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## **GRIZZLY YOUTH ACADEMY: A LITTLE KNOWN GEM**

What is the Grizzly Youth Academy? Many San Luis Obispo County (SLO residents have heard of the facility at Camp San Luis, but may not know its purpose. The Grizzly Youth Academy is not a punitive program. Rather, it is a charter school run by the SLO County Office of Education in conjunction with the California National Guard.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1991, the U.S. Congress directed the National Guard to develop a program that would help at-risk teenagers. The result is the National Guard Youth Challenge Program. The Grizzly Academy opened in 1998 as an outpost of this program. This informational report is to give San Luis Obispo County citizens a brief overview of the Grizzly Academy, how it plans to expand the services it provides and to highlight what it envisions for its future.

### **METHOD**

The 2013-2014 Grand Jury toured the Grizzly Academy during the sixth week of the class session that began in July. Jurors met with personnel from the National Guard, educational staff and cadets enrolled in the program. This report includes information based upon conversations with the cadets and staff as well as from the Grizzly Academy and SLO County Office of Education websites.

### **THE PROGRAM**

There are two in-residence sessions per year that begin in January and July. It is available to males and females ages 16-19, with 18 being the maximum age at time of application. To be accepted into the program, the prospective cadet must be a high school dropout or at risk of

27 dropping out, a U.S. citizen or legal resident, drug-free and have no felony convictions or  
28 pending charges. The program is open to residents of California with Grizzly servicing the  
29 counties of Ventura and those north (Sunburst Academy in Los Alamitos services Southern  
30 California counties). Since the program is completely voluntary by the individual and his or her  
31 family, it is important that the applicant be physically, mentally and emotionally prepared for this  
32 commitment. Applicants are required to visit Grizzly Academy prior to enrolling or to attend an  
33 orientation where the expectations of the Academy are explained. The July session receives  
34 approximately 575 individuals who attend the orientation of which about 450 apply. For the  
35 January session, about 425 tour and 375 apply. Both sessions accept 225 students which include  
36 approximately 60 females. Generally, 10% of the admitted students are residents of San Luis  
37 Obispo County.

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39 Each session is 22 weeks and divided into three phases: Pre-Challenge, Challenge and Post-  
40 Residential. The Pre-Challenge phase is conducted by the National Guard and helps to  
41 determine whether the applicant is prepared for the program. After undergoing physical and  
42 emotional challenges during this pre-phase, students earn their uniforms and become cadets. The  
43 Challenge phase of the program most resembles a military boarding school as the cadets live in  
44 barracks, undergo rigorous physical training, eat in a base dining facility and attend classes. The  
45 goal of the program is for the cadet to either get back on-track for reentry into high school, to  
46 earn a GED or to graduate with a high school diploma. As a rule, cadets increase by one and a  
47 half grade levels during this phase. They have use of computers with limited access to the  
48 internet to facilitate their studies. The last phase begins when the cadet returns to his or her  
49 home community. During this Post-Residential phase, the cadet is matched with a mentor who  
50 offers assistance and guidance in continuing his or her progress.

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52 The Grizzly Academy funding is primarily from two sources: federal funds from the National  
53 Guard Youth Challenge Program and State educational funds. Although it is a locally funded  
54 charter school under the SLO County Office of Education, the State reimburses the County. The  
55 tuition, room, board and most expenses are paid by the Academy, with no charge to the cadet's  
56 family. The cost per student is between \$17,500 and \$19,000 depending on the number who  
57 graduate. The graduation rate for the 2011-2012 term was approximately 86%.

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In addition to public financing, the Academy maintains a United States Code section 501(c)(3) non-profit foundation for private fundraising. This foundation funds non-governmental aspects of the program, such as vocational training, social events and community service. The Local Advisory Group that oversees the foundation is comprised of local community members including elected officials and private citizens. Currently, fundraising for the foundation has limited outreach and is mainly through word-of-mouth.

**INSTILL CONFIDENCE, COMPETENCE AND BELIEF IN SELF**

From the tour, the 2013-2014 Grand Jury found the program exemplary. A few features of the program were often positively cited by staff and cadets:

- 1. My Action Plan (MAP)** – This plan encompasses short and long-term goals developed by the cadets with their counselor’s guidance and is used in conjunction with the cadets’ mentors. This plan allows the cadets to think about how their actions today can affect their future.
- 2. Residential Housing Environment** – This aspect of the program allows the cadets to get away from a negative environment within their community and develop new, positive relationships.
- 3. Mentorship** – Upon enrollment, the applicant selects a mentor. The mentor needs to be at least 25 years old, undergo a background check and attend one-day training at Grizzly or online. Often they are the cadets’ family members, neighbors or school counselors. This program, important in the transition back to the cadet’s hometown, helps the cadet avoid the pitfalls that were present before attending Grizzly. Mentors report monthly on the graduates’ progress and track their placement in school, work or community service. A sign of the success of this program is evidenced by the fact that some Grizzly graduates have returned as mentors.
- 4. Leadership Skills** - Grizzly actively involves the cadets with leadership opportunities and every cadet must assume a leadership position within the 22 weeks of the program. To attain the

88 goal of leadership training for all cadets, the Academy is organized into four platoons (three  
89 male/one female) of 55-60 individuals. For each platoon, there is a platoon leader, four squad  
90 leaders and ten additional leadership positions available. As the program evolves through its 22  
91 weeks, other positions become available including Staff Sergeant, the highest position.

