

City students hit the bull's-eye

Jr. ROTC program at Leadership Academy for Young Men is a rarity in New York state — and has a range of its own

JUSTIN MURPHY STAFF WRITER In the bowels of Charlotte High School, around the corner from the boiler room and directly beneath the swimming pool, shots ring out.

It is hot, humid and noisy. Four young men are prone and propped up on their backpacks with Olympic-grade Daisy single-shot air rifles pointed down-range. Master Sgt. Shawn Legault paces behind them.

The boys, students at Leadership Academy for Young Men, are part of one of the few marksmanship programs in a public high school, and certainly the only one in Monroe County.

"I believe this is character-building," said Master Sgt. Eric Meister, who directs the program along with Legault as part of Leadership Academy's Junior ROTC program. "And that's our mission, to build better citizens."

About 125 students at the high school are part of Junior ROTC, and all belong to the marksmanship program, Meister said. He hopes to open it up to other students as well.

Before they ever handle an air rifle, though, Meister and Legault put the young men through an exhaustive safety training program, including an exam they must ace before advancing.

The rules are clear and inviolable: never point the muzzle toward a person. Never put your finger on the trigger until you're ready to shoot. Always, always, wait for and obey instructions.

For Donald Hill, a 10th-grader, it was different

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MASTER SGT. ERIC MEISTER, CO-DIRECTOR OF LEADERSHIP ACADEMY'S JUNIOR ROTC PROGRAM



Keith Smith takes aim with an air rifle at the Junior ROTC shooting range at the Leadership Academy for Young Men at Charlotte High School. Smith is a junior who hopes the marksmanship program and Junior ROTC will help him secure a future after high school.

PHOTOS BY MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Marksmanship students check out groupings on targets after shooting air rifles at the Junior ROTC shooting range at the Leadership Academy.



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Marksmanship

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from his experience shooting a BB gun as a boy.

"I didn't think they'd tell us all that," he said. "I thought we'd just shoot. But there's a lot to it."

Being in the program has taught him patience, hard work and how to be a gentleman, he said. His cousin is a major in the Army and he's considering enlisting after he graduates.

For now, though, his aim is for the bull's-eye. Ask him and he'll tell you — he's the best shooter this side of Wyatt Earp.

"These kids thrive on competition," Meister said. "We could have a contest to see who can rake a lawn quicker and they'd attack it."

This is the program's third year, but the first at its own range. The last two years, they set up a portable range at a VFW hall, at Edison Tech or in the Charlotte gym.

This winter, the students got permission to set up in the basement and spent a month cleaning and building.

"It was a mess down here," 12th-grader Michael Wilson said. "We swept and vacuumed and power-washed and we got it done."

It is hot, humid and noisy down there, but the range recently gained the certification that will open the door for the students to take part in more regional shooting competitions.

They shoot at the school, then fax in their punctured paper targets for judging. The pellets, loaded one-by-one, are smaller than a pea and travel 600 feet per second.

Meister said having the range gives the Leadership Academy marksmen more legitimacy and will help them advance in the regional

contests.

Marksmanship clubs were once fairly common in public schools but are now rare. It is unclear how many exist in New York.

In 1999, the state Education Department reported there were 26 interscholastic shooting teams, but it was unable to come up with a more current number. Regional Junior ROTC Chief Brenda Gainey said there are two other Junior ROTC-affiliated programs at private schools in Troy and Albany.

In the Hudson Valley, a group called Sullivan County Friends of Firearms is trying to raise money to start marksmanship programs in eight public high schools. Its president, Christine Schiff, said instilling discipline in students is the most important effect of the clubs.

"With the range instructors, it's no nonsense," she said. "It's strict respect. I see a lot of kids who don't have that respect anymore."

Tom King, the president of the New York Rifle and Pistol Association, said he believes the number of clubs in New York is on the rise, particularly in Long Island.

"It's a growing sport and it's perfectly safe," King said. "There have never been any casualties or serious injuries. If you compare any of the shooting sports to football, there is no comparison."

Many clubs around the country are either in elite private schools with a strong military affiliation or in more rural areas. Leadership Academy is different; it is a struggling public high school whose students are intimately familiar with the damage firearms can do.

"A lot of people get shot in the city, and we live in the city," Wilson said. "I've seen people with guns in the streets."

Meister and co-instructor Legault don't shy from the juxtaposition of a marksmanship club in a city plagued by gun violence. They hope the lessons they teach about gun safety will carry over into situations beyond their control.

"I think (the students see guns) all the time," Meister said. "I want the kids to say, one, having an illegal firearm is bad. And two, respect what you have in your hands because it's a very dangerous thing."

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Master Sgt. Shawn Legault watches his students during marksmanship training at the Junior ROTC shooting range at the Leadership Academy for Young Men at Charlotte High School.



Marquis Smith holds up his target at the Leadership Academy's Junior ROTC shooting range. Smith is a senior who hopes to join the military after graduating from high school this year.

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