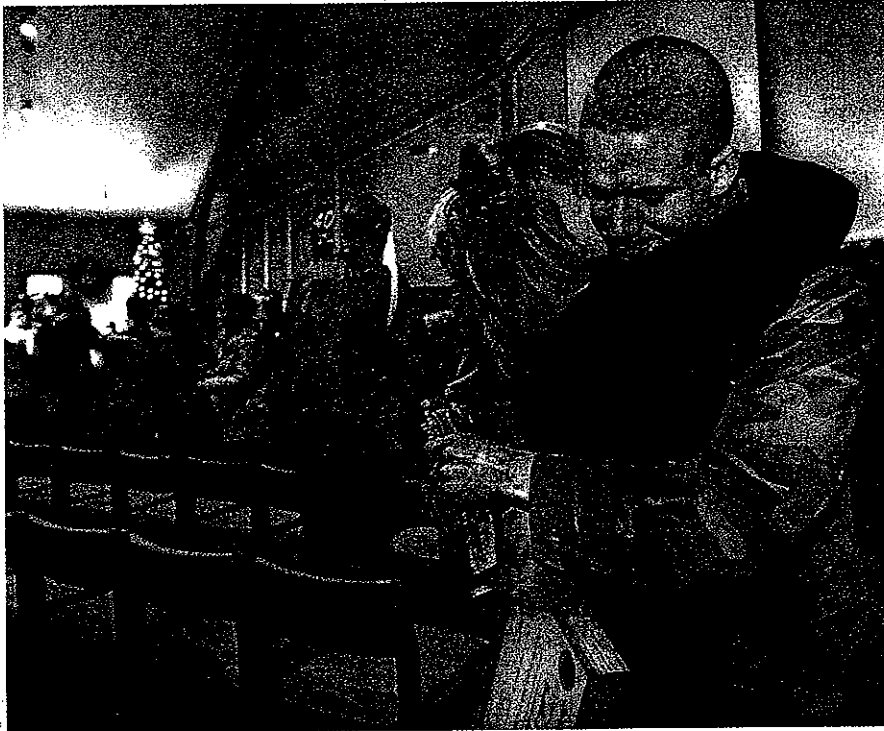
"They are a big voice and advocate for us on the Hill," says Lt. Col. Anthony Kissik, chief of NGB's Office of Athletics and Youth Development, which directs the Challenge program.

An ultimate goal is to make Challenge as well known as the Guard itself.

"We support second chances, so our goal is to make this a [premier] national program for dealing with at-risk youth around the country," says James Tinkham, NGYF executive director.

—By Andrew Waldman





CULMINATION Randal'lee Neeley gets a hug from his mother after graduating from the Indiana National Guard's Hoosier Youth Challenge Academy in 2007.

attended the Fort Gordon academy a year ago and is now a peer mentor, referred to as sergeant and there to lend some knowing support and advice to any wavering current cadet.

"When I was 11 years old, I fell into the gang lifestyle," says Jones. He attended seventh grade three times and ninth

now at the top of the list for admission to a private aviation school, the first step toward his goal of becoming a commercial airline pilot.

Now he tells cadets who have gang backgrounds, "It looks good now ... but gangs don't have a retirement plan."

"I'm going to be a nurse," says

"[The cadets] are incredibly bright. Sometimes maybe that's part of their real issue, too. They are too bright and get bored. But they do well here."

—Lt. Col. Chad Vogelsang

Director
Sunburst Challenge Academy

grade twice.

His gang affiliation resulted in three broken ribs when rival gang members caught him alone. That encounter, he says, "tipped the scales for me." Jones approached ChalleNGe with gusto.

"When people watched movies, I studied," he recalls. "When people played basketball, I studied."

He completed his GED and a college course the academy offers to give students a taste of higher education. Jones is

Cardoza, the Sunburst cadet. "It's going to be hard. But I know I can do it."

Ossie Davis, 16, spent three months at Fort Gordon academy before going home for break at Christmas. He already senses the difference.

"I sat down and talked with my mom and dad and sister," he says. "I looked my father in his eye the whole time I talked to him. That was the first time."

More than 81,000 cadets have graduated ChalleNGe since its inception more

than 15 years ago. But there is always room for improvement. About 11 percent of enrollees don't make it all the way through the program. Of those cadets who complete the residential phase, 67 percent reported in 2007 that they were engaged in positive activities, according to an NGB report.

Padilla says the most difficult part of the program is the postresidential phase when adults from the communities are interacting with cadets. The students are matched with mentors who are close to them either through a family connection or otherwise, but there are always some who can't stay in touch.

"We try to make [the mentor relationship] as cement tough as possible, but it doesn't always happen," said Padilla.

Despite some missed opportunities, most cadets who have been through this program have gone on to success.

Fort Gordon graduates have attended West Point and the Coast Guard Academy. Some have graduated from the Citadel and other colleges on their way to professional lives. One cadet became a crew member of Marine One, the helicopter that ferries the president from place to place.

About 15 percent of Georgia's cadets choose the military, says Faulhaber, although it is not pushed on them. One thing the academy is not is a recruiting tool.

"We do not sell them the military. We do not sell them the National Guard," he says. "If they ask, we will tell them."

One year after his graduation, Matt Hoover is back at the Fort Gordon academy as a peer mentor. He's 17, but displays a maturity of someone much older.

"I was in all kinds of trouble," he says. "I never went to school. Drugs."

The academy put him on the straight and narrow. He'll soon join the military with plans to make it a career, something he never would have considered before attending ChalleNGe.

Asked what he'd be doing if he had not enrolled in the program, he says, "Probably the same thing—still acting stupid. Without this academy, I'd be nowhere." ¶

John Goheen contributed reporting from California. Ron Jensen contributed from Georgia.

