

Introduction

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Kirsten Barber: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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Season 4 Episode 7

Kirsten: North Carolina's first National Guard Youth Challenge Program began in the eastern part of the state in Sampson County. Tarheel Challenge Academy officially opened their doors to class one on March 28th, 1994. The academy is a quasi-military environment that provides structure, discipline and a path for at-risk 16- to 18-year-olds to achieve their goals. Cadets go through a residential and program phase before graduating. There are eight core components cadets must complete as part of the NGYCP. These include academic excellence, life coping skills, job skills, health and hygiene, responsible citizenship, service to community, leadership/followership and physical fitness. To date, the Challenge Program in North Carolina has graduated more than 7,000 youths. In this Safety Scoop episode, I had the privilege of interviewing a father-

daughter duo who both have shared experience with the North Carolina National Guard as well as the Tarheel Challenge Academy.

I'm excited to talk about, uh, Tarheel Challenge with you! Rob, if you don't mind introducing yourself for those who may not know who you are, your name and, uh, your role and how long you've been with DPS.

Rob Davis: Okay, I'm Rob Davis. Um, I'm a regional recruiter for the Department of Public Safety, one of three recruiters. So, we traverse m-most of the state, but primarily I'm assigned to the western part of the state. And I've been with DPS now a little over two and a half years.

Kirsten: Awesome. So, Morgan, since you're not a DPS employee, can you introduce yourself to our listeners and, um, maybe give a little bit of information of why you're here today?

Morgan Raines: I'm Morgan Raines. Um, I'm a former graduate from Tarheel Challenge Academy, and I'd just like to share a little bit about my experience there.

Kirsten: What years were you there?

Morgan: This was in 2011.

Kirsten: So, Rob, we're going to start with you. Can you take us through your experience with working alongside the North Carolina National Guard and how you were first introduced to the Tarheel Challenge Academy?

Rob: Well, I was formerly a recruiter for the National Guard, and so I became familiar with Tarheel Challenge because we were involved in supporting

their efforts in working with youth and running their program. So, at different times, you know, we would interact, so that's kind of how I became familiar with them. Uh, and then later on, I had an opportunity for my daughter, Morgan, to attend the program and have that as a segue to, you know, get her on her way in life.

Kirsten: So, Morgan, now over to you. What led to your decision to enroll in the Tarheel Challenge Academy, and can you take us through your first few weeks as a cadet?

Morgan: The traditional high school setting wasn't working well for me. I was an advanced student and overall just getting bored with school. I didn't like being told what to do, where to go, where to sit, and I really craved more independence. When I found out about the Tarheel Challenge Academy, I thought that that was a really good opportunity for me to take an accelerated path toward the independence that I wanted.

And then as far as the first couple weeks as a cadet, it starts out as a transitional period where suddenly you're in a totally different environment. You're wearing a uniform, sleeping in bunk beds, marching, doing group PT. It's totally different than where you were at home, and you have a short amount of time to get used to that. And, um, although that sounds like less independence, this was all part of the process where you started out learning that you needed to listen and—and conform to these expectations, and then as the process went on, you started to realize why those skills were so important and how that could benefit you in the future.

Kirsten: Rob, back to you. While Morgan was enrolled in the academy, what changes, if any, did you notice in her, and as a parent, did you have any concerns?

Rob: Um, I didn't have any concerns, um, other than just hoping that she would stick with it, you know, stick with the program and complete, uh, it. I did notice some changes, you know, pretty soon after her getting there, uh, and you can tell in her letters that she was writing home to us. Um. But I could see where her confidence was starting to grow as a person and really her determination to overcome the obstacles she was being faced with, you know. So, I could see her overcoming those challenges, you know, figuring out how to, you know, get through them instead of, you know, trying to work around them.

[Laughs]

Um, so, those were the kind of things I—I saw as a parent.

Kirsten: Morgan, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program has eight core components which include academic excellence, life coping skills, job skills, health and hygiene, responsible citizenship, service to community, leadership or followership and physical fitness. Can you take us through some of your biggest takeaways involving these components while you were a cadet and after graduation?

