

# Civic Leadership Academy

Weeklong visit to nation's capital propels many cadets to an exciting career of public service



Photo by Lt. Col. John Erickson, Colorado Wing

The 24 members of this year's Civic Leadership Academy pose for a class photo in front of the U.S. Capitol, one of the cadets' main destinations during their visit to Washington, D.C.

*By Steve Cox*

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Being a Civil Air Patrol cadet and attending premier activities like Civic Leadership Academy in Washington, D.C., is an experience that often resonates well beyond the cadet's teenage years.

Just ask former CAP cadets Jackie Briski of Woodstock, Va., John Erickson of Colorado Springs, Colo., or Danielle Meyer of Jacksonville, Fla.

Briski and Meyer are graduates of the 2005 Civic Leadership Academy, one of the first held in Washington. Since its inception 11 years ago, the weeklong academy has become one of America's top civic education opportunities. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, in recognition of the program's outstanding academic value, placed CLA on the National Advisory List of Student Contests and Activities for 2011-2012 — the fourth straight year it's made that prestigious list.

“I think most cadets who attend CLA really don’t understand the quality of the program until they get there,” said Briski, a CAP captain who returned to CLA this year for the third time, her second as a full-time senior staff member. “They hear about CLA cadets meeting the secretary of state, the director of the CIA and Supreme Court justices, but they’re still completely blown away when it’s their turn to have the opportunity to ask them questions.”

“CLA was one of the most beneficial activities I participated in while I was a cadet,” said Meyer, now a student at Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville. “CLA required me to introduce highly recognized government officials, conduct myself in a professional manner on a broader scale and taught me the importance of networking on a global level.”

Briski, who helped with curriculum development in addition to leading one of the breakout groups for this year’s CLA, said such benefits are by design.

“The focus of the academy is persuasive leadership,” she said. “When I attended CLA as a cadet captain, I had already learned a lot about the classic hierarchical model of military leadership. CLA gave me an opportunity to learn about different leadership styles when there isn’t a clear-cut order of authority like a chain of command.”

Such exposure, at such a high level, is educational and inspiring, Briski said. “CLA was my fourth time visiting Washington, D.C.,” she said, “but it was the only time that I ate lunch with an ambassador, received a briefing from a general in the Pentagon, met U.S. Rep. (now

House Speaker) John Boehner, toured the CIA, shook hands with the deputy secretary of state — and met aviation legend Col. Mary Feik, my region commander and the CAP national commander — all in the same week.”

Erickson, a lieutenant colonel in CAP’s Colorado Wing, didn’t get to experience CLA as a cadet, but he has more than made up for it in the past three years as a faculty adviser, the last two years as the activity’s deputy director.

“As a constitutional law and appellate attorney, I have a special love for our nation’s capital, its rich history and its infrastructure,” Erickson said. “To be able to introduce the nation’s sharpest cadets to the

same has been rewarding in a way that words cannot adequately explain. To be sure, I am more than grateful for the opportunity to do it.”

In addition to a blend of field trips, lectures, seminars and assigned readings from historic and current sources, CLA cadets visit the U.S. Capitol, the Supreme Court, the State Department, the CIA, the Pentagon, the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va.,

and the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, as well as the World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Women in Military Service and Lincoln memorials and Arlington National Cemetery, where they lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns. At each of these locations, they hear from VIPs who provide insights designed to deepen their understanding of government in action.



Photo by Lt. Col. John Erickson, Colorado Wing

At the 2012 Civic Leadership Academy, Cadet Lt. Col. William McLaughlin and Cadet 2nd Lt. Sierra Pierce help lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

“There were so many extraordinary events that we as cadets were able to take part in, but I distinctly remember being fascinated when I walked in the doors of the CIA Headquarters as well as speaking with government officials from the State Department,” Meyer said.

“I had never even heard of the country of Kyrgyzstan until we toured the State Department,” Briski said. “I found myself reading about social unrest in Kyrgyzstan related to recent elections, from the same sensitive daily brief that then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had read literally a few hours before I did.”

Seven years later, Meyer’s CLA experience is still a positive influence. She hopes to obtain employment in a district attorney’s office as a criminal prosecutor or as a civil litigator in a family law firm after graduating from FCSL. Before law school, she served as a police officer in Cochran, Ga., working for both the Cochran and the Middle Georgia College police departments.

Meyer’s CLA experience led her mother, Lt. Col. Vickie Meyer of Melbourne, Fla., to Washington as well, as a member of the academy faculty.

“Danielle spoke very highly of her experience, so

of course I was interested in the activity,” said Meyer, who has served as director of cadets for CAP’s Florida Wing as well as its Southeast Region.

Meyer feels CAP activities like CLA played a major role in her daughter’s development. “I believe everything about CAP has led Danielle to where she is now,” Meyer said. “I think the opportunities she earned, the experiences she got and the skills she learned have served her well, i.e. public speaking, leadership, writing skills, responsibility, moral leadership and time management.”

Danielle Meyer’s CAP career was extensive. In nine years as a cadet in the Patrick Composite Squadron at Patrick Air Force Base, she rose to the rank of cadet lieutenant colonel and visited many places, like Alabama for Cadet Officer School, Pennsylvania for Hawk Mountain Ranger School and Sweden as part of the International Air Cadet Exchange.

