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NEWS

Young Marines plan fundraiser to for work with local veterans

BY SAM PESHEK, STAFF WRITER : JULY 19, 2013 : Updated: July 19, 2013 10:47pm

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Complete with camouflage uniforms, drills, boot camp and a commitment to their community, the

San Antonio Young Marines are not very different from their armed forces counterparts — just a little smaller.

"I take a lot of pride in my Young Marines uniform," said **Mercedes Pedraza**, 14. "I've worked very hard to get it."

As Young Marines, San Antonio boys and girls participate in weekly "drills" where they listen to guest speakers and attend an annual orientation program called "Boot Camp" where they participate in physical fitness testing and "rank up" within their unit of 64.

"It makes us all feel like we've accomplished something big," Pedraza, said. "It's one of the hardest things I've ever had to experience."

Mercedes' older brother **Jonathan Pedraza**, 15, said Boot Camp "really shakes a kid out."

SAYM Unit Commander **Alberto Salas**, a retired Marine himself, said the Young Marines have more than 300 chapters worldwide, growing from a handful of boys in 1958 to more than 10,000 coed members this year. Salas Started the San Antonio chapter in 2011 when he retired from active duty.

"This isn't a scared straight program," he said. "We want to make good kids better and get them to show respect for veterans and our nation."

While not directly affiliated with the **U.S. Marines**, the Young Marines have served as the "focal point" of the Marines' Youth Drug Demand Reduction Effort since 1993, according to the Young Marines website.

“It teaches them how to say 'no' to someone who might push drugs on them,” said **David Pedraza**, Mercedes' and Jonathan's father. “They advocate that a lot to the other kids at school.”

Young Marines are also encouraged to live a drug-free lifestyle as an appendage of the U.S. Marines. The program also places an emphasis on community service and encourages the youths to take part in military events and support programs that work with wounded warriors.

The San Antonio unit of 64 area Young Marines ages 8-18 will be hosting a barbecue fundraiser July 27 to raise money for the unit's community project, Ramps for Warriors, building wheelchair ramps for wounded veterans in the area.

“The kids get a sense of pride in the day and age of the 'me' generation and a sense of giving,” Salas said.

The barbecue fundraiser will include a live band and contests will help raise money for the ramps project and others.

“It's a great opportunity to support the kids and an organization that teaches them about leadership and giving back,” event coordinator **Brett Walker** said. “It's not about what kind of trips these kids get to go on (from fundraising). It's about what they can do to help by doing it.”

Salas said he hopes to raise more than last year's total of \$1,300 for his unit so they can continue to instill military values through community service that will last a lifetime.

“Once a Young Marine, always a Young Marine,” Salas said.

speshek@express-news.net

Twitter: @Sam_Peshek

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