Morgan: I thought that the program was very well-rounded. One of the components that stuck out most for me was job skills. So, one of the things that we did was, um, a computer program where we were able to interact with it and input our preferences, our interests and—and kind of

answer questions within the program, and then the—the output was possible trajectories, p-possible career paths, um, college or more of a—a skilled labor position or all—all different paths. And the—the program broke down, okay, what is the projected salary for this career? How long is it going to take, um, to—to get to the position that I hope to be in? Um, how long will I need to be in school? What sort of student loans are associated with that type of—of college program? It was—it was very specific and very eye-opening for me to be able to use my interests and look at these possible forward paths and to be able to choose what I thought would work best for me. That I really enjoyed, and these were realistic paths, you know. So, this was a whole class where they worked with us on using your skills to create the future that you want.

And then another, um, component that had a big ak—impact on me was, um, community service. We did a lot of community service, and I didn't ever dislike it, so it wasn't that throughout the program I learned to like it. I liked it the whole time. We did, um, roadside clean-up, we did community service volunteering at community events and then we did, um, yard maintenance for, like, an elderly lady that lived nearby. And I enjoyed that aspect of it, getting to give back, and I still do that now. And I—I'm—I'm kind of sharing that interest with my kids where we can volunteer, um, and I volunteer a lot now teaching in youth group, um, and clean-up and, like, event planning-type things. So, those two aspects really, um, are still present in my life now.

So, as far as the career planning portion, while I was a cadet, I joined the National Guard and, um, signed the contract while I was still a student there, and then I was able to take the ASVAB and look at those career

paths forward and choose what MOS I wanted. And that kind of started me on the rest of my life as far as—as a career professional.

Kirsten: Awesome, thank you for sharing your experience. Um, that's really uplifting to hear, and I saw on the website I think every Saturday was the community service day with the class of cadets that was there.

Morgan: I think it was every weekend. We did it pretty frequently. Um, some of the things we did early morning when it was cooler. We would do, like, the roadside clean-up, and that's when we did most of our group PT and our long runs but, um, some of the community service event volunteering opportunities were at whatever time those events were. So, one was in the evening time, I remember, and some were over more than one day. Um, and I did like how they tied in some of the opportunities for participating in community events were tied to behavior at school. So, some of these were, uh, um, incentivized kind of for if you're meeting expectations and doing what we're asking of you, then we'd like to reward you with getting to participate in this activity; that type of thing.

Kirsten: Awesome. Well, Rob, back to you. As a recruiter for the National Guard, is there a certain skillset or personality type that you see in people who successfully apply?

Rob: Um, I would say, in general, that that skillset or personality type is one that is eager to learn. That in itself is the foundation because we've got so many different paths that you can join up or jobs that you can be involved with. Morgan mentioned the MOS, that's the Military Occupational Specialty, and there's so many of them, you know, from... Everybody knows what infantry is, you know, but there's also satellite

communications. There's engineers. There's a host of other, um, positions—human resources, which is what, you know, Morgan actually selected when she went in. Uh, so, there's so many other jobs that it really depends on the person and what their interest is, but all of them have to have that desire to learn and achieve and be challenged, you know. So, that would—that would be what would make them most successful.

Kirsten: And you mentioned a few, but can you expand upon what kind of career opportunities are there for folks within the Guard, and what opportunities are available right now?

Rob: Well, each year, uh, there's a variety of updates and evolutions of the Military Occupational Specialties, and so there are some changes. So, you know, what the training looked like, you know, ten years ago to now for the same type of job can be completely different. It's more updated with the times. A traditional Guardsman is a part-time, uh, soldier who is working one weekend a month, usually, and a two-week annual training period sometime throughout the year. Um, that's their traditional contract, is what they're typically doing. But then, there are opportunities for people to apply for what we call Active Guard Reserve, and essentially that program is like being on active duty, but you stay right here in North Carolina and you're doing the job that—that you were hired to do while also being, you know, a drilling member of your unit that you're assigned to.

