

Testimony

Good Afternoon, Co-Chair Broadman, Co-Chair Evans, and members of the committee. My name is Ava Richards, and I am from Portland, Oregon. I appreciate this wonderful opportunity to speak with you today about the Oregon Youth Challenge High school (OYCP) and how it has changed my life.

My life before OYCP felt completely out of control. I felt like I was losing it. It all started in 6th grade when I came home one day and saw my parents sitting far apart in the living room. I looked around and I knew exactly what was happening—they were getting a divorce. It broke me and my brothers. Before we knew it, my dad had moved out, started a new family, remarried, and, within two years, he barely spoke to us. I felt lost. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to be left alone.

Then, I started hanging out with people who drank and smoked. I had never done that before, but they told me it would be fun—that it would make me feel better. They were right. For a little while, it did. It helped me forget how broken my family was. So, I kept doing it—over and over—until I started feeling like I needed it and it became something I did everyday.

By sophomore year, things had gotten really bad. My best friend and I drank every time we hung out. It felt normal. But then, one night, she invited me over. I told her, *"I can't, I'm going to see family. But don't have too much fun without me."* That was the last time I ever spoke to her. Later that night, she got into a car accident. She had been drinking. And just like that, by the snap of my fingers she was gone.

Her death shattered me. I fell into an even deeper depression. My smoking and drinking got worse. I stopped caring about school, my future, and even myself. I skipped school so much that I was one warning away from being kicked out—but I didn't care. My mom was worried, angry, and disappointed. She kept telling me to go to school, but instead, I would go to the park or a friend's house to drink or smoke. I thought school didn't matter. But then, last summer, as I was about to start junior year, it finally hit me—I had wasted so much of my education. I sat in my room crying to my mom, wishing I could go back and change everything. But I couldn't. All I could do was wish.

That's when my mom heard about OYCP from two former cadets—one from Class 67 and another from Class 68. We looked it up together, and the first thing I saw was "MILITARY" in all caps. I laughed and said, *"This is crazy! I can't do this!"* I told my mom I couldn't handle something military-related, but she believed in me. She gave me time to think about it. We looked at other alternative schools, but for some reason, my mind kept going back to OYCP. Finally, I told my mom, *"Okay. I'll try it out."* We went to

orientation, and when I saw that so many other kids had gone through similar struggles, I realized—maybe I could do this.

I took it upon myself to apply to OYCP, and on January 9, of this year, I walked through those doors. That was the first day of the rest of my life.

And in the beginning of the program those first two weeks (red stage) had me in sweat and tears, i thought i wasn't going to last those 2 weeks i missed my family, and i missed my bed, I just wanted to sleep i didn't want to work out, i didn't want to wake up early but i did it, i learned that if i keep pushing myself to do the best i can Ill be able to make it. The cadre showed me how to not worry about what happened 10 hours, 5 mins, or even 4 seconds ago. I have learned discipline, patience, courage, and respect, they have taught me things without me even realizing.

After being in this program for 2 months it was finally time for a new Cadet Platoon Leader little did I know they were going to pick me. It was hard and within the first few days I wanted to quit and go home. A week after I had been chosen to be the new CPL it was finally break and I could escape from all the responsibility this job came with . When I went home for break my confidence was significantly noticeable. People told me I have changed in a better way. They said that when they walked into the room with me they could feel my energy and it was really strong. It was hard for me to go back to the program especially after spending time with my Mom and seeing everything and everyone I missed so much. I went back, not only because my mom told me I didn't have a choice but also because I can already notice the changes within me and know that there will be even more throughout the rest of the program. It was pretty difficult for me to get back into the routine but I would say I got back into it within 3 days. Cadet Platoon leader is a really hard position but it's been helping my voice be heard and project my confidence. Even though I really didn't like being the CPL and being in charge of my entire platoon I stayed with it because of the leadership skills I was being taught. After being CPL I will be a good follower to the next one because I know how difficult and mentally straining it is. This program also has plenty of opportunities for us cadets to take out of this program into the real world. A few of them are working in the kitchen, baking and cooking. We also get our first aid and CPR certifications. To give back to the community we go on service to community events every weekend where we volunteer for non profit organizations.

My plans after I graduate from OYCP is going back to McDaniel high school and getting my high school diploma.

After I graduate from my high school I would really like to become a firefighter or a tattoo artist. Yes I know these are two completely different career paths but I feel like both jobs will help people. One is saving lifes and the other is helping people express

their emotions and feelings by permanently putting meaning behind their tattoos. Ultimately my goal is to save people, and give them another chance of living just like OYCP is doing for me.

Finally I want to say thank you to the Oregon National Guards for funding the majority of the Oregon youth challenge program. I would also be more than happy to answer any questions you all have and thank you so much for letting me share my story with you all.