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ACADEMY HOPEFULS

Four AAE students get congressional nominations to US Air Force Academy

BY LYNNEA LOMBARDO ~ STAFF WRITER

APPLE VALLEY • Written neatly in the center of a whiteboard was a small quote that read, “People who hate discipline, have no discipline.”

“This is my favorite quote,” said Col. George Armstrong, pointing to a small group of students. “And they personify it.”

Armstrong, who is the leader of the Air Force Junior ROTC program at the Lewis Center’s Academy for Academic Excellence, is referring to four of his students — two of whom are twin girls — who received nominations by U.S. Rep. Jerry Lewis to attend the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“It’s very uncommon for any school to get one nomination, and we got four,” Armstrong said proudly of his students, Kyle Rodriguez, Ashley Bergstrom and Cori and Dena McFadden.

The students, who attend the Lewis Center in Apple Valley, which is named after Jerry Lewis, represent the largest group of students in the school’s history to be nominated for the prestigious university. The Air Force Academy requires all of its students to earn Bachelor of Science degrees, then enlist in the Air Force for five years minimum upon graduation. And although the school does not charge tuition, all of the students agreed when Dena said they would pay in “blood, sweat and tears.”

The teens, who are all 17, received their nominations last month after interviewing with a five-member panel representing Lewis in Redlands on Oct. 20. To be granted an interview with the panel, however, the teens said they needed to produce letters of recommendation, transcripts and resumes.

“Just getting the interview was a process,” laughed Ashley, who became inspired to join the Air Force Academy as a freshman. “But this is something we’ve all wanted and have worked hard for.”

The Air Force Academy requires that all viable applicants have a congressional nomination, pass a physical fitness test and, according to its website, be of good moral character and meet high leadership, academic, physical and medical standards.

Cori and Dena, who are physically identical, finish each other’s sentences as they talk about their past — and their future.

“We have wanted to go into the military since we were 3,” Cori said as she waived a finger in between her and Dena.

“Whoever gets in — goes,” Dena said.

“If one of us gets in, the other wants that person to go. I want her to fulfill her dreams,” Cori said.

The twins said they were inspired by their grandfather, who served in the Army.

Although the teens do not need their final applications submitted until the end of January, they are not wasting any time preparing for the future. They have all been busy with their respective activities, which they say center solely around their grades, sports and ROTC.

Ashley has her private pilot's license, Cori and Dena just ran their sixth marathon and Kyle is the captain of the soccer and cross-country teams. All four students are in the National Honors Society, have lead roles within the ROTC program and are at the top of their class with grades.

"They've had me for four years," Armstrong said. "I watched them grow and I am so proud of them. Getting a student into the Air Force Academy has been one of my personal goals — at least one of them is getting in."



JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

NOMINATIONS: Kyle Rodriguez, from right, Cori McFadden, Dena McFadden and Ashley Bergstrom show their letters from U.S. Rep. Jerry Lewis nominating them to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy. To have one student nominated is an honor. Academy for Academic Excellence has four this year.

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