

LOCAL NEWS

Maryland Freestate ChalleNGe Academy teen cadet says he was beaten, concussed at camp

'I just want them shut down,' his mother said



Jason Royal posted photos of his son, Nathanael Royal, after the teen was attacked in his sleep by other cadets at Freestate ChalleNGe Academy. (Courtesy of Jason Royal)



By **KATE CIMINI** | kcimini@baltsun.com

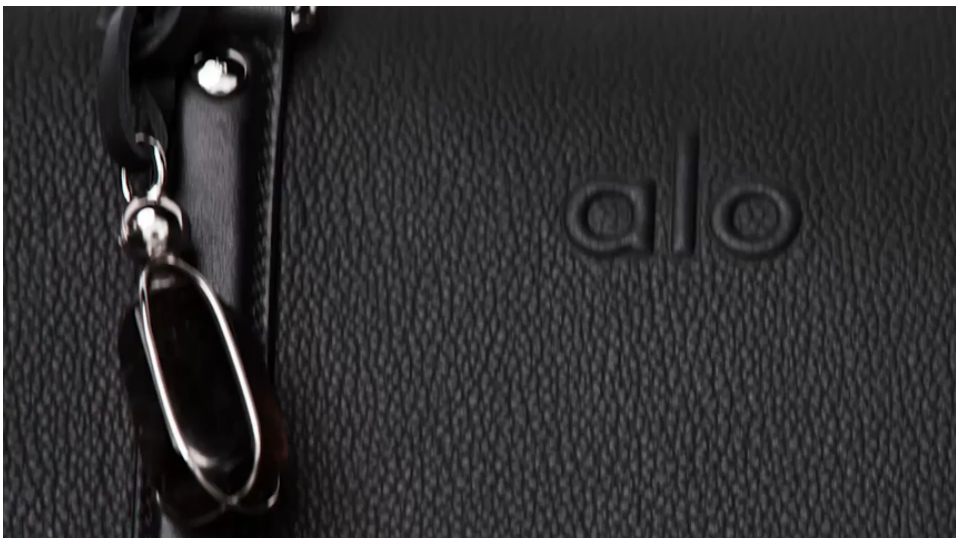
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In early August 2022, 17-year-old Nathanael Royal called his parents and begged them to bring him home before he got attacked.

At the Freestate ChalleNGe Academy, an Aberdeen Proving Ground boot camp-cum-GED program for at-risk Maryland youth run by the National Guard, Royal thought he'd be getting a second chance after failing ninth and tenth grade. He had withdrawn from public school to attend the program, a requirement.

But within a few weeks, Royal wanted out.

Royal told his parents in his one weekly allowed ten-minute phone call that other cadets were hitting teens with “rock socks” and “lock socks”, a type of homemade blackjack. He was scared and didn't feel safe.



He asked them to pick him up, but they refused.

“We honestly didn't believe him because the sergeants, when we first went, told us that the kids would say anything to come

Gov. Wes Moore's office declined to comment on Royal's experience at the camp, directing The Baltimore Sun to the National Guard.

The Maryland Military Department declined multiple requests for interviews with the program director and the state's adjutant general; however, Public Affairs Manager Chazz Kibbler provided a statement.

"The Maryland Military Department's top priority has always been, and will remain, the health, safety, and well-being of the cadets entrusted to our care at the Freestate ChalleNGe Academy," Kibbler said.

"We are aware of concerns raised about incidents at the Freestate ChalleNGe Academy," Kibbler said. "We take any allegation of misconduct or unsafe conditions seriously. In cases where investigations substantiated misconduct, appropriate actions were taken to address the matter."

The following week, around 3 a.m. on Aug. 16, Royal said he woke up to four or five teens, wearing black t-shirts tied over their faces, holding him down on his bed while others punched and slammed him in the head. At times, he told The Sun they hit him in the head with their fists, at other times, that he thought it might have been a lock sock.