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93 Cadets are divided into nine classrooms; each class nominates two classmates as candidates for  
94 student body president and vice-president. After the election of these officers, the other  
95 candidates serve on the student body committee. The Grand Jury observed each candidate offer  
96 his or her speech and campaign platform to each class. Since cadets previously may not have  
97 been in a position of leadership, these roles are viewed as a positive element creating empathy  
98 and self-esteem.

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100 **5. Vocational Training** – The Academy has on-site and off-site programs for vocational  
101 training including food services. Upon completion of this program, cadets receive a California  
102 Certificate for Food Handling. Twenty-two cadets per session have an opportunity for training  
103 in automotive shop at Cuesta Community College.

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105 In week 18, cadets are eligible for the off-site Job Shadowing Internship Program. Out of 200  
106 cadets, approximately 100 apply and 50 are chosen. This program places cadets in internships  
107 among local businesses between Morro Bay and San Luis Obispo with the goal of providing  
108 practical job skills upon return to their community. Older cadets have priority, especially if they  
109 are on-track to graduate or earn their GED.

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## **MOVING FORWARD**

112 The National Guard Challenge program has been successful. Grizzly Academy was the first  
113 extension of the program in California and was replicated with the Sunburst Academy in Orange  
114 County. To service greater numbers, plans are being analyzed to establish a separate northern  
115 California campus and expand the existing individual campuses.

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117 Currently, Grizzly is undergoing an approximate \$3,000,000 expansion of its facilities at Camp  
118 San Luis. Construction began in November 2013 and will add at least four buildings for  
119 classroom space located on the school site just behind the existing classrooms. This expansion is  
120 to reduce class size from 30 to 25 cadets. In addition, the Academy plans to enroll 50 additional  
121 cadets, and organize another female platoon. This will allow the current female platoon, larger  
122 in relation to the male platoons, to be similar in size. This planned program expansion is  
123 scheduled for completion in time for the July 2015 session.

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125 The current expansion will not require additional dining, barracks or medical facilities, as  
126 existing infrastructure will be used. However, there are no significant proportional savings since  
127 the additional cadet population will increase staffing. The Academy plans to maintain the same  
128 ratio of National Guard staff to cadets and add teachers to accommodate additional cadets and  
129 smaller class size.

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131 Beyond the extra space for classrooms, the Academy would like to add both athletic facilities  
132 and enhanced vocational training. Currently, the cadets play field sports on a dirt field near the  
133 school. The Academy would like to raise \$300,000 from private donations and grants to install a  
134 synthetic surface soccer field.

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136 One of the Academy's objectives is to provide the cadets with practical skills that will be  
137 beneficial when they return to his or her community. The Academy wants to expand the  
138 vocational training beyond internships, food handling and auto mechanics to include training for  
139 home health care, welding and construction. Another area of interest is specialized training for  
140 cadets from counties requiring particular skilled labor; for example, petroleum related services  
141 for cadets from counties with a petroleum industry base. The funding for these programs would  
142 come from its non-profit foundation and grants.

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## **COMMENDATION**

145 The 2013-2014 Grand Jury commends the Academy staff and their plans to expand the program  
146 beyond its accomplishments of the last quarter century. The Grand Jury was impressed by the

147 positive atmosphere and the feedback received from the Grizzly Academy's cadets and staff.  
148 The dedication of the National Guard and the charter school personnel is evident in the results  
149 achieved -- instilling self-discipline and good habits that result in an advancement of  
150 approximately one and a half grade levels in 22 weeks. Thus, the cadets are able to successfully  
151 reenter high school, earn their GED or graduate with a diploma. Also, vocational training, while  
152 limited, assists the cadets with beginning a career path.

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154 The Academy is an asset to at-risk youth of California. The expansion of this program is  
155 appropriate so that more at-risk young women can participate and class size can be reduced. The  
156 County of San Luis Obispo is fortunate to have the Academy within its boundaries. Not only are  
157 the cadets exemplary young citizens who are striving to improve their lives, they are often in the  
158 local community assisting with projects such as roadside litter maintenance and at various events  
159 such as the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer annual fundraiser in October.

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