

## Graduation Speech

Good morning ladies and gentleman.

My name is Cadet Robert Eiland, I am from Klamath Falls, Oregon, I'm 17 years old, and I'm Class 50's Student Body President. While here at Youth Challenge, I've earned **8** High School credits. After graduation, I will be returning to Klamath Union High School to earn my High School Diploma and graduate with the class of 2016. On behalf of our Cadet Core, OYCP staff, and the Oregon Military Department, I would like to welcome you to the Oregon National Guard Youth Challenge Program graduation ceremony for class 50. I would like to start off this speech by congratulating every Cadet that has made it to the end. You're the strong ones that stuck with it, and changed your lives for the better. I've come to know all of these young men as wonderful friends that I will never forget! We have all become so close in these long 22 weeks. We have formed bonds of friendship that most people will never experience. Tomorrow, we will all be back in the environments which brought us to this program. I'm not always an optimistic person, but I have faith in every Cadet, that they will go back to their environments and transcend beyond what they thought they could ever do.

At OYCP, I averaged a 3.8 GPA, and learned some of the most important life skills a 17 year old can learn. I learned how to communicate effectively to other people. I learned how to cope with extremely stressful situations in a calmer manner. Most importantly, I learned the importance of education and why it's key to understand the importance of Academic Excellence. Coming to this program was only the first step in making our lives better. Now it's time to use the skills we learned here, and put it to the real test.

After coming to an orientation, my mindset of OYCP was completely different than what I know now. After my orientation as an applicant, I tried to make up so many excuses to my family why I couldn't go here or why I shouldn't. It never registered in my mind that I was too prideful to say that I was scared to come here and leave home. Before I came to this program, I was a very unmotivated person in life. My parents gave me so many chances to better myself. After the last straw, they took all my privileges from me. Pretty much anything that gave me enjoyment or happiness just to try and get me back on track. I used to hold a huge grudge on my parents for that, but I realized that doing what they did really showed how much they loved and cared about me. They had to put up with the constant look of stress, depression, and unhappiness on my face to try and better my life for its future. Even my friends got involved and did a lot to try and help or motivate me. Unlike a lot of others here at the Youth Challenge Program, my friends were great influences on me. They're are like family to me and I would do anything for them. I always think of the quote, *"Show me your friends, and I will show you your future."* I look back on those bad days and say that I must've been the one exception to that quote. I was too stubborn to take what people were saying to me to help, and just threw it away thinking I could just fix myself. I learned quickly that I couldn't do it by myself.

I truly realized how bad I needed this program during basketball season of last year. My sophomore year of high school I was voted the most valuable player on my JV team. My dream after high school was to go onto college to play. After my coach saw my grades, he restricted me from playing Varsity basketball. I was a junior and played JV all over again. I was really hurt and upset. I always dressed down with the Varsity team, warming up and shooting around with all my friends, but sat the bench every single game. People at school would always ask why I didn't play, and I had to tell them the truth. After telling so many people the reason why I

couldn't play, it really took a toll and made me realize that I needed to make changes in my life. I couldn't stand the disappointed look on my family's faces, nor know in the back on my mind that I had potential that was being wasted. After the constant feeling of the depression and stress, I finally came to a conclusion on what I needed to do. I didn't want to confess that I needed the program, but I knew deep down that if I didn't at least try, I would start to give up on myself.

I have very few memories of intake day... mainly I have this theory that the day was so terrible that my mind erased them for beneficial purposes... I remember the Director telling everyone to say goodbye to the people who brought you here. I hugged both of my parents and told them that I loved them and that I could do this. I then remember lots of yelling, tripping, and banging in to people. My last memory was everyone sitting in those grey chairs on the drill floor, sitting with perfect posture and my arm numb from holding our Cadet Handbooks perfect in front of our faces for almost an hour and a half. Although this day doesn't seem like it has many good memories, but this is the first day my platoon and I were all together... learning together, learning about each other, and learning about how we're going to live for the next 22 weeks.