CAP also gave her opportunities to lead. She attended COS both as a student and as an executive officer. In addition, she was deputy commander at a Southeast Region encampment and cadet commander at a Florida Wing encampment.

“I have been offered jobs and various positions based in part on my CAP leadership experience and skills,” Meyer said. “When employers/schools see on a resume that a young adult has had experience in managing/leading such extensive activities, they are more eager to have that person in their office/school/firm. They know you are trustworthy, dependable and hard-working.”



Capt. Jackie Briski, right, visits with one of the 2011 Civic Leadership Academy cadets, Cadet Capt. Sara Fishbein, during a 2011 tour of the nation’s capital. Like Fishbein, Briski was a cadet in the Ohio Wing when she attended CLA. For the past two years, she has returned to the event as a faculty member.



Then-Cadet Lt. Col. Danielle Meyer, center, poses for a photo with two other CAP cadets attending the 2005 Civic Leadership Academy.



Lt. Col. John Erickson stands in front of the Smithsonian Castle, one of the many interesting sites Civil Air Patrol cadets visit during their week in the nation’s capital.

Photo by Cadet Maj. Christopher Weinzapfel, Indiana Wing

So, how did Meyer end up in law school?

“I thoroughly enjoyed working as a police officer and often miss it; however, I felt my goals and eagerness to have a different impact on the judicial system led me to law school,” Meyer said. “I am in my second year and have ranked in the top 1 percent of my class (currently ranked eighth of 596 students). I am involved in the Student Bar Association as a legislator, chairperson for the Mentor/Mentee Committee, a member of the Phi Delta Phi National Legal Honor Society and just received an invitation for candidacy on Law Review.”

Briski also credits activities like CLA with her development. Ten years after she joined CAP as a 16-year-old cadet in the Pathfinder Cadet Squadron in Middletown, Ohio, she remains active in CAP as the Virginia Wing’s cadet activities officer. Like Meyer, Briski was involved in a wide variety of cadet activities, including COS and IACE. She received CAP’s highest cadet honor — the Gen. Carl A. Spatz Award — in 2006.

Such success stories are common in CAP, which motivates members like Erickson to return to Washington each year for activities like CLA. Erickson also joined CAP at an early age, as a cadet in the Connecticut Minuteman Composite Squadron in New Haven in 1985. “I was 14 at the time,” he said. “To date, it remains one the best decisions I have ever made.”

Erickson now serves as character development instructor for his unit in Colorado, the Pikes Peak Senior Squadron at Peterson Air Force Base. Previously, he served as the Alaska Wing’s director of cadet programs and as commander of Mat-Su Valley Cadet Squadron in Palmer.

As he has for three years now, Erickson looked forward to this year’s CLA, particularly Legislative Day.

Every year, the CLA cadets participate in the event,

“*(At Leg Day) cadet officers are some of our best spokesmen.*”

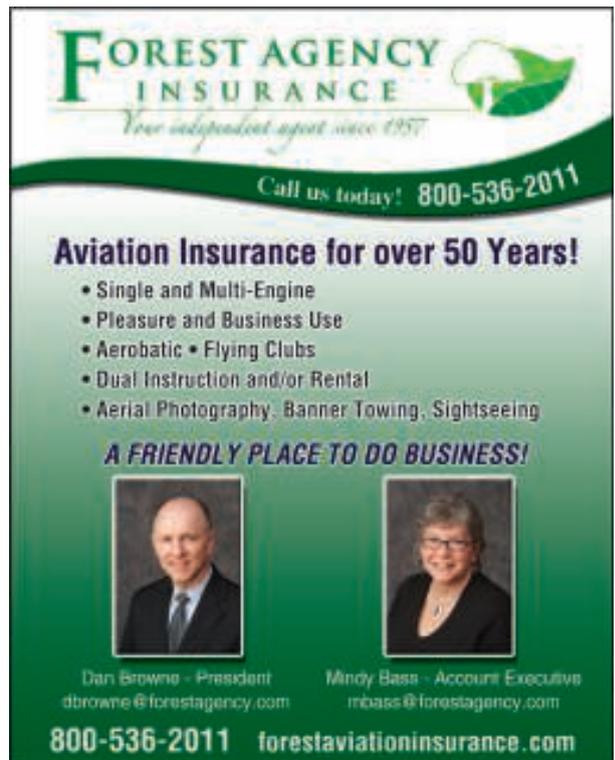
— Capt. Jackie Briski,  
2005 CLA graduate and  
current senior staff member

which coincides with CAP’s National Winter Board meeting. On Leg Day, the cadets accompany their region and wing commanders and assist them in telling legislators on Capitol Hill how CAP’s primary missions of emergency services, aerospace education and cadet programs have benefited their communities.

“My favorite part of the CLA

experience is witnessing the cadets meeting with their respective congressional leaders for a cause worth fighting for, i.e., CAP,” Erickson said.

“Each year, I’m blown away by how articulate the cadets are while speaking with members of Congress and their aides,” added Briski. “By the time a cadet earns the (Gen. Billy) Mitchell award, he or she has a really good understanding of the missions and values of CAP, so cadet officers are some of our best spokesmen.” ▲



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