

Guard member inspires hope at Stanislaus Military Academy

By 2nd Lt. Kara M. Siepmann

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“Front leaning rest position...MOVE!” shouts a drill instructor. Eighty young men and women drop down on their hands and feet and begin doing pushups on a concrete slab as a drill instructor in a large brimmed hat walks through the rows of cadets. Sweat beads form quickly on their foreheads in the August afternoon sun.

When the smoke session ends, the cadets snap into formation and one of their own stands in front.

“See what happens when we waste time?!” he yells out at his peers. From patrol cap to boots, these young souls look like new recruits in basic training.

But as the cadets disperse, they don’t adjust their helmets and body armor or pick up their rifles. They quietly and quickly file into classrooms with white walls and blue trim. It’s thirteen hundred hours at the Stanislaus Military Academy. Lunchtime is over.

When students are expelled from traditional school, they begin attending a continuation school. For those expelled from continuation school, a community school is the last stop before juvenile hall or jail depending on age. John B. Allard Community School in Denair, Calif., serves grades 4-12 in the Stanislaus County Office of Education School District.

“Fifteen years ago when I first came here, this school was a gang haven,” explained Doug Ash, school counselor.

During the 2008-09 school year, the Stanislaus Military Academy, a military style program was created. Originally a senior high program with 20 students, the program has grown to nearly 120. This year a junior academy was created for grades 6-8.

Like any school, the program features academic studies, physical conditioning, character training and extra-curricular activities. Unique to John B. Allard Community School is the emphasis on strict military discipline. The goal of the SMA’s rigorous requirements is to produce a high school graduate who is proud of his accomplishments.

Once the program began, there were start up issues. “There were no student leaders, no students with high grades who shine,” said Ash.

“Parents see this as the one way to save their kids,” said Ash. “One parent told me last year, ‘This is the first thing he’s ever finished in his life.’”

With that kind of pressure on their shoulders, the teachers at SMA, all credentialed through California, rely on help from drill instructors and mentors with some military experience.

But to make it all real, said Ash, an active duty military presence is key.

Air Force Master Sgt. Ron Biggs with the California National Guard's Joint Task Force Domestic Support—Counterdrug program meets with students once a week. He's considering being on campus twice a week this year. He feels his involvement is that important.

"All our alternative education students are at-risk youth who are in dire need of structure, discipline, and normalcy in their lives," Biggs said. "I offer examples of leadership and mentorship to the students."

"Biggs has become a mentor to students and has taken the lead in teaching leadership," school principal Alberto Velarde said.

Biggs follows the National Center for Prevention and Research Solutions' Stay on Track curriculum. NCPRS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1989. According to the NCPRS website, in 2006, rigorous scientific research on the *Stay on Track* program indicated that students who completed the program demonstrated improvement in goal setting, communication skills, decision making skills, perceiving drug use as unacceptable, and have increased their ability to resist negative peer pressure.

Like many servicemembers on the JTFDS-CD Prevention Team, Biggs has ties to Stanislaus County. His oldest of two children is a freshman at California State University, Stanislaus.

"My engagement with the students opens doors for them," Biggs said. "When these students come back and tell me they've done everything I've recommended and they get into college or get a good job, it means so much to me. When they realize everything we've been telling them is true, the light bulb goes on in their minds that they can accomplish their goals—that's more than any thank you I could receive."

"This is the best program I've ever been in," said Ash. "This is the best I've seen in education."

According to James Arnold, an instructor at the school, attendance rates are at 96 percent compared to traditional alternative education schools that lag around 69 percent. Last year 100 percent of eligible seniors graduated.

While overall statistics bode well for SMA, the school also achieves results not easily captured by testing metrics. Students gain self esteem and worth.

"When I went to regular high school, I didn't go. When I went, I didn't pay attention," Cadet Anna Dos Reis admitted. Reis is one of the original twenty students continuing from last year. She said she is on track to graduate this year.

One of her classmates was equally candid about his past. "Before I was disrespectful and I didn't care about lots of things," Cadet Eriberto Barajas said. He said he was fired from his first job for leaving to spend time with his friends and smoke marijuana.

Now more than a year later he said, “If I was in a job interview I would say I’m responsible, respectful, always on time, and have leadership experience.”