So, as far as specific jobs, currently I do know the state is transitioning to more of a transportation, uh, state, so they're going to have a lot of transportation opportunities coming up. One of the other opportunities

that also exists, um, since the National Guard actually belongs to the Department of Public Safety, uh, there are also civilian roles, you know, within the National Guard, uh, working as a member of the Department of Public Safety and working with the National Guard, you know, alongside those folks. Uh, one of those, uh, positions is cook. You know, we have several locations where we have academies such as Tarheel Challenge where we're providing meals, uh, for those students, and so that's a great opportunity for somebody to get their start as a cook. We also have the—the positions with the National Guard that are cybersecurity. Those, um, positions are also very much sought-after. But that's where they're not a green-suiter, as we us-usually call them, or enlisted, but they're actually working with the National Guard.

Kirsten:

Anyone with employment questions with the North Carolina National Guard or the Department of Public Safety can reach out to recruiters at recruiters@ncdps.gov.

Morgan, kind of to close out our discussion with you, as a former cadet, what advice would you give to North Carolina high schoolers or their parents who may be considering enrolling in the Tarheel Challenge Academy?

Morgan:

Uh, my advice would be to be confident. I think if you are considering this program, then it is right for you. The cadets who are there are all different. They come from all different parts of the state, all different backgrounds and family environments. Some start out struggling in the various aspects of the program and then slowly improve as time goes. Some initially are successful at certain aspects, like the physical fitness

part or, um, academically, but are struggling in other areas and then are able to work up, um, as the—as your time goes through the program.

The cadets all are very supportive of each other. There's a big sense of camaraderie. It's not competition based. It's really a group effort where there's opportunities where they're able to help each other or they receive a lot of support from the cadre. They are very willing to help in any way that they can, and it's evident that they really care about the cadets. And this can include anything from joining us on the morning—early morning runs; volunteering right alongside us picking up trash just like us, you know; participating in aspects of the program with us; offering extra tutoring outside of the normal class time in the evenings and even just sitting with the kid who can't sleep and wants to talk, you know, even in the middle of the night. They're dedicated. The cadre is there to support the cadets through the whole program. And the—and the cadets are really supportive of each other, so I think it's a group effort. And the program is designed to where everyone can succeed, and they're there to see you through to the end and then even provide support after graduation.

Kirsten: Anything to add?

Rob: I—I think she did a great job sum-summing it up. Um. You know, it just reminded me of an old slogan that the National Guard had which was, um, “you can.” And, uh, and so, you know, during my time (it's dating me a little bit), but, um, that's essentially, you know, you can do what you put your mind, you know, to. You know, I'd say for parents, if they're considering this program, that yes, they're going to have challenging moments and challenging times and obstacles in front of them that are

going to be difficult for them to work through, but the nice thing about this program is—challenges are being met with a collective effort, you know. It's not just the parent and just the, you know, child that is trying to overcome this challenge. It's the cadre, it's the environment they're in and it's the program they're going through. So, you have all of that coming together to help a—a student be—be successful or a cadet be successful.

Kirsten: Well, thank you both for sharing your perspective and Rob for going into some of the recruitment aspects of the National Guard. Any final thoughts, um, thank yous or anything else you'd like to say about the academy? Morgan, we'll start with you.

Morgan: I'm really grateful that I got the opportunity to go through the Tarheel Challenge Program. Um, it was hard at first. There definitely were challenges, but it has really taught me a lot that stuck with me through my whole life. I think about my time there and the impacts that it had on me throughout my career and in my life, eh, um, now, and I'm grateful that I got to learn everything I did.

Kirsten: And Rob?

Rob: Well, I just wo-would like to thank the state of North Carolina as a whole, um, because not only do they give you opportunities to serve your community, such as being employed with the state, they're also giving young people the same opportunity and showing them that, uh, they can also be part of, you know, a collective community.

Conclusion

Kirsten: For more information about careers with the North Carolina Department of Public Safety or the North Carolina National Guard, visit ncdps.gov/careers.

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Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through preparation, prevention and protection with integrity and honor. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, X and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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