



National Guard program targets at-risk teens

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By LAURA ZUCKERMAN

SALMON — Jon Thibault will be eligible for the first time this fall to play on the Salmon High School football team because of improvements in his grades that came with his enrollment at the newly established Idaho Youth Challenge Academy.

Thibault, 17, is one of seven young adults from Salmon who recently completed more than five months of a residential component in Pierce of the National Guard program that targets teens at risk of not gaining a high school diploma tied to academic, social or behavioral challenges.

For Thibault, legal infractions and a lack of study skills led to low grades for his first three years of high school in Salmon, keeping the natural athlete off the football team.

“It helped me put my life on track,” Thibault said. “I learned discipline, respect and the importance of having integrity. I learned how to take care of myself.”

The intensive program features learning, life skills and a military-style exercise regimen.

His grade improvement was not the only benefit. Thibault came away from the academy determined to join the Idaho Air National Guard after he graduates.

The academy program is available to Idaho students who must enroll voluntarily rather than being ordered to do so. More than 70 students graduated this year in what was the Idaho academy's first class.

Lemhi County probation administrator Katy Smith said the program, relatively new to Idaho, but in place for some years elsewhere in the nation, has proved a lifesaver for several local teens.

"There's a lot of potential in these kids and the academy has helped them realize that," she said.

The rigorous residential segment of the program is followed by a period of adult mentoring after the teens return home.

Salmon student Cassie Fenstermacher, 19, was failing in school and unlikely to graduate. One of the first females in Idaho to apply to the academy, she recently gained her high school diploma and was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship tied to her performance in Pierce.

Fenstermacher, who today is working part-time at a local discount store, said she hopes to apply the scholarship funds to training in phlebotomy.

Looking back at failing grades, Fenstermacher said she thought she was stupid.

"I wasn't applying myself, I was distracted with friends and going to parties and my grades just bombed. I gave up," she said.

At the academy, she gained top marks in such subjects as math, science and history.

"For the first time in my life, I learned I was intelligent," Fenstermacher said.

Her mother, Gloria Schroder, said she has seen the change in her daughter since her return in recent weeks from the academy.

"Cassie has more confidence and self-esteem. You can see it even in how she carries herself," Schroder said.

At a ceremony and dinner last week — put on by the Salmon Valley Baptist Church to celebrate the teens' achievements — Seventh Judicial District Magistrate Judge Stephen Clark congratulated academy graduates and urged them to continue striving.

"You saw you had problems and you made the decision to address them," he said. "I can't help but be proud of you for your accomplishments today."

Lemhi Commissioner John Jakovac told the teens decisions made at this stage would affect the rest of their lives. He advised them to learn from mistakes and to stay focused on their goals.

"When you try to jump across a creek without looking, you don't know where you'll end up and you probably won't make it to the other side," Jakovac said. "But if you don't take your eyes off the spot where you want to land, you're going to make it there."