

A disciplined life: Temecula Valley Young Marines build character

By: LORELL FLEMING - Staff Writer

TEMECULA -- Kathryn Byers rose to the top of her recruit training class for physical training and continues to develop leadership skills, her commanding officer said.

And she's only 9 years old.

Kathryn is one of 60 preteens and teen members of the Temecula Valley Young Marines, a nonprofit, heavily structured youth education and service organization that promotes mental, moral and physical development of its members. The Young Marines focuses on building character, leadership skills, and advocates a healthy, drug-free lifestyle. The program is geared for girls and boys, age 8 to the completion of high school.

"We give the kids a bit of the Marine Corps' self-discipline and a regimented lifestyle," said Michael Guiles, commanding officer of the local group. "We instill in our Young Marines a sense of right and wrong and values such as honesty, courage and commitment. Kathryn Byers and her achievements show how successful the Young Marines program can be."

There are 340 Young Marine units nationwide with a total of 12,000 students. The Marine Corps League -- a federally chartered Marine Corps-related veterans organization, started the Young Marines organization as a national program in 1965.

Guiles, a retired Marine, said he and other adults leading the program do not push the military as a career choice for the students. Professionals in careers such as firefighting and law enforcement are invited to speak about their work to the Young Marines.

"We want them to follow their own paths in life," he said. "What we give them is skills that will help them reach their goals. We give them a chance to develop leadership skills, organizational skills, and self-confidence -- among other skills."

About 85 percent of the students want to go to college, according to Guiles.

There are 15 girls and 43 boys in the local unit now, the commanding officer said.

"Guys take orders from girls. Girls take orders from guys. It's about respecting authority," Guiles added. "Sometimes in life, you may have to take orders from someone who is younger, older, weaker or stronger than you because they are in charge."

Daniel Bill, a 12-year-old who has been in the Temecula Valley unit for six months, said he is OK with taking orders from a female Young Marine or from a Young Marine younger than he is.

"You have to respect who is in charge," said Daniel, of Murrieta.

The local Young Marines operate from a site at Vail Lake Resorts, a few miles outside of Temecula along Highway 79 South.

Bill and Tish Johnson, owners of Vail Lake Resorts, allow the local Young Marines to use their property at no charge.

"I'm proud to have them on my property," Bill Johnson said. "The Young Marines program promotes positive values."

He also noted that the group often helps during events at the resort.

The Temecula Valley Young Marines' efforts to help others earned the local group a Distinguished Unit Service Award from the organization's national headquarters. The unit was cited this summer for its work over a 14-month period.

Among the good deeds were raising money to help victims of Hurricane Katrina, raising more than \$3,500 for the American Cancer Society, and conducting a book drive for a local library that resulted in a donation of more than 2,500 books.

Young Marines' way

Recruit training at Vail Lake consists of nine weekends of classroom instruction in topics such as U.S. history, Marine Corps history, and respect and etiquette. Training also includes drill and marching instruction, and physical fitness training. Testing is also done during those weekends.

Once the recruits complete their training, they do community service projects, go on educational trips and participate in encampments.

In addition, the Young Marines can go to career-based training or fun destinations such as Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala., for a fraction of the cost, Guiles said.

But there are rules.

To go on the trips, Temecula Valley's unit requires that a youngster must have complete recruit training, attend two weekend-long survival encampments during which there is no communication with the outside world, and maintain a 2.0 grade-point average with no Fs. The students must also be active in Young Marines and attend the organization's fundraising and community service events.

For educational trips sponsored by the Young Marines' national headquarters, a student must be an active Young Marine for at least a year.

Young Marine Amber Fitzpatrick, 16, of Murrieta, said she is glad the organization offers regimented, military-style training.

"The rules keep things orderly so we can accomplish our goals," she said.

There are costs for participating in the Young Marines program: a one-time fee of \$250 per child for recruit training, manuals, a uniform and boots, a set of sweats and physical training gear; plus \$50 a year, per child, for program registration. The registration fee goes to the Young Marines' national headquarters to cover insurance costs, Guiles said.

Parental support

Jennifer Byers, Kathryn's mother, said she supports the program because of what it does for her daughter.

"I have never seen Kathryn so focused and so excited," Jennifer Byers said. "She learned good study techniques, like using flash cards. She studied for every test and ran every day to stay in shape.

"The Temecula Valley Young Marines has been such a blessing as far as showing Kathryn discipline, motivation, and the idea of helping other people. It's important for my daughter to grow up knowing that people should help one another when possible."

Kathryn said she enjoyed the lessons on survival skills, such as how to safely start a fire in emergency situations, proper ways to purify water and first aid. She said she had fun on the Young Marines' educational and training trips.

But community service work is her favorite part of being a Young Marine, Kathryn said.

"Doing community service feels good to me because it means helping other people," the young captain added. "Shouldn't people help people?"

-- Contact staff writer Lorell Fleming at (951) 676-4315, Ext. 2621, or lfleming@californian.com.