

## Yellow Footprints

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On a grey Saturday morning in Spring of 2007, I planted my 11-year-old feet on a set of yellow foot prints that would serve as the first steps to the development and discovery of my self. Without my experiences in the Young Marines program and the opportunities it has afforded me, I would be nothing close to the young woman I am today - but my pre-teen self didn't have a clue. All she knew is that the rain was cold, the voices were loud, and the field was muddy. And much to her surprise, she was enjoying it.

For eight consecutive Saturdays, that young girl gave her all mentally and physically in every aspect of Recruit Training. She transformed from barely being able to look someone in the eye to being able to stand tall and answer questions in front of a board of Registered Adults. More than anything, she was able to proudly wear the uniform she put on that eighth Saturday knowing that it had been earned, not just given. That afternoon she, amongst a platoon of boys aging eight through sixteen, was announced the Honor Graduate of Recruit Class 2007 Alpha. Those eight weeks provided the most drastic change I had ever experienced, and all for the better. The girl I became suddenly had the confidence and motivation to excel in the face of a challenge, and enjoy not only the magnitude of the outcome but the experience of the journey. My being announced as Honor Graduate set the theme and the standards for the rest of my time in the program; standards that I continually strive to raise.

Once I earned the title of Young Marine, I immediately immersed myself into the various opportunities of the program, setting out to attend all three leadership schools, for one and two weeks at a time each summer. Not only was the training daunting, but looking back, I can't imagine how I as a 13-year-old had the courage to enthusiastically fly across the country to join ranks with a hundred other Young Marines whom I had never met. Yet every summer for three summers, I did. In 2011, out of the top fifty Young Marines in the nation, I was chosen as the National Advanced Leadership School Honor Graduate. This title, more so than any, sparked a series of events which led me across the country and, eventually, across the world. As the opportunities of the program increased, I continued to search for and create my own.

It was through these experiences and accomplishments that I was named Young Marine of the Year - first for my unit, then the Kentucky Battalion, then the 2nd Division - at which point I was blessed with the trip of a lifetime escorting WWII veterans to Guam and Iwo Jima for the Reunion of Honor. This past May, I stood tall before a board of our National Director and Division Commanders, at which point they chose me to represent our program and its 10,000 members for the next full year.

When I speak of the Young Marines program, be it in front of a national convention, to a prospective young child or to a seat partner on a flight, I not only speak with the confidence of years of training and experience, but I speak from the heart of a life that was fundamentally and forever changed. Each time I take to the stage, my mind drifts back to that Kentucky drill deck, and I wonder how many other stories unknowingly began with a yellow footprint.