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Oakhill graduate headed to West Point

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By Frank Schultz
Gazette staff

A large high school enrollment helps if you're looking for talent for your basketball team.

The same rule applies if you want to find high achievers in academics.

Or does it?

Consider the case of Janesville's Oakhill Christian School. High school enrollment this past year: 22. Graduating class size: two.

Both of the 2007 graduates are going to college. One is going to The United States Military Academy at West Point.

The soon-to-be West Pointer is Mark Benson, a pleasant, quiet ex-paperboy who doesn't get overly excited about that fact.

"What strikes me about Mark is that he is so nonplussed about this," said Mark's pastor, Michael Jackson of New Life Assembly of God. "It's an awesome, awesome thing, but it doesn't seem to faze him."



Jackson said that kind of levelheaded calm might serve Benson well as an Army officer.

If Mark makes it through the four years of rigorous training, he'll be obliged to give eight years to his country as an Army officer, five on active duty and three in the reserves, he said.

Mark is the son of Brian and

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Mark Benson, who is one of two graduates from Oakhill Christian School in Janesville, shows his Offer of Admission to The United States Military Academy at West Point.

Al Hoch/Gazette Staff

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Katherine, the third of four sons. Mom teaches grades 3 and 4 at Oakhill. Dad is a computer analyst for Kikkoman in Walworth.

The Bensons live on a quiet street in the Courthouse Hill district, with a porch swing that Mark made for the family. He also made a desk and coffee table, his mother said proudly.

Mark is humble. He just picked up some books from the library and taught himself woodworking, he said when asked about it.

He also loves reading. Historical biographies are his favorites.

Actually, he's very well read, said Oakhill teacher Steve Dean.

"He's always reading substantive books," Dean said. "He often reads a book just because I've suggested it."

Dean describes Mark as intelligent, quiet thoughtful and very respectful.

"He's exceptionally stable. You think of him as the type that will always do what he's supposed to do," Dean said. "The 'duty' word comes up. He can be counted on to do his duty."

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., nominated Mark for West Point, but a nomination doesn't ensure entry. The process is highly competitive.

Ryan nominated seven from the First District to a U.S. service academy this year. Four were accepted, according to a Ryan spokeswoman.

Mark said he's not too concerned about the kind of danger he might face. His mom worries, though, he acknowledged.

"I always thought it was important to serve your country, and education is also important, so it combines the best of those ideas," he said.

While Mark is certainly not the only Janesville graduate to make it to a service academy, it is fairly rare. Jackson thinks it speaks well of the community.

"He's a product of Oakhill Christian. He's the product of a local church, local parents who are just hard-working, godly people, and Janesville produces that kind of kid," Jackson said.

Mark has attended the nondenominational, Christian school since preschool.

"We liked the family atmosphere at Oakhill, the support of the teachers," Katherine said. "No child is lost."

Dean said a small school has obvious disadvantages, but one of the plusses is that he can spend more time giving each student individual attention.

"A majority go on to college, and a majority seem to do very, very well," Dean said of Oakhill grads. "We feel like they're literate and prepared."

Dean has taught at Oakhill for 34 of the school's 35 years. He recalled that one grad scored a perfect 36 on the ACT.

As for Mark's accomplishment, "It's an amazing thing for our little school," said Dean.

Oh, and about that basketball team: Both members of the Class of 2007-Mark and Blake Mosley-played on the Oakhill team that won the Wisconsin Association of Christian Schools state championship, not once but three years in a row.

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