



A Second Chance

The National Guard Challenge Program

www.visionpreject.org

The National Guard Challenge Program

Photographs & Text
by

Richard Falco

Every year approximately 57,000 boys and girls drop out of school. These individuals are five times more likely to be unemployed. When they find jobs, their salaries are usually fifty percent less than their counterparts. Eighty-two percent of the prisoners in jail today are dropouts. Because of the magnitude of the problem, a number of states around the country are trying to develop programs to deal with the situation. One such program in New York was called the National Guard Challenge Program. The program was designed to help young men and women get back on track, reshape their lives and earn a high school equivalency diploma.

The program began in 1993 and was located in Peekskill, New York. The Guard Challenge was a voluntary program. Participation was not mandatory. All of the corps members asked to join and after a careful interview process a candidate was allowed entry.

Requirements for the program were that Challenge members all had to be between the ages of 16-19 years old. A corps member had to live within the strict structure of the program that functioned similar to a boot camp. The participants lived at Camp Smith for twenty-two weeks. They would rise at 5:45 am. Each day included six hours of educational instruction and approximately 2-3 hours of physical training and drill exercises. Drug tests were conducted regularly. Lights were out at 9:30 pm. One breach of the rules and a member was out.

The goals of the program were education, skills building, discipline, teamwork and community service. Though the program was short lived -- long term conclusions are at this point difficult to measure -- it did show some impressive results. Of the graduates tracked, some 93% are either employed, in the military or attending college. The program has since been disbanded. The termination of the program was made for political reasons and not because of poor results. To date, the drop out numbers remain high with very few programs to address the need.



Boot camp discipline is used to create an environment that promotes self-esteem and structure.



A number of the girls come from troubled or dysfunctional homes. Upon arrival, each group is assigned to a unit coordinator. The coordinator's first job is to orient the teens to their new environment and help them with the transition into camp life.

After an evening inspection, the girls relax and write in their journals.





For most of the girls, this is their first time away from home. Because of that, all of them experience periodic bouts of loneliness and depression.



The girls live in a very structured environment. The camp's leaders have created activities that require teamwork. These coordinated exercises show the girls the importance of thinking and working together. In addition to these activities, calisthenics and discipline are a large part of the daily routine. Parade drills and competitions are an integral part of camp life.



Every day the girls march and drill on the fields surrounding the barracks. They will chant in unison while marching. The cadre's leader usually initiates a call and response.



The most important element of the program is education. The girls attend school five days a week. Each works to achieve their GED. A total of 5-6 hours is spent in classes or study groups every school day.



Once a week the girls must participate in some form of community service. They can work as crossing guards at a local public school or help out at a neighborhood child care center. Most of the girls seem to particularly like working with younger children.

The concept of community service is a unique part of the Challenge Program. It enables the girls to understand the importance of contributing and giving something back to the neighborhoods in which they live.





Down time. The girls are kept on a busy schedule, but there is time throughout the day when they can relax and unwind.



The phone call home is another important weekly event. Each girl is allowed only one call a week. Because most of the girls miss their families dearly, this moment is anxiously awaited.

The first visit home is always an emotional experience. Each girl has been away for almost three months and all have grown and changed significantly. The mixture of thoughts and feelings during these visits reinforces the fact that they are no longer the same person who began the program.





At the end of every day a platoon meeting is called in which attendance is mandatory. The team leader will use this forum to inform the girls of camp news, upcoming activities and duties; but more important, it is to discuss problems, issues or anything related to the day's events or the program. The girls are also given an opportunity to talk about individual problems or conflicts that may have arisen or dynamics related to the group. During the meeting a girl can ask for a private consultation between a team leader and/or another girl to address a particular situation. The meeting serves as a small therapy session set up to resolve problems and create positive solutions.



The program ends on graduation day. Emotions run high for all of the cadets. A number of them will join the military, some will go on to college, the others will head home and begin the process of looking for a job.



This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of documentary photography and educational programming related to still photography.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, design, and education.

For further information contact:

Richard Falco
Vision Project Inc.
P. O. box 230
North Salem, NY 10560
USA
www.visionproject.org
rfalco@visionproject.org
(914) 277-8850