



Otter salutes youth academy

Cadets meet with Idaho governor

- By KATHY HEDBERG of the Tribune

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- Tribune/Barry Kough

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, also commander in chief of the Idaho National Guard, offers words of encouragement to the seventh class of cadets Monday at the Idaho Youth Challenge Academy at Pierce.

PIERCE - For Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, the success of the Idaho Youth Challenge Academy is as much a personal triumph as a political one.

He lobbied hard for the National Guard and the Idaho Legislature to approve opening the school in the old Pierce Elementary School in January 2014 instead of somewhere closer to a metropolitan area. And he has made the program, which serves more than 100 high school dropouts in two 22-week courses each year, part of his \$350 million, five-year state education plan.

Otter noted with pride Monday - after swooping down with an entourage in a Black Hawk helicopter for a last-minute stop - that he has visited every one of the seven classes that have gone through the academy so far.

And when all 107 cadets lined up outside the school Monday for a group photo with the governor, who was dressed in camouflage military fatigues, his was the brightest smile in the crowd.

The academy, Otter said, is among his proudest achievements in his three terms as governor.

"You know, what you learn here is, anything is possible," Otter said, watching the cadets line up in formation outside on the school blacktop.

"Almost everything in my life experiences has served me well. Some things I did wrong and some things I can champion. This was one of my ideals."

Otter noted that about 5,000 Idaho students drop out of high school each year. The academy makes it possible for at least 200 of them to get back on track by providing a disciplined academic and performance program that is monitored for a year after they graduate.

"These kids are going to make a big difference," Otter said, adding that former cadets often drop by his office in Boise to "tell me what they're doing and (about) their families."

Earlier the governor addressed the cadets in the school gymnasium and told them about his own experience as a high school dropout.

"I left school at 16 and wanted to join the Navy," the governor said. "I thought I was smarter than all eight of my brothers and sisters and my mom and dad."

Because he was too young to join the military, he spent a year working on a dairy farm and finally concluded he would go back to school and pursue an education because, "I didn't want to work that hard" for as little pay as he got then.

Aliana Gallegos, 16, of Caldwell, is among the cadets who was inspired by the governor's message Monday.

"That's really awesome," Gallegos said. "I've never met the governor - ever."

She said that when she first arrived at the academy, "I was really scared." She missed her family but had been involved in drugs and didn't take her education seriously. At the academy, her English teacher assigned her to read the book, "I Am Malala," by Malala Yousafzai, about how girls living under the Taliban regime were not allowed to have an education.

"I never really looked at it that way, that I have an education here and that I have the opportunity to come to (the academy)," Gallegos said. "It's been a life-changer."

Gallegos recently was promoted to squadron leader because her instructors recognized her leadership potential.

Harv Nelson, the program coordinator for the academy, said in the next few weeks cadets will be attending a job fair and meeting with business people from around the state who will help them explore employment possibilities after they finish school. Part of the academy's program includes vocational training.

"There are a whole lot of businesses interested in trained workers," Nelson said.

Otter emphasized the influence the cadets could have on their families and friends when they return home.

"In five and a half weeks you'll be through," the governor said. "No, you'll be beginning. ... You know a lot about what leadership is, and you have the opportunity to change a lot of lives."

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