

# **My I-Day Shock And My Weeks Of... Well... Grief !**

Aloha,

Well, my work is cleared off from my desk enough to write a quick (okay not so quick) word to you Plebe-to-Be Parents on what I experienced and what you can expect during I-Day and Plebe Summer. Sigh... Where to begin...

Every family is different, but I chose to take my son alone to I-Day, it was one of the best decisions I've made, leaving the other kids behind. Having been a single mom for 11 of his 18 years prior to I-Day, this was a huge event in our family's life. As the only boy, he had been the man of the house for years. In fact, he validated plebe year English writing an essay about how difficult it was to care for three young sisters while his mom was working three jobs. Like your kids, my son was a stellar student, valedictorian with his choices of any military academy or many Ivy League schools - confident, well-spoken and a joy to have around. His desire is to enter politics, and he had the opportunity to serve in the U.S. Senate Youth program, and eloquently talk to Congressman and Senators on many occasions. I say this only so you will understand my shock and horror on I-Day. My immediate family had no military ties (only grandparents and uncles), so I was totally unprepared for what happened that day.

We went to Annapolis a few days early, so my son could acclimate to the time change and climate change. He says I damaged his kidneys forever because I made him drink so much water in the three days prior to I-Day (but thanked me when I saw him later on Stribling Walk, as he said so many plebes had "fallen" that day due to dehydration and heat exhaustion). During these three days, we had so many wonderful talks that are tucked away in my heart forever - his hopes, his dreams, our views on life and death, love, motivation and more. We basically said to each other everything that had been left unsaid prior to that point.

As we waited in line and he reached the door (him wearing a green Teenage Mutant Ninja turtle shirt and surf shorts - which I know now is not recommended), he was happy, confident and ready-to-go. He had chosen USNA years before, and it was where he wanted to be. I caught glimpses of him later through the upper windows in Alumni Hall (his Ninja t-shirt now tucked tightly in his surf shorts) as they made the rounds of immunizations, hair cuts, shoe fittings, etc. and I looked up at the disoriented, almost scared face in the window and gave a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" gesture to him. He looked around to make sure no one was looking and did a "so-so" gesture. The next time I saw him, it was in the back of Alumni Hall, where cadre were in the faces of plebes

and yelling, "do it faster, you're not doing it right, your mommy can't help you", etc. and he looked pale, and well, in shock. I barely recognized his countenance, as he looked huddled into a shell of what he used to be.

When I saw him later on Stribling walk, I've described the look as a wet kitten that had just been through a washing machine. His hand shook as he held his Reef Points book in front of his face, and he was visibly shaken. When we had the opportunity to talk, my first question was "Do you want to leave?" because I knew for a fact that two Marine guards with guns at Gate 8 could not stop a mother protecting her firstborn. "No, Mom. This is what I want. I can do this."

Parents will tell you that at the orientation meeting for parents, I was the dummy that stood up and asked the Commandant of Midshipmen during open mike session, "Why are you people so mean? Isn't a pleasant environment more conducive to learning?" Experienced parents rolled their eyes and many with military experience came to me later and said, "Did you think it was summer camp?", etc. but so many more parents were in the same boat as me, and listened intently to what the answer would be, as they were curious, too.

The Cadre in charge of Plebe summer asked if he could respond to my question and he said, "Ma'am, we're not mean. We're confrontational. It's different. These are all great kids who have never been in a confrontational situation in their life. They have always done whatever was asked of them, and excelled. Now we are turning their world upside down to see what they are really made of and how they will react. We want them to respond with intelligent choices, and take emotion completely out of the picture."

So I left my son there, still not happy with the place I had left him. It went against everything I've ever taught him. When I got home, the first thing I did was to call his NJROTC commander and say, "What the heck have we done to my son?" and I explained the day's events. His explanation was that never in my son's young life had he felt, "what did I get myself into to?" or "what am I going to do now?" and he said that the first time my son ever attempts to land a plane on an aircraft carrier, or the first time soldiers look to him in battle and say, "What do we do now, Sir?" that he will have the exact same feeling, and he will now know that he can do it because of the training he received in plebe summer.

Call me skeptical, but I still wasn't convinced. I thought it was a weird cult. The two phone calls we had during the summer did not sound like the exuberant young man I knew, they sounded tired, and unsure, and downright sad.

I went through a period of grief that summer; I would wake up at 4 am, and check for

pictures of him on the internet, or read through all of the emails to hope someone had some information that would reassure me that my son was okay. Every time my 8 year old would hear "welcome back", a popular song on the radio that summer, she would burst into inconsolable tears.

We have a squeaky screen door, and I can't tell you how many times during the summer I would hear the squeak and look up smiling in anticipation of my son walking through the door as he had done so many times before, only to see that the wind had blown it, and I would literally put my head down on my desk and cry. More times than I can count. I made friends through the listserv, and they too, confirmed that they were depressed and grieving, and we all kind of hung in there together. If someone wasn't feeling what I was at that particular time, they had felt it, or they would be feeling it soon, so we stuck together and supported each other, never judging, just listening and comforting each other.

Now, two years later, my son is not the same confident, self-assured kid that I dropped off. He is a confident, self-assured young man who knows that he's been tried by fire and made it. His demeanor was not changed by plebe summer, it was enhanced, and I say that because I truly doubted "the process". You will hear over and over this summer "trust the process" and I will tell you that I did not. I am in awe of "the process" now, but I was not a happy mother during plebe summer.

I encourage you to ask your questions, vent your frustrations and concerns and truly rely on the support that is offered by the listserv. No one, not your friends, family or co-workers will understand what you will all go through this summer. But we will. We've been there and done that - some better than others. I admit, plebe summer has been the hardest event I've been through in my life, and I imagine my son would say the same.

We're here, call on us and we'll respond, we understand what you will be going through and we will relate with every emotion you'll have, and there will be many.

Enjoy the time with your plebe-to-be this next month, store up hugs now for the long summer, and have those talks that you've never had time for, all of the important discussions that will sustain your plebe through the toughest event of their life, remind them that they are loved and that you believe in them. Tell them that they can do it.

My son and I once went to Alaska fishing with a group, and we all went for a short walk. He noticed a marked path to a glacier and wanted to go up, although we were not properly dressed with hiking shoes. We climbed about half-way up, and I was exhausted from the effort. As we sat there, my son said, "Mom, we have to do this. This is one moment in time that will never come around again. We will never be in this situation

again in our lives. It would be so easy to climb back down, but it will haunt us for the rest of our lives that we didn't make it to the top." How glad I am that I "sucked it up" and climbed to the top with him - he pulling me along - until we were literally on the top of the world, giddy with our accomplishment. I reminded my son more than once during plebe summer that this was it - it would be easier to give up and go back down the mountain, but the opportunity would never come again. Your plebe will make it too, as will you, but you will need to encourage each other and accept the hand that is offered to you by others, as this opportunity will never come again.

Carmen, Proud Mom

Blair 08/07, Preparing for Fall Semester Exchange to National Defense Academy of Japan

Antone 09/05, National Collegiate Boxing Champion

Erica 10/Cornell NROTC Scholarship Hawaii

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