



# Leadership, Character, and Service: The pillars of Success

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When I was five years old, I drew a picture of my future self. In this drawing, I am wearing a captain's hat and epaulets. "I am a pilot" is scrawled unevenly across the page. That sketch has quietly stood watch over our kitchen, affixed to our refrigerator since 2013. It was not long until I realized that in addition to becoming a pilot, I felt a higher purpose to serve my country. By the time I was in fourth grade, I knew that I wanted to fly in the United States Air Force. I have never wavered in this pursuit. Therefore, it was an exciting revelation when I learned that Campo Verde High School offered a JROTC program. It was there that I began building the platform on which my future resides. The primary pillars of this platform are Leadership, Character, and Service.

Leadership development is one of the key benefits provided by JROTC. I have had the good fortune of working under some outstanding mentors. Senior Aerospace Instructor, Colonel Stephen Wood, along with our corps commander, Cadet Lieutenant Colonel Evelyn Frost, have been instrumental in building my leadership skills. Their guidance has helped me refine my approach to problem solving and conflict resolution. In addition to mentorship, JROTC has also provided me with multiple opportunities to practice being a leader, serving in positions such as Executive Officer, Flight Commander, Drill Commander, Logistics Commander, and Color Guard Commander. These experiences have taught me that there is great value in being able to recognize the talents of my fellow cadets. Two years ago, while leading the Color Guard, I was faced with a difficult situation. We did not have a complete team and it was only one week

before the Desert Talon Drill Meet. Colonel Wood was considering withdrawing from that particular event. I knew that I needed to come up with a plan quickly. My friend Chloe was part of the corps, but had never performed in the color guard. She was not convinced that she could do it. I could see that Chloe had talent, so I spoke with her along with the rest of the team. I proposed an intense practice schedule in order to be ready for the competition. Although Colonel Wood was skeptical, he gave us a chance to prove ourselves. We worked through our lunch periods and after school every day for a week. Not only were we ready for the meet, but we came in first place and brought the trophy home to AZ-951. It has been my experience that leaders who innovate and instill confidence in their teammates ultimately succeed in their endeavors.

JROTC has also been instrumental in the development of my character. Part of doing the right thing means honoring commitments. One of the challenges of being involved in many extracurricular activities is managing time and balancing obligations. Competing interests are always an issue for me. I have been faced with difficult choices many times over the years. One particularly disappointing situation that caused me great mental anguish occurred during my freshman year. My JROTC unit was scheduled to take an epic trip to visit the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. This trip was one of the reasons that I was so enthusiastic about joining AZ-951 in the first place. I could not wait to visit the Academy. Attending USAFA had been my dream for five years. Prior to the final date of the trip being decided, I had already committed my time to my orchestra teacher, Mrs. Payne.

She was depending on me to lead the second violins in the Aboda Festival. As you may have guessed, the USAFA trip was planned for the same days as Aboda. Missing the trip was very upsetting for me, but I had to do the right thing and keep my commitment to Mrs. Payne. The festival was a great success and we earned a Superior rating, which is something to be proud of. This is certainly not going to be the last time that I have to give something up due to having prior commitments. Colonel Wood appreciated and respected my decision to bypass the trip. Those with strong character understand the power of keeping your word.

The final pillar, service, is the bedrock of JROTC. We support our community in many capacities including Feed My Starving Children events, color guard presentations, and charitable collection drives to name a few. However, to me, the most meaningful way we serve is when we honor our veterans at POW/MIA ceremonies. At the most recent Veteran's Day event at Christ Greenfield Church in Mesa, we performed a missing man table ceremony. This was particularly touching as many of the veterans were moved to tears. I met a widow who thanked me for our service and I could tell that everyone in attendance was grateful for our tribute. There

have been many moments like this at all of our veterans ceremonies. It never fails to leave a lasting impression and I am humbled by their sacrifice. I cannot always pay back those who have given so much, but I do try to pay it forward everyday.

Without a doubt, being a cadet in JROTC has changed the way I view the world. I have become a more effective leader and I now truly understand that my character is the core of who I am. Through serving my community, and ultimately my country, my goals are beginning to come to fruition. Shortly after turning 16 years old, I earned my FAA Private Pilot Glider license and am presently working on my powered airplane certification. I look forward to beginning the US Air Force Academy application process this March. None of this would be possible without having learned the valuable principles instilled by Colonel Wood and my time in JROTC.

## Victoria Thom

### Campo Verde High School

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