



## Guard Chief, Other Luminaries, Get Youth Development Awards

By Gerry J. Gilmore  
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, March 1, 2006 – The National Guard Youth Foundation honored a U.S. senator, two governors' wives and the chief of the National Guard Bureau at the organization's first ChalleNGe Champions dinner held here last night.

Louisiana Sen. Mary Landrieu and Nancy Murkowski and Kim Henry, the wives of the governors of Alaska and Oklahoma, respectively, all received ChalleNGe Champion awards, while Army Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum was honored with a National Mentoring Partnership Award during ceremonies at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center.

During his remarks to dinner attendees, Blum noted that the foundation's National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program has positively influenced the lives of 63,000 graduates since the program was created by order of Congress in 1993.

All awardees are supporters of the ChalleNGe Program, a co-ed program that gives troubled high school-age youth a chance to obtain a General Equivalency Diploma, self-discipline skills and a better future.

The program started out small, Blum said, but it has expanded tremendously over the past 13 years, reflecting a rising national high school dropout rate now affecting one out of three students.

"It has grown, unfortunately, because the need has grown," Blum said. "We cannot give up on our American youth."

Attendees of the volunteer program, who must be ages 16 to 18 and drug-free, experience 22 weeks of military discipline. The program has 30 locations in 25 states. There is no obligation to serve in the U.S. military after graduation from the program.

About 60 cadets in the ChalleNGe program also attended the dinner, as did Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs Thomas F. Hall, who administers the program on behalf of the Defense Department in partnership with the National Guard.

The ChalleNGe program gives young people an opportunity to become productive citizens, Hall said.

"What is one life worth?" Hall quizzed the audience, answering, "If we save one life, it is worth the entire program."

Also attending the event was active duty Marine Cpl. Jordan Spencer Pierson, 22, who'd been severely wounded in Iraq during his third tour of duty there. Pierson had his left leg amputated as the result of his wounds. He earned his GED within Michigan's ChalleNGe program in 2001 before he enlisted in the Marines.

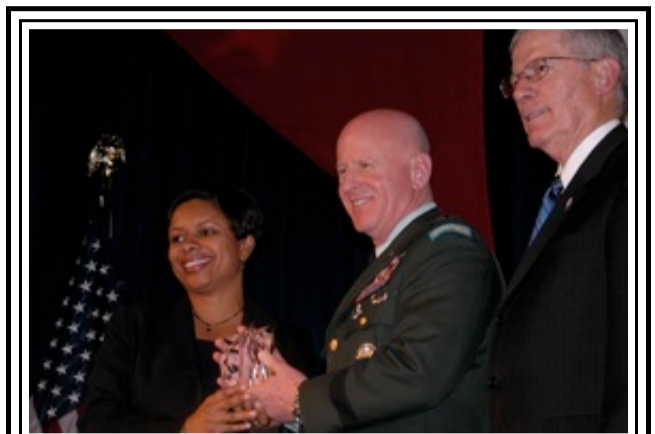
The main purpose of the ChalleNGe program is to guide troubled youth in choosing a life path "of learning and success," said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. John Conaway, the chairman of the National Guard Youth Foundation and a former chief of the National Guard Bureau.

Cadet Wilbert Taylor, 19, related his experiences with drugs and street life when he was a 16-year-old "gangster-in-training" in Cleveland. Taylor graduates March 4 from the ChalleNGe program at Fort Gordon, Ga.

"I thought I was grown, but I really wasn't," Taylor said of his troubled life in Cleveland, noting that his father had left the family when he was 10 years old.

But, "after I joined ChalleNGe I channeled all of that evil energy and made it positive," Taylor said, noting he intends to attend college and to become an entertainer some day.

Kelly Perdew, second-season winner on the TV series "The Apprentice" and a U.S. Military Academy graduate, was among the featured speakers at the event, which also included a musical performance by former Marine and "American Idol" contestant Josh Gracin, the NGYCP's national spokesperson.



*Army Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, receives a National Mentoring Partnership Award from Tonya Wiley, senior vice president of the National Mentoring Institute, as retired Air Force Lt. Gen. John Conaway, chairman of the National Guard Youth Foundation, looks on Feb. 28 at the foundation's first ChalleNGe Champions dinner held in Washington, D.C. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.*

## **Biographies:**

[Thomas F. Hall](#)

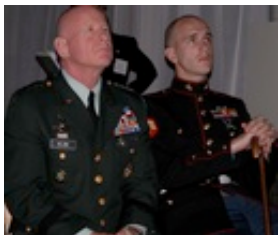
[Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, USA](#)

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[National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program](#)

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*Army Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, left, and Marine Cpl. Jordan Spencer Pierson, 22, watch a video at the National Guard Youth Foundation's first ChalleNGe Champions dinner held Feb. 28 in Washington, D.C. Pierson had his left leg amputated as a result of wounds received in Iraq during his third tour of duty there. Pierson, who has re-enlisted in the Marines, earned his GED within Michigan's ChalleNGe program in 2001 before he'd enlisted in the Marines. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore*

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*About 60 young cadets in the National Guard ChalleNGe program, like 19-year-old Wilbert Taylor from Fort Gordon, Ga., left, and Raquel Correa, 17, from Dillon, Mont., attended the National Guard Youth Foundation's first ChalleNGe Champions dinner held Feb. 28 in Washington, D.C. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore*

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