Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Rebecca King of Grafton is determined to be a leader of men and women and West Point is giving her the training and opportunity to do it.

When Rebecca King was a student at John Long Middle School in Grafton, she took it to heart when veterans talked about the price of freedom during a Veterans Day program at the height of the war in Iraq.

“She came home and said, ‘I want to save our country,’” her mother Pam said. “As she moved into high school, she talked more and more about wanting to enlist.”

Her mother, father Brett and an Army recruiter convinced the girl it was better to enter military service as an officer than enlist straight out of high school.

Today, King, a 2009 graduate of Grafton High School, is a senior at West Point Military Academy, majoring in management with a minor in nuclear engineering.

When she graduates in December 2013, she will be a second lieutenant. Her goal is to lead a platoon of engineers in a combat zone.

“That’s why I went to West Point,” King said. “It gives you an opportunity to lead soldiers eventually in combat. You lead them successfully and bring them back home safely to their families.”

Her parents, who proudly wear West Point attire and long ago accepted their daughter’s career choice, are relieved that as an engineer she won’t be on the front lines, but suspect she will find a way to get close to the action.

Female soldiers are needed for house inspections in Afghanistan and Iraq when women are present, her father said.

“If she can figure out a way, she will likely do that,” he said.

“This is so not what I wanted my little girl to do,” her mother said, “but it’s a pleasure when your children find what they want to do. I’m not afraid any more, but I don’t listen to the news a lot. I know she will succeed at what she does.”

No one in King’s family was in the military and her older brother Matt, who owns a business in Grafton, showed no interest in joining the armed forces. However, the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, left an indelible mark, King said.

“It was something I couldn’t look away from,” she said. “I couldn’t watch men and women go overseas and make that sacrifice, and I had no reason not to go. It’s not something I had to do. It’s something I wanted to do.”

After her daughter’s first week of basic cadet training, Mrs. King said, she called home excited because she had met friends who thought like her.

King, whose current rank is 200 out of 1,081 cadets, will learn this week the job she will be assigned. She has an eight-year commitment to the Army, five years of active duty and three years in the Reserves. Ideally, King said, she would like to serve in the Army until retirement.

King was home for a week over the Thanksgiving holiday on a recruiting mission. She talked to prospective West Point candidates at Milwaukee schools and her alma mater.

While espousing the benefits of West Point over the Air Force and Naval academies, King always mentions the Army football team. She’s the team manager and works with the quarterbacks during practices.

“We beat Air Force already, and I think this is the year we beat Navy,” King said.

The team is gearing up for its Dec. 8 game against Navy, she said.

Her closest friends are members of the team. She tutored football players her freshman year and became manager her sophomore year. King refers to a group of senior football players as her 10 brothers.

She credits her parents for pushing her in the right direction.

“I would probably have enlisted,” King said. “Both my parents went to college, and there was an emphasis from them to get my education. I looked at a lot of college ROTC programs, but I didn’t apply anywhere else.”

She advises aspiring cadets to also apply to colleges in case they don’t get an appointment.

King said she enjoyed her time at Grafton High, where she was captain of the soccer team and involved in a variety of activities, but never felt she fit in until she visited West Point. After shadowing a cadet, she knew that was where she wanted to be.

In addition to traveling with the football team, which she considers the highlight of the school year, she also traveled to North Korea and to Uganda.

She spent two months this summer in a rural area of Uganda where she taught in a school, worked with a medical team, helped get clean water to villagers and managed to shower four times in the two months.

“I would go back in a heartbeat. It was absolutely the best experience in my life,” King said. “The people there are amazing. I learned a lot about the culture and the way it works. I’ve stayed in touch with a couple of Ugandans and plan to go back in the summer.”

King is definitely in a man’s world. Only 12% of her classmates are female. She said there have been no incidents of sexual assault or harassment since she’s been at the academy.

“I’m pretty much the token female all the time,” she said. “I’ve had a great cadet experience. It’s kind of like a frat. There are so many guys.

“Sometimes, it takes choosing how to present yourself so you maintain respect and professionalism as a leader.”

King said Major Gen. Angela Selinas of the Marine Corps once told someone she wanted to be the best female Marine.

“He told her, ‘No, you want to be the best damn Marine,’” King said.

“That’s how I feel. What gender you are has nothing to do with being a good leader.”

Image Information: SERVING HER COUNTRY is what Rebecca King of Grafton has wanted to do since she was in middle school. She’s now a cadet at West Point Military Academy.
Photo by Sam Arendt