They hit him so hard they knocked him unconscious, he said, but not before threatening him with further harm if he snitched.

The next morning, around 5 a.m., Royal, afraid to be honest with program staff, told a sergeant he'd been stung by a bee.

The sergeant took Royal to the nurse, who called his mother, Shayna Royal. Shayna picked him up that morning and drove him to the E.R., where doctors diagnosed him with a contusion, a possible concussion and recommended a follow-up with a brain injury association in Virginia, according to medical records The Sun reviewed.

“You are at very low risk for having any bleeding in your brain,” his discharge paperwork reads. “You may also have a concussion [and] feel nauseous, have difficulty concentrating.

“Please follow up with your PCP in the next few days.”

“He was very lucky,” Shayna said, thankful that it wasn’t any worse.

But Royal didn’t feel lucky.

Although things have been getting better over the past year, he can’t shake what’s happened to him — and his parents want to make sure this doesn’t happen to another teen.



Nathanael Royal and his mother, Shayna Royal, discuss what happened to Nathanael when he was a cadet at Freestate ChalleNGe Academy, a National Guard camp for at-risk youth. He said several cadets assaulted him in the middle of the night. He has since struggled significantly, and his academic aspirations were set back several years. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

Sleepless nights

Royal can't remember much of the attack, and doesn't remember a lot of what happened at the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a possible concussion and a contusion. What he does remember is the sleepless nights he endured for months after — night after night where he lay awake, terrified. He couldn't fall asleep until the sun came up.

The concussion symptoms were severe, too, but he didn't want to seek follow-up treatment. Instead, his mother said, he stayed in bed or shut himself in his room for most of the following year.

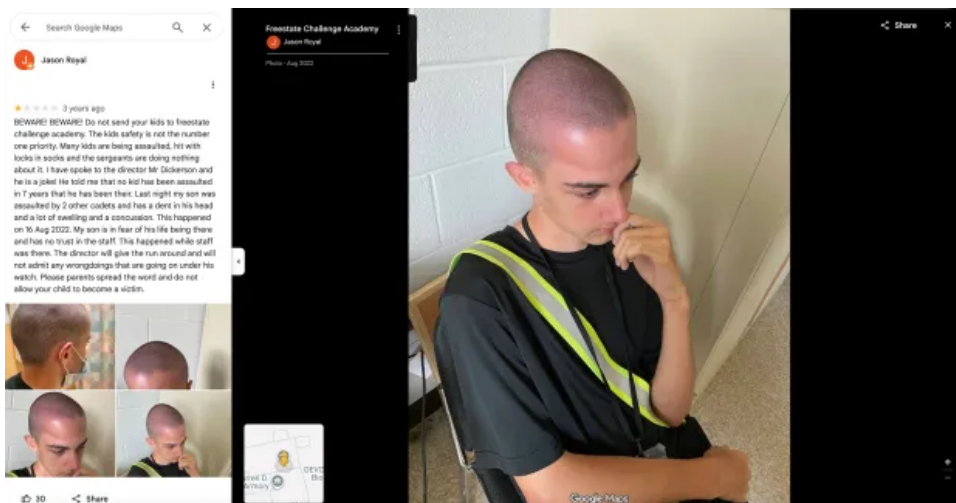
"Everything in my mind was in a different place," Royal said.

But he said, "I like to deal with things myself."

Royal's family said they reached out to Freestate, pursuing accountability but said Freestate swept the attack under the rug. The staff implied they didn't believe Royal had been assaulted in conversations after the event, and the program didn't even cover the cost of Royal's E.R. bill, the family said.

Now, Royal is 19 years old, and still struggling.

"He's not who he was before," Shayna said. "I just want them shut down."



Jason Royal posted photos of his son, Nathanael Royal, after the teen was attacked in his sleep by other cadets at Freestate Challenge Academy.

'BEWARE! BEWARE!'

