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Young Marines train for years before enlisting

By Magdalena Wegrzyn
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LONGMONT — Preslee Miller can't wait to enlist in the U.S. Army.

The discipline. The values. The camaraderie.

He loves all of it.

But he's 11. So for now, Miller is a recruit in the Flatirons Young Marines.

"Before, I was disrespectful to my parents and didn't have any discipline," he said during boot camp May 15.

The Flatirons Young Marines is an education and community service program for students 8 years old through high school. The U.S. Marine Corps sponsors about 300 Young Marine units in the U.S. and overseas, according to the organization's website. The program also is part of the Marine Corps' efforts to prevent drug and alcohol use among youth.

Miller, who will be in seventh grade at Imagine Charter School at Firestone, said that since joining the Young Marines, his grades have improved and he's getting along better with his parents.

"I want to join the Army when I get older," he said. "I want to be in the same branch as my brother."

His brother, Army Pfc. Dom-enick Schlagel, deployed to Iraq in March.

Miller said he tells his brother about what he's learning in the Young Marines during weekly Skype chats.

"He says he's proud of me," said Miller, a Dacono resident. "I tell him that we do lots of (physical training), lots of learning. He likes that I'm doing this because I'm having more discipline."

Young Marines recruits pass through a 13-week boot camp during which they practice physical drills and learn about military history, customs, ranks and traditions.

The Loveland Marine Corps League sponsors the Flatirons Young Marines unit, which meets each Saturday for boot camp at Longmont's Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2601.

The local group has a dozen active young marines and 11 recruits.

After boot camp, recruits graduate to privates and become full-fledged members of the Young Marines. They can advance through the ranks and participate in unit activities, including marching in parades, setting up Memorial Day services, retiring torn flags and volunteering throughout the Front Range.



Flatirons Young Marines executive officer Brian King addresses recruit Terry Webster, 10, and other recruits during drill May 22 at the Longmont VFW. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

For more information

Flatirons Young Marines are looking for volunteer staff members interested in working with children. Military experience is preferred, but not required. To volunteer or for more information about the program, call 720-204-3788 or e-mail flatironsyoungmarines@gmail.com.

Clad in gray sweatpants and white T-shirts with their last names scrawled on the back, 11 recruits listened as Cpl. Alex Griffith barked orders May 15.

“Right, face!” snapped Griffith, 14, a four-year member of the Flatirons Young Marines.

Hands clenched into fists at their sides, the recruits moved 90 degrees to the right.

“One, two!” they called out as Griffith looked for wayward elbows, incomplete turns and whispering.

His mother, Pat Griffith, watched the scene unfold in the parking lot behind Longmont’s VFW.

“He needed to learn respect,” said Pat Griffith, who joined the Flatirons Young Marines’ all-volunteer staff a year ago. “He needed to understand that I wasn’t the only one who commanded respect.”

And that’s exactly what happened when he joined the unit, she said.

Alongside Staff Sgt. Madelaine Struwe, 16, Cpl. Griffith led the platoon in formations, marching and a series of drills.

As the highest-ranking Young Marine in the unit, Struwe said she looks forward to training the recruit platoon.

“They’re the highlight of my week,” said Struwe, who lives in Thornton. “At school, I can’t boss people around or help them learn.”

Struwe, who joined the Young Marines five years ago, said she plans to enlist in the Marine Corps after high school.

“My dad was a Marine,” she said. “I just want to follow in his footsteps.”

But the program isn’t a recruiting tool, training officer and senior drill instructor Byron Berger insists.

“We’re not turning them into little soldiers,” said Berger, a Thornton resident. “We’re trying to make them into better citizens.”

Berger started working with recruits five years ago after enrolling his 11-year-old daughter in a Fort Lupton Unit.

“Just being around some of these older vets to really understand what they did for us is important and should never be forgotten,” said Berger, whose father was a private in the Marines.

“What it all comes down to are people who care about them and are willing to teach them,” he continued. “We’re really here to be their mentors. I’d put my kids up against anybody as far as respect. I see these kids, and then I go to the mall and see other kids. And there’s a big difference.”

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