



Retired colonel touches lives of high school cadets

December 22, 2011 9:11 AM

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Editor's note:

Today we continue our 10-part series profiling some of the people who made a difference in 2011. Those profiled were nominated by Daily Press readers, with the finalists selected by the Daily Press staff.

From the 2011 Person of the Year series:

APPLE VALLEY • The Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, known as the JROTC, isn't considered "cool" on most high school campuses.

But at Academy for Academic Excellence it is.

The Apple Valley charter school enrolls about 400 students [that is only our high school] and more than 100 of them belong to the Air Force JROTC program. And these young cadets are among the top achievers in the classroom.

"I made tons of friends. I had tons of opportunities," said Erin McFadden, a 2011 AAE graduate who participated in the JROTC for four years. "I was always surrounded by the best people, best students, hardest workers. It really pushed me to be my best."

In the middle of this is Col. George Armstrong, a 62-year-old retired Air Force fighter pilot who directs AAE's JROTC. He has influenced hundreds of students' lives since he founded one of the nation's three charter school Air Force JROTC programs in 2007.

"He worked so hard to make the ROTC program and school so good," said McFadden, who's a freshman at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. "He put so much time and effort that you don't want to be the one to let him down and let his hard work disappear. ... I still want to make the colonel proud because he's the person who made me who I am today."

Recognizing his achievement and leadership, the JROTC headquarters recently named Armstrong the instructor of the year, for which he will be honored in January.

Born in New Jersey to an Army major, Armstrong said he moved around a lot as a child, attending 16 different schools. He was accepted to the U.S. Air Force Academy, but decided to go to Rutgers University, Armstrong said.

"Of course, I was stupid back then," he said, laughing.



JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

George Armstrong leads the Academy of Academic Excellence's Air Force ROTC program, which has a membership of about a quarter of the school's population

He completed the ROTC program there and joined the Air Force upon graduation, where he would spend the next 27 years. He was assigned to George Air Force Base during the 1970s.

“I liked the area and I decided that when I get out of the Air Force, I would come back here,” Armstrong said.

Another goal he had was to become a teacher upon retirement.

He accomplished both of them when he got hired as a math teacher at AAE in 1999. He was about to start the JROTC at the school when Sept. 11 happened. The Air Force had to freeze funding new programs and Armstrong’s plan went up in air.

After six years of waiting, however, Armstrong finally got his chance when the Air Force approved the program.

“The Air Force doesn’t want to take a chance on charter schools, but they took a chance on us,” said Armstrong, who then became a full-time JROTC instructor.

He went around classrooms to promote the program, which began with 38 cadets. Armstrong runs the program like the military, teaching students military history and how to stand and march. But he also tutors them and takes them on field trips. To stay in the program, cadets couldn’t fail in the classroom.

Some of his students get scholarships for college ROTC programs and others enlist straight into the military. His motto is developing good citizens, he said.

McFadden said she joined the JROTC because her friend did. But soon it became the center of her high school life, just like for many other cadets.

“(Armstrong’s) so passionate when he teaches,” McFadden said. “It’s really inspiring how interested he is in the subject he’s teaching. It makes everyone really excited to learn about it.”

Armstrong graduated his first four-year unit this year. Hanging on his office wall is a picture of the unit the seven graduating students gave him.

“I have 48 freshmen this year. I want all 48 to stay with me for four years,” Armstrong said.

“It’s just making right choices,” he said. “When I was their age, I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. It gives them a place to belong to while they figure out what they want to do with their lives.”

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