In the aftermath of the attack, Royal's father, Jason Royal, said he reached out to Freestate leadership seeking justice for his son, but found then-director Keith Dickerson's responses unhelpful.

"He kept saying 'your son was allegedly assaulted,'" Jason said. "Allegedly.' 'We don't even know if that's true or not,' and 'we

Dickerson, who stepped down from Freestate in April 2024, said Royal had called and written his parents daily, “begging them to disenroll [him] from the program...” Based on the initial story we were told [regarding Royal’s injury] and the story told at the hospital, naturally, there was some doubt that arose; particularly because the youth had been trying to get out of the program since it started.”

Dickerson said in an email he expected to hear from the Royal family after the hospital visit, but that he and his staff “never heard from the family again.”

Frustrated, Jason posted to Google Reviews, leaving a one-star review of Freestate. He recounted his family’s experience with the program and included photos of Royal’s head after the attack, swelling clearly visible through his bootcamp buzzcut and wrapping around his forehead.

In the photos posted, taken the morning after the attack, Royal looks away from the camera, his hand curled in front of his mouth, and a little expression on his face. A visible dent can be seen at the back of his skull and about half his skull, including his forehead, is heavy and swollen.

“BEWARE! BEWARE!” Jason wrote. “Do not send your kids to Freestate ChalleNGe Academy. The kids’ safety is not the number one priority. Many kids are being assaulted, hit with locks in socks and the sergeants are doing nothing about it. ... Last night my son was assaulted by 2 other cadets and has a dent in his head and a lot of swelling and a concussion. ... My son is in fear of his life being there and has no trust in the staff. This happened while staff [were] there. The director will give the run-around and will not admit any



Nathanael Royal discusses what happened to him when he was a cadet at Freestate ChalleNGe Academy, a National Guard camp for at-risk youth. He claimed he was brutally assaulted in the middle of the night by several other cadets. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

Dickerson told Royal's parents to bring him back to the camp, Shayna said. Instead, they removed him from the program and reached out to Bel Air's public school district, hoping to re-enroll him as a high school freshman. The district, however, refused to take him back, Shayna said. He was already 17, and wouldn't graduate until he was 21.

They reached out to a military lawyer, Shayna said, but didn't know what steps to take next.

'Blowing smoke'

Royal blames his parents for the attack he suffered at Freestate, and everything that followed. The sleepless nights, the inability

Before the attack, he had been set to graduate with his GED a year earlier than his peers. After, he was frozen, he said.

It took him another year before he could even start to work on his GED again, and he didn't get his diploma until December 2024, a full year after he would have graduated high school. He now works the overnight online order shift at the local Target.

The blame hurts Shayna, who picked him up from the camp, who met with every district administrator she could to try and get him back into public school. She is still upset that she didn't bring him home when he first called them, but thought she was doing the right thing, she said.

Jason, however, is less bothered by the blame. He developed PTSD after an active duty tour in the Army in Iraq in the early 2000s, and said he sometimes struggles with empathy for others. But he's frustrated at the lack of response from Freestate and program accountability after what was done to his son.

"They preach how it's supposed to be very safe," he said. "They were just blowing smoke."

This article is the first in a two-part story on conditions at Freestate. Did you or someone you know enroll at Freestate? What was your or their experience? Contact Kate Cimini at 443-842-2621 or kcimini@baltsun.com.

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Around the Web

REVCONTENT

LOCAL NEWS

Burned, beaten, forced into fight clubs: Former cadets accuse National Guard camp of brutality



Nathanael Royal and his mother, Shayna Royal, discuss what happened to him when he was a cadet at Freestate Challenge Academy, a National Guard camp for at-risk youth. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)



By **KATE CIMINI** | kcimini@baltsun.com

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One still has burn scars on his palms, earned during hours of push-ups on burning hot pavement.

One said he was attacked, beaten with a homemade blackjack while he slept.

One said he developed post-traumatic stress disorder.