Reis and Barajas are cheerful about their future. “I hope I carry my discipline with me and not become sloppy again. I hope good things for myself,” she said.

It’s clear last year’s students are proud of surviving in the SMA.

“They aren’t against you. They are here to help you,” Cadet Anna Dos Reis said.

Newer students still seem wary of the program’s authoritarian format. “I chose to be here,” Cadet Davi Mitchell said proudly. But her voice waivered.

In contrast to the first two students, professional looking and focused from their first year’s experiences, Mitchell, a junior, seems nervous as she quickly sways back and forth on her feet.

While the older students described themselves with positive, focused adjectives, Mitchell and fellow junior, Cadet Robert Fletcher seem daunted by the questions, “What words describe you and your personality?”

“I don’t know who I am,” Fletcher quietly said. But he does know where he wants to be. “I’d like to control my anger more, I fight too much. And I’d like to finish things that I don’t want to do.” said Cadet Robert Fletcher.

If he stays with the program, Fletcher will improve. “We use military discipline, Arnold explained. “But we offset it with compassion to really show the cadets that we care for their overall growth now and in the future.”

Fletcher served as 4th squad leader during the four day, three night basic training two weeks earlier.

“I had fun at basic camp,” Fletcher said. “I loved it. I’m an outdoor person.”

Despite the pushups, the yelling, the rushing around, the cadets seem motivated and proud. Of the more than 100 students, all but a handful of heads are held high as they sit in class, walk around campus or participate in military style training. Those students stand out in regular, civilian clothes.

“Those students just started,” Biggs explained. “They either adapt or leave the program.”

At the far corner of campus there are students in regular clothes. They are by far the minority on campus.

“They all have a chance to be here with us,” said Capt. James Arnold, a teacher dressed in camouflaged patterned attire. Arnold is a credentialed teacher, a National Guard Soldier and the Junior Academy commander. If a student fails to adapt to the SMA’s program, he is kicked out.

“Repeatedly demonstrating a bad attitude and not showing any sign of improvement constitutes failure to adapt,” Arnold explained.

This day, Biggs is out on the grass teaching 20 students or so about trust—trust toward their supervisors, their peers and their subordinates.

The students laugh as they stand in small clusters of five students. The lone student in the middle of the circle crosses her arms across her chest, closes her eyes and lets her body go limp. The students on the outside push her gently clockwise around. Twice the student in the center is dropped, but quickly helped up by peers.

“You won’t always like who you’re working with, but you still have to give them respect,” he reminds the group. They all nod their heads, understanding. Biggs captures the attention of every teen on the field for a 15 minute talk following the exercise.

“The transformation of the majority of students’ behavior is unbelievable. They turn themselves around,” said Velarde. He attributes the program’s successes to the students’ ability to self regulate.

But the teachers and administrative staff also deserve credit.

“This is my community,” Arnold said. “We (the teachers) do extra hours, extra everything for these kids. They have value and are worth something and I remind them of that every day.”

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CUTLINES:

Photos by 2nd Lt. Kara M. Siepmann, Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug, California National Guard

20100923_A_2965S_SMA_001: A cadet at the Stanislaus Military Academy raises his hand to ask a question during a presentation by Master Sgt. Ron Biggs, California National Guard Central Valley’s Drug Demand Reduction team member.

20100923_A_2965S_SMA_002: Air Force Master Sgt. Ron Biggs talks to Stanislaus Military Academy cadets about leadership after conducting a trust-building exercise with the teens.

20100923_A_2965S_SMA_003: Stanislaus Military Academy cadets perform pushups in between classes. Using physical exercise and military type discipline, instructors help cadets learn to respect authority, develop an ability to follow rules, practice safety first and demonstrate appropriate behavior toward staff and other cadets.

20100923_A_2965S_SMA_004: Cpt. Arnold reviews English lesson for the day. Cadets receive a comprehensive high school education. All academic teachers at SMA hold a California Teaching Credential.

20100923_A_2965S_SMA_005: Cadets pass Master Sgt. Ron Biggs around in a circle while his eyes are closed and body is limp. Students participate in this exercise to develop trust in each other. To demonstrate his trust in the cadets, Biggs was passed around by their hands.