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### **The mission continues for Alaska Military Youth Academy cadets**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** – The fog slowly lifted early morning from the Alaska Military Youth Academy campus. The morning wake-up command of “Get on Line!” is now literally replaced with “Go online.”

The AMYA class 20-2 is exactly one-half of the way through the “residential” phase of the program. In a typical cycle, the class would be excited about seeing their families for the first time on Mother’s Day.

COVID-19 has ensured this cycle is anything but typical. At week six, cadre sent the cadets home as new restrictions settled over the state and nation.

Cadets left the campus with a mix of excitement, anxiety and a lot of homework to keep them engaged during what rapidly developed into the longest home pass in AMYA history. Cadre members, accustomed to face-to-face opportunities to correct and motivate the cadets, were relegated to phone calls, emails, and video-conference meetings.

Academic, and Recruiting, Placement, and Mentoring staff developed diverse and innovative methods of communicating with cadets in rural and urban Alaska. Those connections are both difficult and critical to the cadets.

Many of the cadets who reside in the local community went home to families impacted by furloughs, and the dining facility continues to prepare meals, which are distributed to the local cadets in need. The mission of AMYA to serve at-risk youth continues despite the obstacles created by the response to COVID-19.

One very distinct difference between AMYA and a public school or boarding school in Alaska is the program doesn’t fall under the Department of Education and Early Development for funding or policy. That distinction is critical in that cadets don’t have the ability to promote to the next grade based on their current semester standing.

They are not enrolled in the public-school system while at AMYA and face a risk of falling further behind their peers in school. Over the past few years, the classes are more closely aligned with the public school calendar in order to support cadets who choose to return to high school with their newly recovered credits.

The closure of the campus forced staff to seek alternate means to complete the Test of Adult Basic Education and General Education Development testing in order to maximize the opportunities for the cadets to catch up or graduate.

Since departing campus, many of the cadets of class 2020-2 remain highly engaged while practicing the behaviors they learned during their short stay on campus. Cadet Selina Jijon is one such cadet, and she sent the following note to share:

"I enrolled in the Alaska Military Youth Academy for a couple major reasons," Jijon wrote. "First and foremost, I needed to make up a good amount of credits in order to graduate high school with my class and obtain my diploma. Secondly, I needed to get myself out of a hole I had put myself into, I was dealing with a lot of depression and really wasn't in a good mind space at all.

"The atmosphere of AMYA was better for me because there was always little to no distractions while I was there. I cannot wait until we are able to return, so I am able to finish off the cycle and complete all the goals I had set for myself, thank you AMYA, couldn't have done it without you."

A quick look at the AMYA Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/GOAMYA/](https://www.facebook.com/GOAMYA/), reveals many activities that Jijon and her classmates are doing to remain engaged in the program while away from campus.

While many of us are looking forward to getting past COVID-19, there are many valuable lessons that AMYA will be able to apply to future classes. The connection between parents, guardians and the staff at AMYA is at an unprecedented level.

While it hasn't been unusual for numerous daily posts and photos of the cadets during their campus and off-campus activities to appear on Facebook, it was very unusual for the staff to conduct weekly parental video teleconference meetings until now.

Based on the feedback from parents, we will likely include a version of this as a standard practice during future classes. We've learned that there are few substitutes for the face-to-face time our staff spends with the cadets, and that distant delivery provides new and diverse challenges, which are best overcome by increased coordination between staff sections.

At the end of the day, each class is different, and the common trait is every cadet gets out of the program a reward that is equal or greater than their effort. The experience for class 2020-2 is unique and difficult for both staff and cadets.

AMYA is not cleared to return the cadets to campus yet, and we are prepared if that changes. We are also monitoring the COVID-19 response as we work to complete this cycle and prepare for the next.

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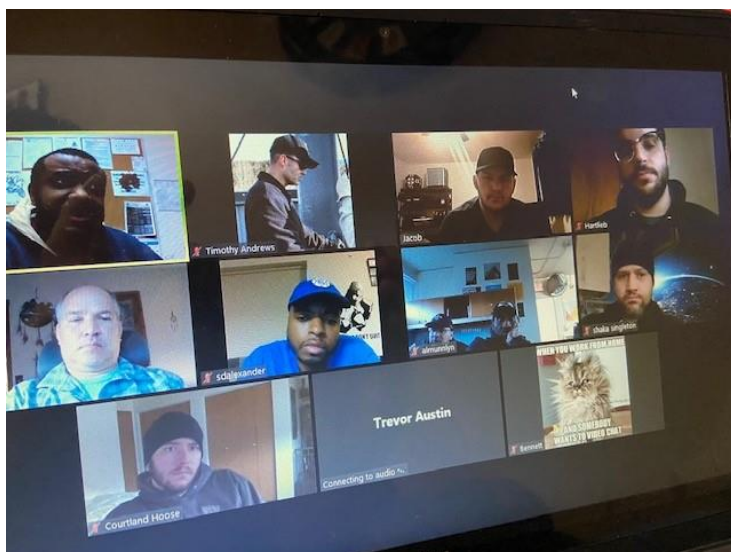
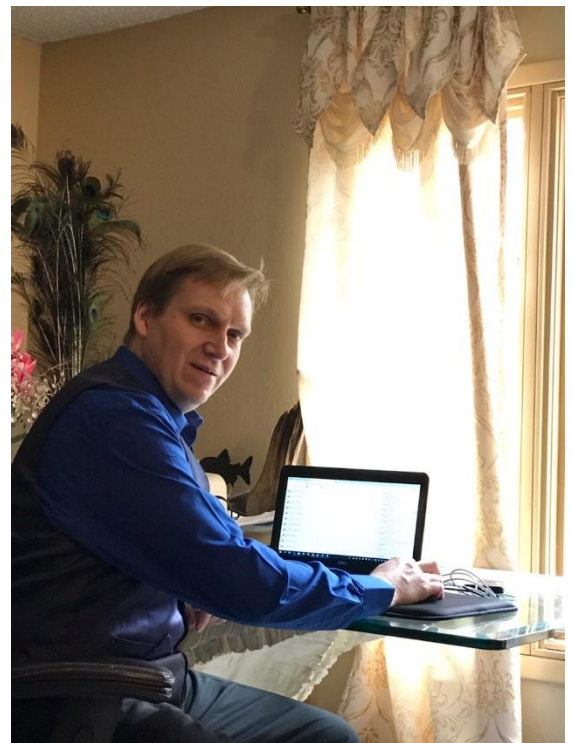
**About AMYA:** AMYA was established as a community-based program that leads, trains and mentors 16- to 18-year-old Alaskans who have left high school without receiving a credential. The Youth Challenge program is a quasi-military, 17-and-a-half month residential and non-residential high school.

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Selina Jijon is a cadet at the Alaska Military Youth Academy. (AMYA file photo)

Mark Balts, Alaska Military Youth Academy instructor, delivers academics in a whole new way during COVID-19. "I had to explain long division over the telephone, and that was challenging." (Courtesy photo)



Alaska Military Youth Academy staff meet via video conference. (Courtesy photo)