These teens who enrolled at the Maryland National Guard Freestate Challenge Academy in previous years have a lot to say about their experience as cadets in the program — not much of it good.



A boot camp for at-risk youth, the program promises teens and their families a strict structure, housing and food for 22 weeks, along with the opportunity to study and take the GED — a potentially life-changing offer for many of these youth.

But three cadets interviewed by The Baltimore Sun say they were forced to exercise without water breaks until they passed out or vomited, and that it wasn't unusual for teens to be airlifted from the camp at the Aberdeen Proving Ground by

They said camp staff organized fight clubs where they encouraged or allowed teens to fight one another after hours, and that many teens in the program never earned their GEDs — a major component of Freestate, and one that is vital given that teens must drop out of school to enroll.

Some are too old to be readmitted to public school if they drop out or don't complete their GED at Freestate, as Nathanael Royal, the cadet who says he was beaten by other teens in the program, discovered.

The cadets told The Sun they feared the other teens in the program, some of whom claimed to have gang ties and were at times violent. In addition to the homemade blackjacks and nocturnal attacks that took place during the 30-minute window in which the guard changed shift, Royal and one of the other cadets The Sun interviewed — two of whom asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation by former cadets — recalled regular fights that erupted in the stairwell as teens passed one another. Those fights, they said, staff watched silently without interference.

Some cadets made shivs out of the metal forks they ate with and hid them under the floorboards, Royal and another cadet from his year said. At a certain point, the cadet said, the staff stopped allowing them access to the forks.

While some thrive in the ChalleNGe Academy setting, Royal and other cadets said the experience was anything other than positive.

Royal told The Sun he was awoken in the middle of the night and attacked by other cadets wearing black T-shirts tied around their faces, beaten in the head with a homemade blackjack, and that staff were aware of this pattern of attacks. He and his family say they reached out to the camp after the attack, and when the staff dismissed their concerns, his parents disenrolled him from the program.

“We are aware of concerns raised about incidents at the Freestate Challenge Academy,” Maryland Military Department Public Affairs Manager Chazz Kibbler said in an emailed statement. “We take any allegation of misconduct or unsafe conditions seriously. In cases where investigations substantiated misconduct, appropriate actions were taken to address the matter.”

Kibbler declined to say what their investigations found and what changes were implemented afterward, instead directing The Sun to file a Maryland Public Information Act request.

“FCA remains a life-changing program for youth across Maryland, which is why it has strong support from former cadets, families and communities,” Kibbler said.

A chance at a GED

Royal entered Freestate with hopes of earning his GED.

After years of struggling with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, unable to focus in class and being passed on despite failing grades, by high school Royal didn't understand much of the material. Rather than admit it, he avoided the pain point —

Although his teachers liked him, mother Shayna Royal said, he earned three of the eight credits he was supposed to earn in his freshman year. As a sophomore, he earned zero credits and regularly slept in or locked his bedroom door to avoid his mother taking him to school, father Jason Royal said.

When he did go, Jason said, his son spent his time roaming the halls or hiding in the bathroom rather than sitting in class.

“I couldn’t focus on the work,” Royal said. “I didn’t want to be there.”



Nathanael Royal discusses what happened to him when he was a cadet at Freestate Challenge Academy, a National Guard camp for at-risk youth. He said he was brutally attacked in the middle of the night by several other cadets. He has since struggled significantly, and his academic aspirations were set back several years. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

The high school, Bel Air’s C. Milton Wright High, called a meeting with the Royal family at the end of his sophomore year, Shayna said. That day, a vice principal suggested they look into an alternative schooling placement and presented them with

Together, Royal and his parents chose the state's Challenge Academy, a tuition-free program Congress founded in 1993. The program allows 16- to 18-year-olds to study for and earn their GED, as well as vocational training certificates and set up a recruiting pipeline for the National Guard and other military branches. Freestate is one of the 10 original Challenge Academies founded.

