

Cadets find school tough but rewarding - Tribune Herald, June 2007

By Ma'ata Tukuafu

*1/28/07 Dear Mom, It's already a week since I've gotten here. I'll be out of the pre-challenge phase in a week! I haven't gotten into any trouble yet with sergeants or the other girls, and I'm trying my best to keep it that way.*

The letter from Cadet Sara Lopez was mailed from the Hawaii National Guard Youth Challenge Academy (HNGYCA) at Kapolei, Oahu. She entered the Academy on January 21st with a cocky attitude and no expectations.

The previous November, Lopez was caught both cutting school and hitchhiking, and was on her way to flunking her grade at Honoka'a HS. As her mother, it was frustrating to see her do so poorly. The HNGYCA program appealed to Lopez as it offered a diploma at the end of a six-month intensive program.

The class attending HNGYCA for the first half of 2007 was Class 26. The program itself began in August 1994 and has since graduated 2,075 non-traditional students. A combination of boot camp and hard-core studies, students learn the keys to graduation: attitude, motivation and dedication. Without their familiar home surroundings, computers or phones, students are forced to learn teamwork and consequences to their actions.

Both military personnel as well as civilians serve as staff, dorm parents, teachers and role models. The YCA program is available in all fifty states, but only Hawaii offers diplomas rather than GED certificates. Providing 16-18 year olds with life skills, YCA is sometimes the only form of discipline and structure these kids have ever experienced. Hand-written letters become the only form of communication and during orientation phase, parents are told that mail call is the most anticipated event of the day.

*1/30/07 I still haven't gotten any letters, it really hurts more than I'd expected. Only thing I really want bad is some sleep. My shoe soles are already rubbed down from marching and turning.*

The teacher to student ratio at YCA is 1:20. Classrooms are air conditioned, bringing relief to the students as they follow a tight regimen of getting up at 5:00 a.m., exercising, chores, studies, marching and more studying. Lights out for the cadets is at 9 p.m.

*2/03/07 School's going by real well. Feels like we've been in here for months. Jeez, I have muscle aches everywhere! Worst are knee-kicks...you put your hands on your hips and make your feet touch your butt. Do 50 or more and your thighs ache so bad. Tomorrow's Saturday! Meaning, we*

*get to sleep in until 6:30! Haha. When kids act funny here, they have to do corrective action and go on MADD (hard core punishment.)*

With four beds to a room and one shared bathroom, cadets are expected to get along with their peers and learn teamwork. They are taught to fold clothing military-style and line toiletries in their closets at two inches apart.

Bronson Tingkang, former student of Campbell HS, said he decided to attend YCA after learning about the program from friends. "I've gotten more confidence and know that I can achieve more things," Tingkang said. He added that he's changed both physically and emotionally. Tingkang plans to attend Leeward CC after graduation.

*2/05/07 Seriously the [lack of] sleep is killin' most of us. Some graduates are actually back to help with us...they said they liked it here and wanted to come back...hmmm...don't think I'll be doing that. There's lots of Samoans here, like my roommate is half. She's the only one I mentioned to that I'm Tongan, who's gonna believe a white girl like me?*

Like many of the cadets, Angel Nathaniel, of Waiakea HS said he was on a road of bad choices; partying and cutting school. "Since coming here, it's made me realize I was wasting my life," Nathaniel said. His father, Jonathan Nathaniel said his son has had a major change in attitude. "My son wasn't doing good in school and it was too easy for him to cut out," Nathaniel said. "Now, this is part of his growing up and I'm proud of him."

Cocoa Michaelson, parent of Honoka'a HS student Carmichael Delizo, said she's seen her son become self-motivated. "My son recognizes what needs to be done and takes initiative," Michaelson said. She said in previous years, she tried hard to support Delizo, by working with teachers and supervising homework. "It was frustrating because he's so smart, and yet he still wasn't passing," said Michaelson.

She said Delizo wants to be a rescue pilot for the Coast Guard. "I wish my classmates and I had this program when I was his age, because I was a lot like my son," she said.

*3/01/07 School is okay, I ace most of my papers on reading, writing, and math...I don't care for science and social studies though. I don't think I ever have.*

HNGYCA bases its educational program on the GED test series. The military-based approach not only instills discipline and self worth, but also establishes an effective learning environment by supervising the cadets at all times. Even after the five-month residential period is up, a twelve month "post residential" mentoring period continues to provide guidance to the newly-graduated students.

Cadets are required to find mentors who help them stay focused on whatever route they choose, whether it's college, military service or full-time jobs. Although the program is considered quasi-

military, cadets are not required to join the service. HNGYCA is free to parents because the \$16,000+ per student cost is funded by both the State and Federal governments.

*3/18/07 We got to sleep-in today! One thing is for sure, I ain't leaving this place until I complete it. The new shoe soles worked just as I'd hoped for my mule kicks. Dr. Scholls is getting a lot of business from Youth Challenge cadets!*

Cadets perform many hours of community service, instilling teamwork among the participants. Kandace Pasa, from Hilo HS said she joined YCA because she wanted to change her life. "The hardest part about being in here is that we have no freedom," Pasa said. "But we as cadets learn to work with others."

In spite of periodic illness throughout the program, Cadet Lopez has persevered, and is determined to make a better life for herself. Her attitude is more respectful and like the other cadets, will have more options as a successful graduate.

*5/07/07 I'm glad our relationship is improving 100%! I'm sorry for many of the things in the past. I'm looking forward to an awesome, loving friendship and mother/daughter relationship. I love you Mom!*

Congratulations to Class 26, where 110 cadets out of the initial 146 students who first signed up graduated on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

HNGYCA will conduct neighbor-island interviews in October/November 2007 for Class 28 which begins in January 2008. For more information, visit HYPERLINK "<http://www.ngycp.org/state/hi>" [www.ngycp.org/state/hi](http://www.ngycp.org/state/hi), or call LeeAnne Santos, program coordinator at 808-673-7530 ext. 220, or Nicole LaBerge, assistant program coordinator at ext. 213.