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New Jersey Youth ChalleNGe Academy Class 58 marks program's 30th Anniversary

Lawrenceville, N.J.—“DEEDS, NOT WORDS!”

Forty cadets graduated New Jersey Youth ChalleNGe Academy in a ceremony at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, December 16, 2024. They join a proud lineage of more than 4,500 graduates in the 30 years since the program's inception in 1994.

ChalleNGe is a leadership academy for youth that helps them become responsible and productive citizens of their communities, state and country. The academy provides unique transformational experiences through a highly disciplined 22-week residential program that integrates a quasi-military training environment, innovative academic offerings, and opportunities to further develop their physical, social, and intellectual abilities. In partnership with a mentor, they will receive continued guidance and support during their one-year post residential phase immediately following graduation.

“I was encouraged to believe in myself when I thought I couldn't do it,” said Cadet Dinanyeri Guzman Roso. “We adapted to emotions and cultures, and I have a support system. ChalleNGe is a challenge, and I overcame the ChalleNGe!”

Guzman Roso, whose Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery scores increased by 40 points from the beginning of the program, was one of numerous Class 58 awardees for excellence. Class 58 engaged in more than 1,400 hours of community service, and 32 have already earned their GED.

“You will persevere and reach your goals,” said U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Michael LaPoint, Deputy Adjutant General of New Jersey, addressing Class 58. “I predict bright futures for you all.”

“Stay curious,” added retired U.S. Army Col. Walter Nall, NJYCA’s first commandant and deputy director. “Connect with mentors and peers. Learn from experienced leaders, volunteer for small roles, and keep moving up the ranks.”

Nall instructed the program’s newest graduates to build trust, embrace resilience and adaptability, and gave a shoutout to one attendee in particular, Class 56 graduate and U.S. Marine Corps Pvt. Sage Blanks.

“Semper Fidelis,” Nall said. “Always faithful. Well, I give you all a new motto: Semper Gumby—always flexible!”

Blanks, who graduated from NJYCA in 2023 and Marine Corps Basic Combat Training just days ago on December 6, 2024, explained that NJYCA prepared him for the rigors of his service training.

“The best thing it helped me with was not being homesick,” Blanks said, adding that he could not wait to go on to his duty station. “ChalleNGe is twice as long as boot camp too.”

Blanks was just one of many former NJYCA cadets in attendance. Jamel Johnson of Class 38 also chose military service after graduating in 2013.

“I went New Jersey Air Guard,” Johnson said. “I’ve been out but I’m thinking about maybe reenlisting.”

Johnson, who also earned a private pilot license, explained that he always kept in touch with his classmates.

“Things greatly improved for me with ChalleNGe,” Johnson said. “I was excited to come here today. I tried to get all of [Class 38] here too. ChalleNGe turned me around completely. Even after being Air Guard, it was skills from ChalleNGe that you need the most—certain things like communication, things in everyday life. Maybe I’ll come back as a mentor!”

Kevin Lamb of Class 10 in 1999 credited NJYCA to finding his footing and making his own way in the world.

“I got my first job on the books [after ChalleNGe],” Lamb said. “And from there I continued to work. I got my associate’s in electronics. I’m technical support at the Princeton University Material Science Group, and I do science outreach for kids.”

“Class 10 was a big mix of characters,” Lamb added. “ChalleNGe got me started on stable ground.”

The 40 graduates of Class 58 accepted their diplomas from U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, and the leadership teams of the New Jersey National Guard, the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and NJYCA.

Congratulations to the 40 graduates of Class 58 and the 4,500-strong NJYCA family!

For more information on Class 59 recruitment, please visit: <https://njyca.org/admissions>

For photos of the event, please visit:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/njnationalguard/albums/72177720322647438>