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Virginia Commonwealth Challenge Youth Academy Recognizes Program Graduate as Recipient of National Guard Youth Foundation Spring Scholarship

Former Cadet to Use Award to Attend University of Texas at Arlington in Fall 2015

Virginia Beach, Va. – The Virginia National Guard [Commonwealth Challenge Youth Academy](#), a free, state-wide, 17-and-a-half month alternative education program located at Camp Pendleton, Va., today announced the award of a \$20,000, four-year college scholarship to former program cadet Nicole Rector, who plans to use the financial support to attend the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in the fall of 2015.

Rector is one of only five nationwide recipients to receive the award. The scholarship was presented by the National Guard Youth Foundation (NGYF), the national nonprofit that supports the National Guard Youth Challenge Program. The competition was open to cadets who graduated less than 18 months ago. The scholarship competition is held twice a year. In addition to the \$20,000 awards, five former cadets from various states also received a \$6,000 two-year scholarship.

According to Ashley Saunders, NGYF Communications Director, the awards are very competitive. “A select committee of NGYF Board members graded each blinded scholarship application. The committee looks for strength of the written essay and strong recommendations from Challenge staff, mentors and teachers or counselors. They also look for demonstrated leadership, service to community and involvement in extracurricular activities,” Saunders said.

Rector, a member of class 40 which graduated from the five-and-a-half month residential phase in June 2014, said that she was very grateful to have received one of the awards. “I am relieved and thankful; the Challenge program has provided opportunities that I otherwise wouldn’t have had access to, and this is one opportunity that will be of tremendous assistance to my education endeavors,” Rector added. Currently attending Mary Baldwin College, Rector plans to transfer to UTA in the fall and study economics.

“We want every graduate of the National Guard Youth Challenge Program to grow into successful, self-sustaining young adults and these scholarships are a critical part of helping them along that path,” said Louis A. Cabrera, President of the National Guard Youth Foundation. “I congratulate the recipients of the scholarship competition who have taken the “Challenge” to change their lives for the better.”

Commonwealth ChalleNGe director retired Navy Capt. Mark Chicoine emphasized that Rector's hard work in the program certainly has paid off. "Cadet Rector exemplifies the qualities of leadership and initiative that we have come to expect from our graduates," he said. "I believe that these were instrumental in her earning one of the \$20,000 scholarships. She has our most sincere congratulations."

The mission of the Virginia Commonwealth ChalleNGe Youth Academy is to intervene in the lives of 16-18 year old teenagers by providing the values, skills, education, and self-discipline needed to produce responsible, productive citizens, and to do so in a highly structured learning environment. Chicoine said that he considers it to be Virginia's premiere program for potential, or actual, high school dropouts or transfer students from Virginia's high schools. "We are here to provide eligible teenagers throughout Virginia the opportunity to participate in an alternative educational program that helps them become productive contributors to America's future," he added.

During the residential phase, cadet studies center on the eight core components of the program: academic excellence, responsible citizenship, physical fitness, leadership/followership, job skills, service to the community, health and hygiene and life coping skills. Cadets have the opportunity to take the GED test and establish a life plan of continued education, employment or military service during this phase.

Upon graduation, cadets begin the 12-month post-residential phase. In this phase, a mentor guides each of the cadets as they follow through with the life plan established during the residential phase. To successfully graduate from the program, each cadet must either go back to high school, join the military, go to college, or have a job in place.

As a graduate who chose to follow the path to college, Rector credits the academy with providing her the tools to help her accomplish her goal. "ChalleNGe gave me life skills, people skills, confidence, and resources that have not only gotten me to college, but continue to help me establish a successful life in all aspects," she said. She added that the program has radically changed her outlook on life. "The most important thing that I learned through the ChalleNGe Program residential phase was how I was in control of my life and whatever I wanted out of life, I can get with some creativity, a positive attitude, determination, and perseverance."

Conducted at 35 academies across the country, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program is operated in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Defense, National Guard Bureau, state governments and local sites.

Helping more than 131,000 teens to date turn their lives around, ChalleNGe is recognized as among the most cost-effective, highly rated programs of its kind for youth who have dropped out of school. An independent, multi-year study of the program by MDRC shows that high school diploma/GED attainment increased by 29%; college attendance increased by 86% and annual earnings increased by 20%. An independent cost-benefit analysis by the RAND Corporation shows a 166% return on investment in the program – every dollar spent yielded a return of \$2.66 in benefits to society.