The first night sleeping in those racks, I couldn't help but think, "I have no one else to blame but myself for being in this situation. Everything I am about to go through is no one else's fault but mine." I never cried during Red Stage or threatened to quit, but believe me when I say it was a fraction of hell on earth. The days felt like they would never end! The 14 days of Red Stage felt like months. And I for sure was not used to getting yelled at so often during the day, or doing push-ups or other physical activities for messing up! After what seemed like months of calling ourselves Candidates, we walked in front of the staff on the Drill Floor, earned our first

ribbon, and gained the title of Cadets. Those 2 weeks were the hardest weeks in my entire life, and I couldn't be more proud of myself to complete them.

After White Stage began, the program didn't get easier... we all just got better. We got stronger, and more dedicated. Next thing I know, I'm walking to the drill floor to meet my parents for 1<sup>st</sup> break. I hugged them and started walking out like it's a normal thing. Half way to the car, my parents said how proud they were of me, and I started to break down. I never thought I could miss people so much, nor did I know anyone could get that happy. My favorite part of 1<sup>st</sup> break was seeing most of my family! My grandpa is a Marine that served in the Vietnam War. I've never seen such a big smile on his face when I talked to him about all the military slang we learned, and the drill and ceremony that we practiced! It really made me happy that I could vaguely relate to what he went through in his time in the Military.

Break was great and it was really nice seeing all my family and telling them about how much I learned, but every upside has to have some kind of down fall. It sucked coming back! We all started to get off our homesickness before we left, and we all gained it right back again. My platoon had a hard time flipping the switch back to our reality of being at a military school, and we had a lot of physically demanding sessions with really ticked off Cadre.

By the time Visitation rolled around I was really locked into the program. I was used to the schedule of the day and the days just started rolling by! I really enjoyed visitation because the parents got to see a little bit of our world. It's hard explaining our world to them, but having them see what we have to do, and where we sleep felt really cool.

Going back home for 2<sup>nd</sup> break was a really good feeling! I thought 2<sup>nd</sup> break was going to be bad because it started off with driving back home to Klamath with no heater! That soon

changed when I got home and saw my mom, my two sisters, and my cousin. It was an extremely emotional moment for me to see one of my sisters, Kendra. Unlike my other sister, I hadn't seen her in almost 7 months. We all had a great thanksgiving together, and I was so blessed to be able to eat at a table with my family once again. As much as I loved hanging with my family, I enjoyed showing up to a basketball practice and seeing all my teammates and friends again. It felt good to know that I was missed by my peers!

Coming back after 2<sup>nd</sup> break wasn't nearly as bad as first. Everyone was upbeat and ready to take on the rest of the program. Now that we're here on our last day, those 17 days felt like forever! It definitely was well worth being patient for. I've learned that if you apply yourself, stay focused and learn how to block out your distractions, there's nothing you can't achieve in your lifetime. The only thing that can stop you is you. Hope is something in our minds that says "possibly" when the rest of the world is trying to tell you "no". All of the Cadets that accepted and stuck with the ChalleNGe of OYCP, looked at hope as not "possibly", but as a fulfillment of making their lives better. *God sometimes takes us into troubled waters... not to drown us but to cleanse us -Anonymous. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith -Timothy 4:7.* I want to finish this speech by thanking all the OYCP staff for believing in us and never letting us fall too far before picking us back up! We will never forget any of you! Thank you! Before we begin our ceremony, I would like to introduce our platform guests and speakers:

- **Major General Michael Stencel, the Adjutant General for the State of Oregon**
- **Heidi Moawad, Public Safety Policy Advisor for Governor Brown**
- **Shay Mikalson, Superintendent of the Bend-Lapine School Disctrict**
- **Kathy Saterdahl, Chairman of our Advisory Board**

- **Dan Radabaugh, Director of the Oregon Youth Challenge Program**
- **Skip Butler, Principal of the Oregon Youth Challenge Program**
- **Pat Shields, Commandant of the Oregon Youth Challenge Program**

In addition, I would like to recognize; from Senator Merkley's office.

- Mr. Phil Chang
- Deschutes County District Attorney, John Hummel
- Deschutes County Commissioners, Tammy Bainey, and Alan Unger
- Deschutes County Sheriff, Shane Nelson ...and lastly
- Members of our Advisory Board, Mentors and Special Guests in Attendance

We are very proud of our achievements and grateful that you came today to celebrate our hard work and our life changing experience. Thank you.

**To all Cadets of Class 50! “Congratulations, we’re here, and we’ve made it!”**