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Program offers dropouts discipline, GED

## Another chance

By **JACKIE BORCHARDT** - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Monday, July 12, 2010 12:00 am

GUERNSEY -- They walked in with long hair, their belongings stuffed into plastic trash bags.

Some were from Riverton, some Sheridan. Some arrived with two parents, some one and others none. They were weighed and measured and issued gray sweatpants. They were instructed how to address staff members. Yes, sir. Yes, madam.

Forty-seven Wyoming youth entered the National Guard's Youth ChalleNGe program at Camp Guernsey on Sunday. They walked in as high school dropouts and, if they make it through the program, they'll walk out as GED completers and changed men and women.

Youth ChalleNGe accepts students ages 16 to 18 who have dropped out of high school. With the aid of military-like structure, students learn self discipline, life skills and values while taking classes to obtain their GED. The 22-week program is followed by one year of mentoring.

Some graduates join military service, but that's not the goal, said Dave Juliano, deputy director of Wyoming's program, one of 31 in the nation. Cadets leave with a GED, resume and portfolio documenting service during the program. They are coached through job interviews and when they face the real deal, they get the job, Juliano said.

The program boasts a 100 percent placement rate in a job, vocational program or college and the Wyoming program ranks in the top 10 percent nationally.

To be eligible for the free program, students must be Wyoming residents 16 to 18 years old, have disenrolled from high school and have not committed a felony or be on probation. Cadets come from all walks of life and every level of anxiety about their futures, said 2nd Lt. Christian Venhuizen of the National Guard.

"We have parents that try their best, but kids just take the wrong turn," Venhuizen said.

Kids from foster homes, kids who fell in with the wrong crowd, kids who were bored in high school become a team. The military structure makes them focus on academics and personal growth.

"All they have to do is learn and grow to trust each other," Venhuizen said.

Students enter with differing levels of education but they live together, work together and learn together. Learning how to live begins on the first day.

After their parents leave, male cadets walk upstairs to get the obligatory buzz cut. Cadets are then told what they can and can't have, can and can't do. They are shown how to properly eat, dress and make their bunks.

Lights out is at 8:30 p.m. because the first day starts at 5 a.m. Cadets begin each day with military-style physical fitness. In two weeks, the cadets begin academic classes, which take up most of the day. They have time in the evenings to study or write letters. Cadets also must complete 50 hours of community service. They look for projects beyond picking up trash, such as visiting nursing homes on holidays and helping with parades.

"Many of them know the dark side of their communities," Juliano said. "We want to introduce them to the positive side of their communities."

Christian Oueilhe, 17, got caught drinking two months ago. Instead of bailing him out, his mother Heather Beller let him sit in jail and learn a lesson. He had been skipping school and decided to drop out. An assistant principal suggested he try Youth

ChalleNGe. His parents didn't push him to go, and he came around to the idea and said he was ready.

He wanted to do something better with his life and change his attitude in the process. He couldn't do that at home in Rock Springs.

"If I'm at home or around my friends, I won't finish it," Oueilhe said.

Oueilhe's family is hopeful he'll succeed -- it's their last try.

"I'd like to see him be a productive adult and make right choices," Beller said. "He's a good kid."

The cadets will see their families only once before graduation, about four months into the program. They can write as many letters as they want but only get two minutes of telephone time each week. Classroom instructors and program staff members become a family for the cadets.

"We're there as we see them making that next step, that next achievement," Juliano said. "This is not a place for the lesser achievers by any means."

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