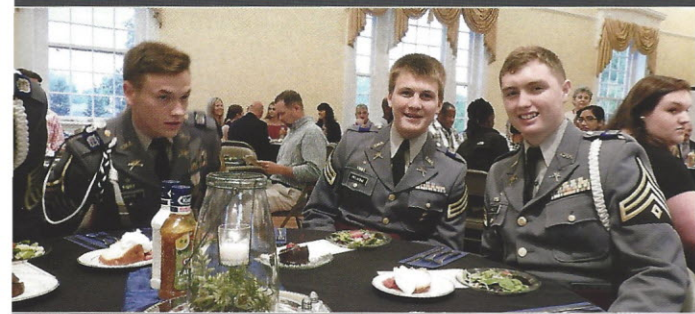


Kershaw County Junior Leadership



On April 27, 2017, Sébastien Offredo gave the speech representing Camden Military Academy for Junior Leadership's graduation.

"The Importance of Student Leadership"

Good evening ladies and gentlemen of the Kershaw County Board, the graduating class of Junior Leadership, and other guests. Growing up, we have all wanted to be like our older role models, from our parents to celebrities. But at some point, we want to back away. As teenage students, it's in our mind to rebel. Why should we listen and respect these older folks if they don't understand *us*? Instead, we look to our peers to help mold us, for better or worse.

Before coming to Kershaw County, I've spent most of my life confined to the coastal town of Westport, Connecticut. My time in public high school is a story of a lack of peer leadership. In the 9th grade, I started dating a girl who lived on the complete other side of town. I'd avoid my bus, wouldn't pick up my phone, and skip class to see her, ignoring my parents and slipping grades. None of my friends told me I was doing something wrong. Around this time a few of my friends began experimenting with drugs, but it wasn't until my sophomore year that it became a regular activity. From marijuana to alcohol, some tried even worse. And even then, I didn't tell any of my friends they were doing something wrong.

On May 11, 2015, I saw how my silence brought upon the worst day of my life. I was called out of my Biology class by my Assistant Principal and he told me my brother was in the nurse's office. As I was trying to sort out this confusion, I saw my brother - pale, strapped in a stretcher - being carried out by medical personnel through the front of the school. I spent that afternoon in my room, asking so many questions and thinking only about my brother. Why didn't any of my friends stop him? Why didn't I tell him earlier that he was doing something wrong? My brother was only 14 years old at the time. He was my best friend. And here I was wondering if I'd ever hug him again.

My brother is in the audience as my only family member for this graduation today. I learned from this experience the importance of student leadership. We, as students, have a responsibility to make our class the best we can. At Camden Military Academy, we call this *esprit de corps*. Though everybody knows what it means to them, it can be hard to define. A cadet last year told me that it was that feeling after winning a sports game with the team. A TAC officer told me it was the brotherhood bond built serving together. For us seniors, it can also be shown by the blue ring we wear on our fingers.

Our class rings show that together, all 61 seniors accomplished what most people our age can't: military school. No high schooler volunteers to wake up at 6:00 every morning, clean their bathroom, blow the hallway, drill with rifles, and march to breakfast. Last year, cadet Thomas Azrelyant gave a speech here and described this rewarding sacrifice of our time, saying "you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs." Indeed, we seniors know that in our leadership positions we've inspired not just future officers and sergeants at Camden, but future leaders for the world tomorrow. And I believe that this graduating class of Junior Leadership has done the same at their high schools.

Just last week, a sophomore cadet asked if we could talk after class. He had asked me for advice before about his future career, so I was expecting a check-up on the matter. Upon meeting him by my barracks, he told me he saw a recent military movie of this great Company Commander who cared for all his soldiers and put their interests ahead of his own. He also read a book about counterterrorism recently and described all these qualities a leader must have. He ended by saying that all these things reminded him of *me*, and that I needed to know this before graduating. I believe *that's* student leadership: the idea that this underclassman aspired to be like me, that though there was only a two year difference, I could actually be his role model.

Student leadership is doing the right thing when everyone's doing the wrong thing. Student leadership is not being afraid to tell your friend when they've made a fault. Student leadership is bringing your class together, not letting any other students trail behind. Our Junior Leadership class was picked for these qualities, and the best I can hope for is that we continue to spread these morals to everybody else.

Junior Leadership is an organization founded in 1988 of student leaders from the four high schools of Kershaw County. Each year, teachers from CMA nominate six cadets to participate. The 2016-17 class included Alex Beasley, William Larsen, Sébastien Offredo, Sean Orcutt, Clay Pflaging, and Kevin Phillips Jr. They met in monthly sessions covering many topics about leadership: government, public speaking, job interviews, teambuilding, rope courses, and table etiquette.

