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LAKE ODESSA - Casey Ayres will tell you sometimes life knocks you down and it's a little hard to get back up.

The 18-year-old Lake Odessa youth graduated Saturday, June 14 from Battle Creek's Michigan Youth Challenge Academy, which is essentially a voluntary school that takes in troubled teens and churns out polished young men and women, ready for the world. Their programs are taught by former military personnel and drill instructors who enforce discipline and academic excellence and numerous other positive characteristics.

Before he enrolled for the six-month program in January, Ayres said he was heading down a long, hard road.

"I was doing stupid stuff every day," Ayres said. "I'd come home staggering at 4 a.m., into drugs and drinking. It was bad."

Ayres' problems began when he was 14 years old when his biological mother, Melissa and his father, Darren, divorced. The shakeup left Ayres, his brother Daniel and his sister Hannah, feeling abandoned. But while his siblings recovered, his mother's absence never sat right with Ayres.

School became secondary to drugs and alcohol - Ayres admits to falling in with the wrong crowd - to the point that he earned only two credits by the time he was a senior at Lakewood High School. Sometimes he put in effort, but no matter what, his emotional issues loomed overhead.

"He tried so hard sometimes, but he chose bad patterns and bad things to do," said stepmother Lori Ayres, who married Casey's father two years ago. "We felt sorry for him, he was heartbroken over a lot of things. I think it was hard for him to concentrate, to get over those issues."

Throughout the whole time, however, Ayres was looking for a way to turn his life around. The opportunity finally arose when his father's co-worker and friend mentioned the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy. Darren learned more about the school and talked to his son about it. Ayres didn't need to hear much about the program, he knew it was time for a change. He volunteered to enroll.

"I wanted to go, I guess I was getting older and knew it was time to grow up," Ayres said. "There just wasn't anything else for me. Every day, those stupid things, they weren't going to make me go anywhere."

The voluntary program has a reputation for being difficult - two weeks of boot camp followed by five months of hard studying and lifestyle changes will create such a reputation - but the Ayres family decided it was worth it. After a six month orientation process, Ayres joined the school in early January, having been dropped off at Fort Custer.

While Ayres was "going through hell," as he puts it, his parents took classes, too. The all-encompassing school encourages parents to better their skills, further facilitating each student's transition.

Ayres' family could only visit during specified visitation hours, otherwise direct communication was essentially cut off. The Ayres family could write letters to each other, but that was it.

"When he first started sending letters, they were, 'It's tough here, I want to come home,'" said Darren Ayres. "But as he went on, he got to liking it better and learning things. You could see him changing."

Ayres left a February visitation with tears in his eyes, as the changes he noticed via his sons' letters were reflected by his behavior.

"We knew then he was on the right track," Ayres said. "He started calling me 'sir,' acting like a man. He acted grown up. Words really can't express what that meant to [Lori and I]."

In addition to academic and social instruction from former military instructors, Ayres received guidance from mentor James Thomas throughout the six-month duration. Thomas'

motivational words and example provided an extra kick to Ayres' behavioral and character changes.

When six months were up, Ayres had completed his metamorphosis from a mixed-up teen to a mature, young adult.

"He went in, you can tell, a little unsure of himself, but wanting to change," said Lori Ayres. "But he came out holding his head high, proud of himself. We see it every day now. I haven't seen him so proud since I met him."

His father feels much the same way.

"It's night and day," said Ayres. "He's well-mannered and respectful when he wasn't before, he even wants to go to college."

Ayres earned his GED from the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy and plans to study culinary arts at Ferris State University. If he decides against college, Ayres said he might train to be an Air Force helicopter pilot. Regardless, it's a far stretch from where he was headed back in January.

"I'd be in jail right now, I know it," said Ayres. "I don't want to think about it, I like where I am now, but I know where I was going."

In the mean time, Ayres is looking for summer employment and hanging out at home. He doesn't hang out with his old crowd, Ayres instead prefers relaxing and enjoying time with true friends.

His family is thinking of moving to Portland, which will not only bring a change in scenery, but might also allow for what Lori Ayres said is "a fresh start."

"We know, now, that we're all going to make it," Ayres said. "That's what matters most."