The fact that he could earn his GED in a year was appealing, Royal said, and it seemed like a better choice than the alternative school the vice principal suggested.

Challenge academies largely target troubled or at-risk youths. Program requirements state that applicants must be at least 15½ years old, be at risk of dropping out of high school or have already dropped out, and may not be on probation or parole. In order to attend, they must drop out of school.

But Royal did not earn his GED there, as he disenrolled early after the attack, he said. Another cadet The Sun interviewed said he didn't earn his either, nor did many cadets in his year, calling the education aspect lacking.

Former director Keith Dickerson, who ran the camp at the time Royal was enrolled and stepped down in April 2024, disputed the characterization of the program.

"Challenge is not a GED program," he said in an email to The Sun. "Challenge is founded on eight core components that program participants must successfully complete to be a Challenge graduate. Yes, taking the GED test is part of the program, but that is an added bonus," he said.



Jason Royal posted photos of his son, Nathanael Royal, after the teen was attacked in his sleep by other cadets at Freestate ChalleNGe Academy. (Courtesy of Jason Royal)

The ‘troubled teen industry’

Research shows the ChalleNGe Academy setting can be a beneficial experience for many. The program promises parents and teens discipline and a set environment, and it is free to attend. For many, it can help them turn their lives around, get them away from bad influences or break bad habits and set

Indeed, a [2009 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation survey of Challenge Academy cadets](#) who completed the program and a control group showed that cadets were more likely to obtain a high school diploma or GED, be working and attending college, and have better health and higher levels of self-efficacy than the control group. They were also less likely to have been arrested.

Still, the program bears significant resemblance to programs in the “troubled teen industry,” wilderness or re-education camps parents can enroll their children in that begin with said child being kidnapped in the middle of the night from their bed by strangers and subjected to extreme conditions and requirements for weeks or months on end.

Programs such as wilderness therapy and boot camps for at-risk or troubled youth can be traced back to the 1958 cult Synanon, a drug addiction rehabilitation center that used attack therapy, isolation, limited freedom and rewards for compliance in said teens, according to an [oral history of the “troubled teen industry”](#) by a University of New Hampshire researcher. Hallmarks of such programs often incorporate some of these methods, such as isolation, exhaustion through physical exertion and rigid rules, which Royal and other cadets said they endured at Freestate.



Shayna Royal discusses what happened to her son, Nathanael Royal, when he was a cadet at Freestate Challenge Academy, a National Guard camp for at-risk youth. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

‘Serious facility issues’ shut the camp down temporarily

The Sun requested information on how many cadets had earned their GEDs through the program in the past five years, organized by class, as there are two classes a year. The full information has not yet been provided; however, Kibbler told The Sun that during Class 64, the last class to go through the program, 38 of 56 cadets earned their GEDs.

It is not clear if the 18 cadets who did not earn a GED took the test or dropped out.

Maj. Gen. Janeen Birckhead, the state's adjutant general who oversees the National Guard and its programs, did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

Calls to program leadership were not answered or returned, and Director Kisha L. Webster did not return calls or emails. Through Kibbler, she declined an interview.

Freestate temporarily closed in early September due to what Kibbler called “[serious facility issues](#),” including leaking condenser lines and a broken sewer pipe.

“In response, FCA shifted operations to a temporary location at Camp Fretterd Military Reservation in Reisterstown, anticipating only a short stay,” Kibbler said. “After further evaluation, however, it became clear the new facility could not be brought up to federal installation requirements and was not a permanent solution.”

Class 65 was given the option to continue in other ChalleNGe academies or withdraw. Ten transferred to Washington-based Capital Guardians ChalleNGe Academy and four to New Jersey's ChalleNGe Academy. Others pursued GED testing directly with support from Freestate staff, Kibbler said.

The state plans to reopen the camp in January for the next class, Class 66.

Did you or someone you know participate in Freestate? What was your or their experience? Contact Kate Cimini at 443-842-2621 or kcimini@baltsun.com.

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