

Challenge Award Recipients Cite Passion for Program, Success in Helping At-Risk Teens

By Wayde Minami

Scott Monroe is a civilian who always wanted to work with at-risk youth. Jeffrey Connell was a National Guard lieutenant colonel looking forward to a quiet retirement when he was asked to temporarily take over his state's program and wound up falling in love with the job. Maj. Gen. Glenn H. Curtis saw the impact of programs like ChalleNGe and helped make his state a model for success.

They came to the program from different backgrounds and perspectives, but one thing they all shared was an absolute dedication to helping struggling young men and women succeed.

On Feb. 21, Monroe, Connell and Curtis were recognized for their exceptional achievement in support of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program at the National Guard Youth Foundation's Annual ChalleNGe Champions Recognition Event. The event, which was held in Arlington, Va., also featured ChalleNGe Program alumni and current cadets.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 20 percent of high school freshmen won't graduate. ChalleNGe, which is funded by the Department of Defense and operated by the National Guard, was created in 1993 to leverage the structure and self-discipline learned in the armed forces to help teenage dropouts grow into successful, responsible young adults.

There are now 40 ChalleNGe academies nationwide, which have produced more than 145,000 graduates. The NGYF is a non-profit organization formed to advocate for the ChalleNGe Program and to provide resources to its graduates. Since 2011, the NGYF has awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships for college, trade school or vocational school to ChalleNGe graduates.

Monroe, this year's Teacher of the Year honoree, is the lead instructor at the Alaska Military Youth Academy, where he's worked for 12 years. He says he's always wanted to work with disadvantaged young people.

"I went into college fully wanting to go into this field with at-risk youth," Monroe said. "I felt like one of the best opportunities to make the biggest amount of change in kids' lives was the Alaska Youth Academy. The National Guard programs, they're amazing, and they get you the environment that you need and the support you need to make a difference."

Connell, who was selected as Program Director of the Year, heads the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy. He was about six months away from retiring from the Michigan National Guard and looking forward to golfing and not having to work on weekends, when he was suddenly asked to take over Michigan's program, which at the time was struggling.

In short order, he revised the program's curriculum, fiscal processes, and approach to outreach. Within a year, Michigan's program saw a 400-percent jump in applications, a 5-percent increase in graduation rates, and a 24-percent increase in GED pass rates. The program has been so successful, that Michigan is now looking at opening a second Youth ChalleNGe Program.

While he says receiving the award was "an amazing honor," Connell was clear that he credits the program's staff and partners with enabling Michigan's program to be such a success.

“I think more I’m happier for the program,” he said. “I think I just happen to be the recipient and I just can’t be happier for the program, all the people that did the work that allowed me to get this award.”

But the bottom line for Connell is the teens who benefit from the program: “You don’t do it unless you have a passion, and that’s what keeps me in it every day,” he said.

Curtis, this year’s Leadership Award recipient, is the adjutant general of Louisiana. As the state’s top military officer, he oversees the three academies that make up the Louisiana National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program: Camp Beauregard in Pineville, Camp Minden near Shreveport and the Gillis W. Long Center near Baton Rouge.

Over the past year, Louisiana has enrolled 1,729 cadets, 84 percent of whom graduated. Some 21,815 cadets have completed Louisiana’s program since 1993—14.5 percent of the national total. In addition, in 2016, Louisiana cadets earned a total of 2,777 college credits, 593 cadets received GEDs, and 108 earned technical community college credentials in technical fields.

Curtis is a big believer in the program.

“The data shows that YCP simply works,” he said. Independent reviews have found ChalleNGe to be effective and efficient at addressing the problem of at-risk youth, both in terms of operating costs and participant outcomes.

A study by the RAND Corporation found that for every dollar spent on the ChalleNGe Program, the nation realizes \$2.66 in benefits—a 166 percent return on investment. According to the report, this return is substantially greater than that of other social programs targeting disadvantaged youth that have undergone a rigorous evaluation.

MDRC, a social policy research organization, conducted a multi-year evaluation of the ChalleNGe Program and found that it significantly improved the educational attainment. In addition, the study found that program participants were more likely to be employed and their earnings were 20 percent higher than comparable populations who were not ChalleNGe graduates.

“Youth Challenge cadets work hard, and for many of them, their ability to graduate from the program can literally be a life-changing event,” Curtis said. “We have many, many success stories that have come from the ranks of the Youth Challenge Program. I look forward to every YCP Graduation day—it’s such a great real-life example of what can come from hard work and determination.”