

## Lincoln's Challenge Cadets Bring Confidence, Hope to Graduation

Written by Illinois National Guard PAO  
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295 Cadets to Graduate with GED June 15 at Prairie Capital Convention Center in Springfield

SPRINGFIELD, IL (06/12/2013)(readMedia)-- Listening to Lincoln's Challenge Cadets talk about their experience in the structured, quasi-military academy in Rantoul, Ill., a common theme emerges from the nearly 300 young men and women who are about to graduate June 15.

"This place saved my live," said Cadet Javier Campos, 18, from Grayslake, Ill.

"If I didn't complete this, I know I wouldn't complete anything else in life," said Cadet Erin Keegan, 17, of Downers Grove, Ill., and the salutatorian of the class graduating on June 15.

Lincoln's Challenge Academy (LCA) is an Illinois National Guard-administered launching platform for Illinois' at-risk youth that provides Cadets with essential life skills and educational requirements to be successful in today's society. Since LCA began in 1993 as a pilot program, more than 13,000 Cadets have graduated with more than 75 percent earning a GED, making it the most successful Youth Challenge program in the nation.

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While both Campos and Keegan said the 22-week residential phase of LCA has given them renewed confidence and instilled improved self-discipline and work ethic, they acknowledge the program is not for everyone.

"This program doesn't work for 100 percent of people, but those few people that take everything to heart and that listen and that learn, they will go places," said Campos.

Keegan, who scored a 3,800 out of 4,000 on the GED exam, the second highest score ever for an LCA Cadet, said being successful at LCA depends on the individual.

"A few things play into it. First is personality and how the individual's personality fits with the military lifestyle. Second is your willingness to change," said Keegan.

LCA is completely voluntary and Cadets can quit the program at any time. Cadets come from different backgrounds, from 115 communities across the state, and for various reasons.

Campos said he was estranged from his mother, living on his own, and performing poorly in school when his Grayslake Central High School dean arranged a meeting with his mother in the dean's office to suggest LCA as an option to get Campos back on track.

"He sat us down to talk and I asked my mother if we could forgive each other. It didn't work out and she left," said Campos. "I sat there in shock. I broke down and felt like I had nobody. The dean said 'you need to trust me, this is something you need to do.'"

Other Cadets were good students and involved in their high school, but strained relationships with their parents led them to LCA.

"When I found out my mom made the decision to send me to Lincoln's Challenge, all I could think about was my Downers Grove South High School teachers and my friends, my cap and gown, my class ring," said Keegan. "To not get to walk across the stage and receive my

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diploma, to leave that behind was hard. Now, I know it was the right choice. Without LCA I couldn't have learned what I've learned-self discipline-but I still miss Downers Grove South."

If the Cadets had found life to be a challenge before LCA, the challenge that awaited them at the academy proved to be cathartic.

"It was a shock. I had seen military situations on TV and, before I got here, I thought 'I'm big stuff, this will be easy.'" said Campos. "I was confronted with not only physical challenges, but also emotional challenges. The Cadre tell you how it is. They've been through what we've been through. They're honest and you can relate to them."

During the residential phase Cadets get a \$10 per week allowance and, like most high schools, have an array of extracurricular opportunities including yearbook, student council, intramural sports, chorus and band. After the residential phase, the 12-month post-resident phase pairs the Cadets with mentors in their communities to provide positive, continued support. On average, after graduation 49 percent of Cadets go on to get jobs, 34 percent attend college, 12 percent join the military and 5 percent pursue other opportunities.

Keegan plans to study creative writing and performing arts at North Central College in Naperville, Ill. Campos plans to enlist in the Marine Corps and specialize in military intelligence.

Both said they would recommend LCA to young people they see fit.

"Definitely," said Keegan. "I made the right choice. Staying at home I wouldn't have gained the necessary skills for the real world...self-discipline, time management, motivation for life. My habits are much better than they used to be."

Approximately 295 Cadets will graduate from the 40th Lincoln's Challenge Academy class June 15 at 11 a.m. at the Prairie Capital Convention Center in Springfield.