



What are 3 things you have learned as a cadet in your JROTC program and why are they important?

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I heard one line in an English class during my freshman year that has eluded me ever since: “The rose that grew from a crack in the concrete.” The idea of a fragile flower triumphantly emerging from the unforgiving embrace of cold, unyielding concrete fascinated and perplexed me. How could something so tender and delicate flourish amid such harsh circumstances? This mystery lingered, germinating in my mind until I reread the poem years later. When I came back to it, I realized that I related to the rose, defying odds that seemed to dwarf my stature. It is within the nurturing embrace of my JROTC program that I blossomed and learned three invaluable lessons that shaped my life: confidence, personal resilience, and the importance of strong leadership in serving others.

From my early years in school, my background as a refugee and immigrant in the United States led to stereotypes and stigma that weighed on me daily. The unwarranted profile was based on a simple and misguided interpretation of my personal history, and carried the sole intent of degradation. I would miss school on days when I had to speak in front of everyone, all to avoid the criticism of not sounding American. This all changed when I spent my first afternoon at a general meeting in my Army JROTC. What struck me most were the stories of immigrants who had undergone transformational journeys to better their lives, their families, and their communities. One such story that resonated deeply with me was that of Bol, a Sudanese immigrant who had escaped a civil war and joined the army. Through his service, Bol not only changed his own life but also achieved great success and earned prestigious ranks. I remember seeing his photo hanging high on the wall of my JROTC building and realizing that now that is the level of success I want to achieve. If he could be resilient and overcome so much, I too could achieve the impossible. Finding solace

and strength in my roots, my JROTC program ignited a defiant voice within me, challenging misconceptions about immigrants. Alongside confidence, it instilled resilience — resilience that felt as simple as morning runs and raising the flag. It sparked a new idea of perseverance that ushered me to keep going regardless of my circumstances.

Amid the challenges of a global pandemic, my JROTC journey began, providing me with a newfound support system. Having lost my mother just a year earlier, I sought solace, healing, and examples of resilience within the program. During a class orientation, I was captivated by a series of videos showcasing soldiers persevering through incredible hardships. Among them, J.R. Martinez’s story deeply resonated with me. Despite sustaining severe burns while serving in Iraq, he saw his experience as a symbol of strength and honor. This powerful lesson taught me that resilience not only soothes the soul but also becomes the driving force that propels us beyond our comfort zones, empowering us to achieve greatness.

In that inaugural year with the JROTC, I became squad leader, taking my first step as a leader. Guiding my fellow cadets, I learned the importance of effective communication, strategic organization, and leading by example— all of which when I was grieving the loss of my mother. These lessons taught me the extraordinary power of uplifting others, breaking through the barriers of self-doubt, and enveloping myself in a cloak of resilience. As I delved deeper into the program in my sophomore year, the second lesson of leadership unfolded. We transitioned back to in-person learning, refining my leadership skills and learning to lead face-to-face, not just behind screens. I took on the role of a squad leader once again, entrusted with fostering cohesion and unity among my team of cadets. I led by example, delving

deeper into the art of communication, discovering the power of effective interaction, and utilizing collaboration to inspire and unlock the full potential of others. A particular team-building exercise tested the depths of my leadership skills, a challenging puzzle that needed to be solved within a limited timeframe. Guided by the principles of leadership instilled in me by the JROTC program, I delegated tasks and called on fellow cadets to collaborate. Together, we achieved victory, showcasing the power of collaboration and the synchrony of leadership. These experiences taught me that true leadership lies not in commanding, but in inspiring and empowering others to achieve greatness.

As my junior year unfolded, I transitioned into a new chapter of my JROTC journey, finding myself in the Marine Corps JROTC program. With a new chapter unfolding, I had to navigate resilience, leadership, and service within new waters. The Marine Corps JROTC program challenged me to my core, demanding that I learn, unlearn, and relearn a multitude of military drills, cadet knowledge, and physical fitness. Held to a higher expectation, I had to rise above my limitations, embracing the thorny path of personal growth. It was here, amidst the crucible of the Marine Corps JROTC, that I discovered the profound significance of service to others. The program steered me towards active societal contribution, leading me on a path of community service with tangible impacts. I dedicated 234 hours to organizing winter and summer drives, teaching elementary children how to read, and participating in community cleanups. These experiences ignited my passion for selflessness and inspired me to co-found a club called Roots and Foundation. Through dance performances, street cleanups, and efforts to foster unity among the African diaspora, our club made a significant impact. The rivers of inspiration flowed, creating a sense of empowerment and celebration of diversity.

Now, as I approach the end of my high school journey, a symphony of pride and gratitude resonates within me. I have experienced a transformation from shattered con-

fidence to unbreakable resilience, evolving from a timid cadet to a radiant leader dedicated to service and change. I was ashamed of my accent and hesitant to speak up in the past, but now I actively encourage kids with similar backgrounds to embrace and honor their roots. This metamorphosis motivated me to create the nonprofit organization “Bridging Futures,” which connects students to essential programs like JROTC, the National Honor Society, and Jobs for Arizona’s Graduates. These programs equip them with the crucial skills needed for success in the corporate world and universities. Acting as a bridge, our nonprofit guides students toward their goals. I express my immense gratitude to the BBB and SRP for providing me with the opportunity to give back to the program that inspired my journey toward confidence, resilience, and leadership through service to others.

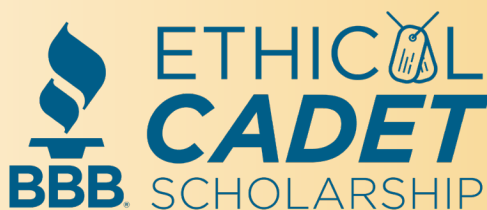
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