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CAP Teaches Visually Impaired Missouri Cadet 'My Limits ... Are No Different Than Anyone Else's'



Cadet 1st Lt. Svetlana Ehlers of the Missouri Wing's Platte Valley Composite Squadron is visually impaired, but she sees a bright future ahead, thanks in part to her involvement in Civil Air Patrol.

Her journey is a story of overcoming a challenge, building confidence, and learning to advocate for herself.

In March 2016, at age 12, Ehlers joined the Platte Valley squadron at her mother's urging. At first she encountered some rough moments, as "senior members and cadets did not know how to help a cadet with a disability," she said. Adding to the situation, she said, she "had been adopted from an international orphanage three years before and was very delayed."



"For example, even just having a simple conversation with me was difficult for them, and I was 12 at the time so I was not ready to step out of my comfort zone just yet," Ehlers recalled.

As she matured and became more comfortable with fellow squadron members and others, she began focusing on advancing through the cadet ranks. Her mother arranged for Braille versions of the cadet exams, because at that time "I did not have great computer skills to interact with the testing system," she said.

Once the promotions began coming – she gained the rank of cadet first lieutenant Oct. 20 – "the other members were starting to see that I had the potential to succeed," Ehlers said.

"I remember a time when we were conducting a PT (physical training) meeting and there was a cadet up front demonstrating the exercises," she said. "I raised my hand and respectfully told the cadet to verbally describe the correct way to conduct the exercise.

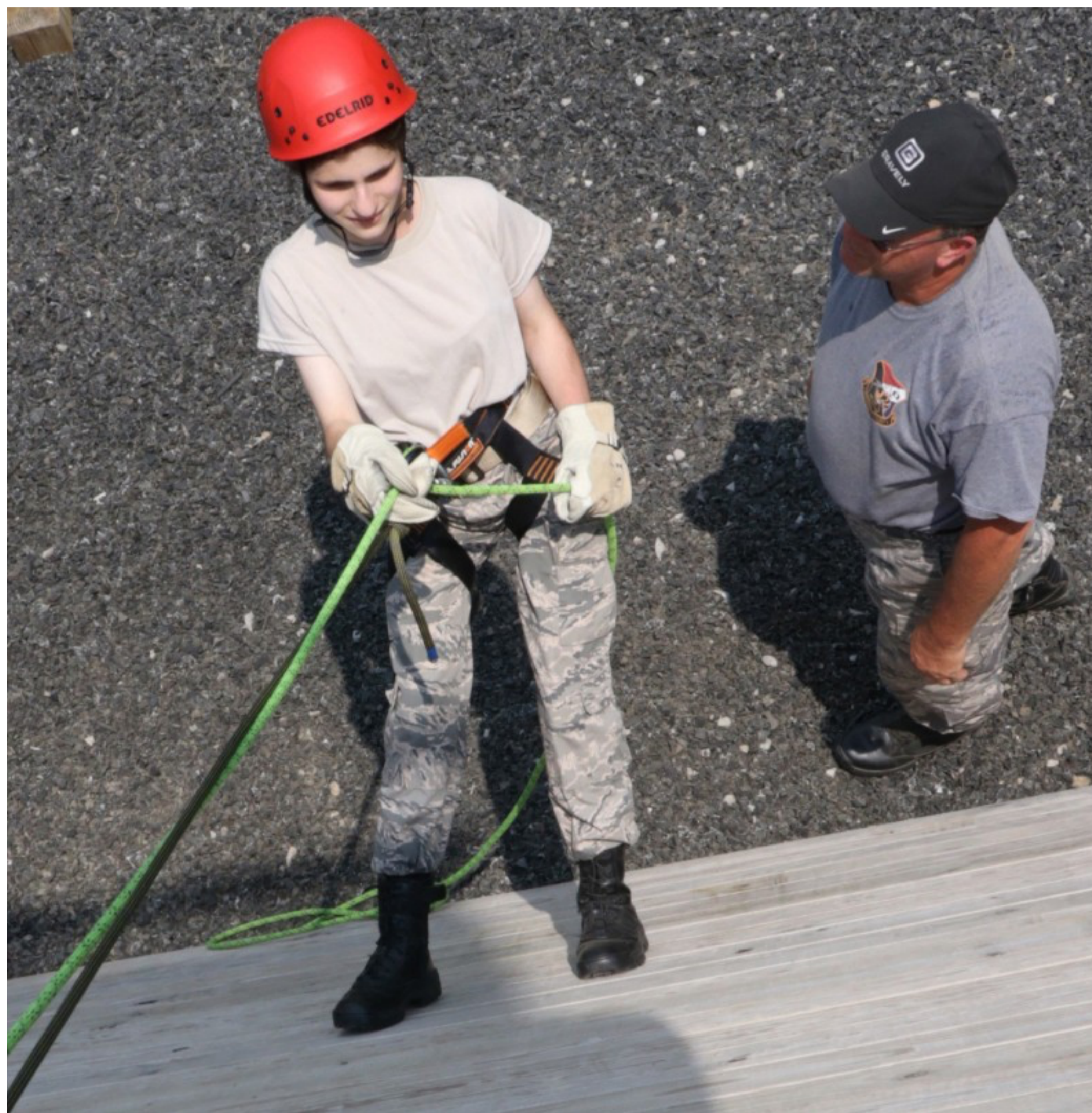
"The cadet responded with, 'You can just sit out.' Two years before, I would have accepted that answer, but not then," Ehlers said.

"The cadet could not argue and tried his best to describe the exercises. After a lot of similar conversations, cadets who are around me have developed a culture where they all describe the exercises verbally to all cadets.

"Once we all discovered what I could do, things went so much more smoothly – like learning that I am a cadet just like everyone else," she said.

Meanwhile, the Platte Valley's senior members made the same discovery and adjusted their leadership styles as needed.

"I am confident that if I left the squadron right now the next cadet with a disability will thrive," Ehlers said.



"This program taught me a considerable amount of leadership skills. It was so instrumental in my life that my skills expanded into other programs that I participate in, like creating an entire youth group for blind students to learn how to grow just like I am.

"If I were not part of this program, I would not be the person that I am today," she said. "Thanks to CAP, quitting is not an option for me. There were many times I wanted to quit, but my mom would not allow it.

"CAP taught me that if you put in the challenging work, you will be extraordinarily successful."

As for career aspirations, "I thought about serving in the military for a long time, but that is not going to work," Ehlers said. "My long-term goal is to become a lawyer and do a little motivational speaking on the side."

"CAP taught me how to hold myself to a high professional standard; have a sense of command presence because employers look for people who can do those things; but most importantly, I know that as an attorney I will be one step ahead because I do not have to work to develop skills like speaking in front of an audience, and I can be assertive when necessary.

"CAP is an organization where I was able to learn skills; learn how to fail; learn what it feels like to succeed and discover my limits, which I now know are no different than anyone else's," said Ehlers, the Platte Valley squadron's deputy cadet commander for operations.

"I look forward to the day when I am presented the (Gen Carl A.) Spaatz Award as the culmination of my cadet career," she said, referring to Civil Air Patrol's top cadet honor, earned by less than one-half of 1% of all cadets.

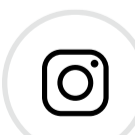
"CAP has truly been a life-changing experience for me, and I look forward to continuing in CAP and helping the program to help other cadets with their challenges."

Capt. Michael Spry, squadron commander, said Ehlers "embraces the sheer aspect of determination without sacrificing her ability to command and lead others."

In doing so, "she brings awareness that visually challenged people can thrive in an organization that treats them with the respect and integrity everyone deserves," Spry said.

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