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Academy youths do a good turn

By [Will Hoover](#)

Advertiser Leeward O'ahu Writer

A funny thing happened yesterday at Ko Olina Resort's Lagoon 4 as the Water Sports Day canoe, paddle-boarding and beach competitions got under way.

The activities were part of a celebration for 96 cadets with the Hawai'i National Guard Youth Challenge Academy — a program that offers 16- to 18-year-old at-risk students a second, tough-love chance to earn a diploma.

An unscheduled Car Key Contest ensued after YCA director Wally Mitsui spotted an anxious woman, uninvolved with the event, who had locked the keys inside her 1995 Toyota Camry.

"Any of you cadets know how to break into a car?" yelled Mitsui — and about two dozen hands soared aloft.

"We're sending in the experts," said Mitsui with a chuckle. The games briefly halted while a trio of young cadets bounded across the sand to the parking lot and went to work on the vehicle in question.

Within moments, the cadets eased the door open.

"They were faster than Triple-A," said a stunned and grateful Celeste Nakagawa of Makakilo, who was further astonished when the young Samaritans refused to take a penny for their good deed.

"No need, no need," Craig Anderson, 17, and Charles Ulmer, 16, told Nakagawa in unison. The two Kahalu'u kids acknowledged that they used to open car doors as a team for less-noble purposes. The



Cadets from the Hawai'i National Guard Youth Challenge Academy had fun at Ko Olina Resort yesterday during the academy's Water Sports Day. The 24-week course has been recognized as one of the nation's best at turning young lives around.

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two were assisted yesterday by Timothy Hall, 17, of 'Ewa Beach, who, like his fellow cadets, couldn't recall how many vehicles he'd pried open in the past.

"We don't do that anymore," Anderson said — unless, that is, it happens to be for a good cause.

Mitsui is well aware that most of his cadets have troubled pasts. But he also knows his Kalaeloa-based, quasi-military program, which has state and federal assistance, has been recognized as one of the nation's best at turning young lives around.

The goal is to instill in cadets the concept that a person's actions, good and bad, have consequences. The program aims to give them structure, along with effective coping and social skills.

The 24-week course is difficult and strict.

"The idea here today is just to give these kids a break from their everyday routine at the barracks, where they're waking up at 4:30 in the morning and doing drills and going to classes," said Nicole LaBerge, the academy's assistant program coordinator.

Cadet Amber-Leigh Anduha, 17, of Wai'anae, knew exactly how long it had been since she'd touched the ocean.

"Since July 17," said Anduha, who had practically counted the hours and minutes, and was thoroughly enjoying the long-awaited R&R.

Anduha had just returned from her first experience paddling a six-person canoe a mile out to sea and back only to discover it's a lot tougher than it looks.

Meanwhile, Cadet Otto Lee Omoto, 16, of Waipi'o, was back from scuba-diving, something he'd never done before.

"Being able to breathe underwater is awesome," Omoto said. "The instructors briefed us very well, and made you very aware of the hazards. I'm planning to go scuba-diving again when I get out."

The fun fest was sponsored by the Duke Kahanamoku Foundation and organized by former board president Tim Guard.



From left, Jenna Corelli, 16, gets buried in the sand by cadets Jamie Ramisca and Mel Andaya, both 17. The Youth Challenge Academy is a tough-love program that aims to instill values in at-risk youths to refocus their lives in positive directions and help them earn diplomas.

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"These kids just don't get any ocean experience at the academy," Guard said. "So we thought we'd have a fun day for them and get them associated with some local sports, as well a lot of informal competitions, such as series of relay races and beach flags.

"It's meant to be a casual day at the beach."

The day included box lunches, caps for every cadet, compliments of the Denver Broncos, and T-shirts given away as prizes that were signed by Jason Elam and other players.

Four six-person canoes were furnished by Hui Nalu Canoe Club, along with some superior instruction by the likes of Bruce Blankenfeld, a Hokule'a voyaging canoe crew captain.

"They've got some really good paddlers," Blankenfeld said. "For others, this is so foreign to them. But I think it's been fulfilling for them all.

"It's been a great day."

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[Back](#)

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