

Our Service as Coast Guardsmen is About Servitude (Continued)

I grew up in a small town in Illinois. I have an older sister and a younger brother. I thought I had the perfect life growing up. My dad owned his own small trucking company and I had a stay at home mom. My life changed forever when I was 12. My mother's mom died and my mother started a downward spiral. Drugs and alcohol consumed her life. She went to California for rehab when I was 15, and that is when the problems started to become real. I focused on school and volleyball instead of her problems. My dad was my #1 fan. He had played volleyball too, so I always thought I was making him proud. When I got a full ride to the Coast Guard Academy it meant that my dad didn't have to work as hard to send me to college. It meant that I made it. I had free college for four years – no, paid college! Then a job for at least five years after I graduate. My sister and I are the first generation in our family to go to college. I don't know what your definition of the American dream is, but I know I am living it.

I went to PEP when I was a swab. Yes, I know my Golf company swab mates remember that. The thing I remember most was Mr. Dewecter yelling at me. He asked me why I was here. He told me to think of the person I most admire. Then he told me to think about what that person would say if they saw me at that moment. I thought of my dad. And from that moment on, whenever the tough got going, I thought about what my dad would think of how I was handling the situation. He was handling so much more, and thinking of his problems made mine seem easier to overcome.

On my brother's 18th birthday in April 2012 my mom left. My parents started their divorce and things got ugly in the courtroom. My mother had turned into a selfish woman I did not know. I know it was the drugs and alcohol, but I still cannot forgive her for some of the things she said and the lies she spewed to milk the system.

My father's business was failing with gas prices rising and he was unable to pay the court-ordered \$1,500 a month to my mother plus all her insurance. He was looking at jail time for not being able to pay. He had suffered from depression for a long time, but we thought he was getting help.

On Friday, December 21, 2012 (last Christmas break) my dad didn't come home from work. He and I had been playing cards the night before and I thought we had planned on it again. I figured he had to pick up a late shift so I went to bed early. The next morning he still wasn't home. I thought it was weird but continued on with my day figuring he was still working. By Saturday night I was ready to call the cops. My sister, uncle, and I had all been in contact throughout the day looking for him, so we filed a missing persons report around 8 p.m. We checked his bank accounts, I-pass accounts, local hospitals; nothing. I barely slept that night, but woke up at 6 a.m. to go to my old volleyball club for a tournament. Minutes seemed like an eternity. At 10 a.m., my sister walked in the door and said we had to go. That was the moment I knew.

She dragged me outside. In my mind I didn't want to know. I wanted to be 10 again; innocent, with a strong family and not a care in the world. I looked at my sister and said "Tell me"

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and nodded. "TELL ME!" I screamed.

"They found him" was all she said.

For two days all I said aloud was the word "No". I didn't eat. I was afraid of sleeping. Mostly, I sat and listened to my heart. I focused on it. How it fueled my entire body. I thought about my heart

beating and how his wasn't any more. I wished I was back at the Academy. I missed my little snow globe life where nothing really substantial hit the fan. At home there was real life problems. At school there are only Academy problems.

Academy problems. Think about that for a second. We have too many credits every semester, can't wear our own clothes, can't sleep during the day, we can only leave during certain hours, etc. We are all going through Academy problems. And while all problems are real, we need to take a step back and put them into perspective. We all understand that we need to blow off steam on the weekends, but getting drunk is not a very responsible way to do that. I know first hand that going downtown and drinking can be a good time sometimes, but it gets old fast. And if it doesn't, you have a problem.

When it doesn't get old fast, you start to jeopardize more than you might realize. Take my mom for instance: she lost her entire family. Think about having to go home and tell your family, those people who are most proud of you, that you got kicked out of the Academy. Spiderman movies are most famous for the line, "With great power comes great responsibility." I challenge everyone to think about that considering in only a short time we will have some very great power. We will be looked up to by people twice our age once we graduate. We will have positional power and will represent the entire Officer Corps. With great power comes great responsibility.

When explaining the Academy I always describe it as a four-year program. We are here for four years because that's how long the system takes to work. And believe me, it works. We have all done something that wouldn't make our families proud, but the ones that get caught seem to be the ones that don't belong as officers in the Coast Guard. We are given privileges slowly so we can learn to handle them. Those that can't handle them probably won't be able to handle the responsibilities of officers in the fleet. It's amazing to look around at my classmates and think about how much we have matured in only three years. The system works.

Sunday December 23, 2012 I lay awake in bed, afraid of the nightmares to come. Scared of waking up in this reality again. I suddenly didn't mind Academy problems as much. I imagined my dad in his final moments. My uncle had found him at his place of work. No one had told me, but I knew he did it. I was hoping he had just taken a bottle of Advil and fallen asleep: something that didn't hurt. I thought of him sitting there, feeling hopeless, with nowhere to turn, no future to look forward to. He would never be able to retire. I imagined him crying: the strongest man I have ever met falling apart.

The decisions you make on the weekends affect others. We are the privileged few. We live next door to our best friends for four years rent-free. We get paid to get a top-notch education from a military academy. We get to make more money than my father did per year in our first year out of college. We are living the American dream, so I beg you all to start cherishing this opportunity.

Anyone that was a 4/c Hellion last year knows Miss DePorto's rules to success. #1: Do the risk/reward analysis. #2: Do the cost/benefit analysis. If you decide the risk is worth the reward and the cost is worth the benefit, you can't be upset with the punishment. You knew what the possible outcome was. So if you do get caught, don't lie about it. Take your punishment and learn.

I did my analysis last semester. I debated quitting this place. Drinking seems to be where everyone going through conflict goes. But I decided that my family had been through enough. I was going to do it for my sister. I started painting on the weekends instead of going out. I started a blog to write

down all my thoughts. I wish I had worked out because I would be 20 pounds skinnier, but hey, it's 20 pounds I got from sleeping too much and eating what I wanted. I put in for a Regimental Staff position: something I never imagined myself doing. But it was a new position. The Regimental Workplace Climate Officer – the cadet that deals with diversity affairs and sexual assault. During my interview I was asked “What does the Academy mean to you?” At that I broke down in front of Chiefs and Officers who I highly respected. Once I got myself together I managed to explain that the Academy means hope. It means family. I have more family here than I do back in Frankfort. I consider the Corps of Cadets my siblings going through our Academy problems together. It means I am away from all the garbage of the world that citizens have to deal with. I am so fortunate to be here it brought me to tears. I want you all to imagine what your life would be like if you weren't here and you lost both your parents. That is my siblings. I am the fortunate one.

I'm not telling you my story for sympathy. I'm telling you for understanding. I want to see everyone here graduate because I know Admissions would not have let someone in that wouldn't one day be capable of being a leader in the United States Coast Guard. But we all have bumps in the road, and how we deal with them is what defines us.

It's a shame that the worst moments seem to be defined by out of character acts that happen under the influence. I'm not telling anyone not to drink because that would be ludicrous. I'm just challenging the Corps to start changing the climate. Watch out for each other. Don't be afraid to tell a friend to switch to water. Encourage your friends to go to the theater every so often. We are supposed to participate in two sports every year. Participating in sports helps people manage their free time better, especially on the weekends. We have sponsor families at our disposal. Instead of going downtown every weekend, why don't we hang out with them? Maybe more family time around children and animals will help us remember why we are here and who we are making proud. Our service as Coast Guardsmen is about servitude.

For many of you I am preaching to the choir. For some of you this is a wake up call you will take to heart. For those sitting there letting this go in one ear and out the other: this is four-year program. Shape up or ship out because the system works.

Thank you.