

ON THE MOUNTAIN

# Proud to be an American

Story by Mike Latona

Some of his classmates might still be holding graduation parties. John Ayers, on the other hand, has already begun the next phase of his life.

John, 18, graduated from Hilton High School on June 15. Just 11 days later, he left for Colorado Springs to begin serving as a basic cadet in the United States Air Force Academy.

After enjoying a wide range of activities during high school — from playing football, to helping make rosaries, to meeting the President of the United States — the Air Force will be John's primary commitment for perhaps several years to come.

"I'm optimistic and a little nervous. I know it's going to be hard, but it'll be 100 percent worth it," John said during a June 17 interview at his home.

John's desire to serve his country was enhanced in July of last year when he spent eight days in Washington, D.C., as a member of the American Legion Boys Nation. Highlighting the trip was a visit with President George W. Bush at the White House.

"I was thinking 'This is my future commander in chief — this is amazing,'" he recalled.

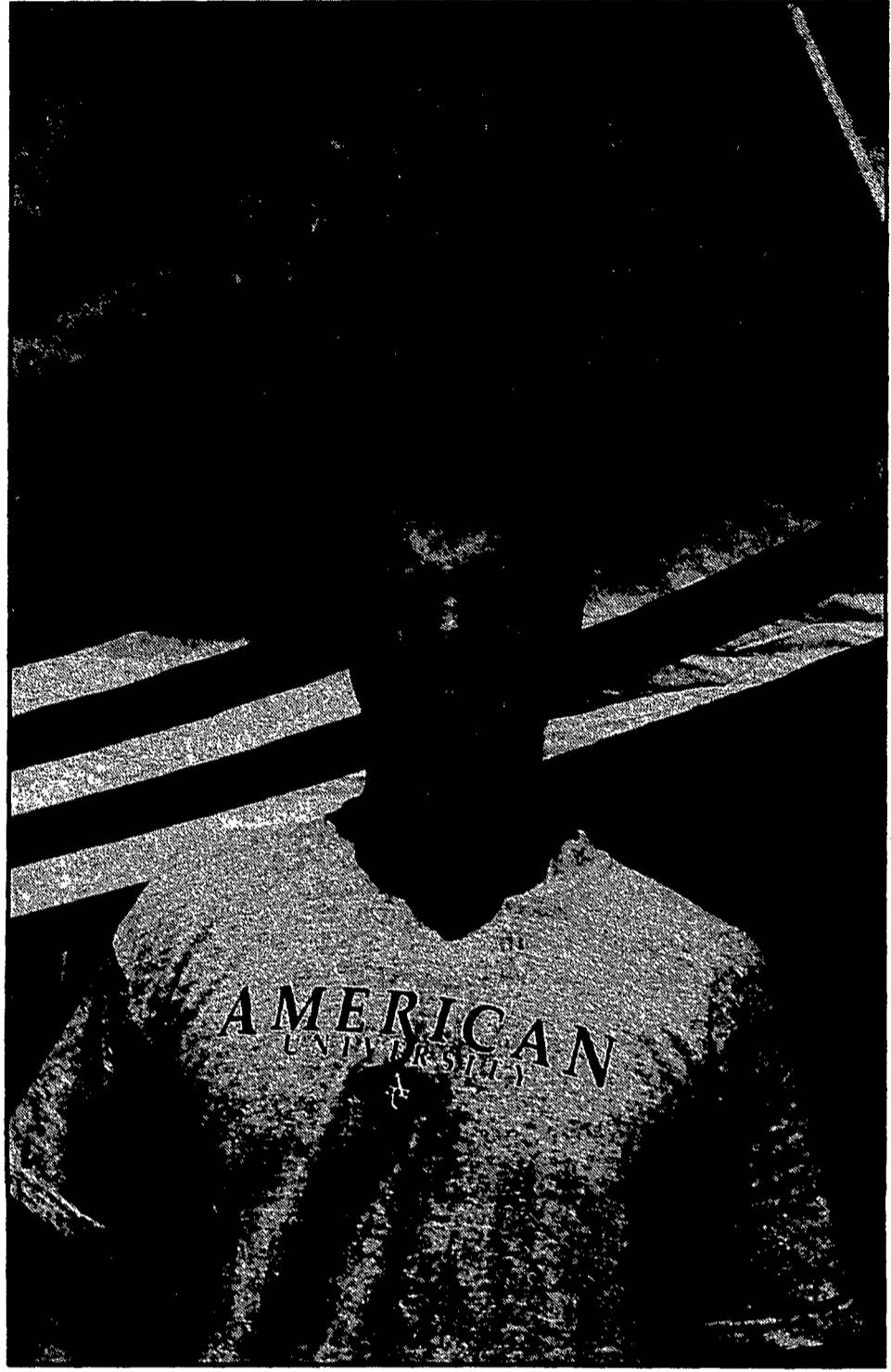
President Bush spoke briefly to the young representatives of both Boys Nation and Girls Nation. "He talked about leadership and making a difference in the world," John said. Then the president met guests one by one and posed for photographs.

"I shook his hand twice and said, 'Sir, it's quite an honor meeting you today. I was at your inauguration (John had traveled to that event with a group from Hilton High) and am going into the military.' He said something like 'That's great' and thanked me," John said. The visitors were then escorted away by Secret Service agents.

Boys Nation, an American Legion program designed to help youths better understand the structure and operation of government, brought together two delegates from each of 48 participating states. John was the first person from Monroe County to ever attend Boys Nation, which began in 1946. He was selected out of a large group of teens that had attended Boys State two months earlier at the State University of New York College at Morrisville.

While in Washington the Boys Nation group toured federal agencies and historical spots around town, and visited with elected officials from their home states. They also simulated many functions of government, such as holding sessions on bills and organizing party conventions.

Only a few weeks after Boys Nation, John learned about the work of our nation's leaders from a much different perspective, as



Karin von Voigtlander/Staff photographer

John Ayers of Hilton, a parishioner at St. Jude's Parish in Gates, poses at his home June 25. Less than two weeks after graduation, John left for Colorado Springs to begin serving as a basic cadet in the United States Air Force.

they responded to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. John asserted that the tragedy furthered his desire for a military career.

"That just more or less reaffirmed my position: Nobody messes with the United States and gets away with it," he said.

John noted how the events of 9-11 have stoked patriotism in this country that hasn't existed for several decades. He added that Americans now cherish their freedoms more greatly even though the country is far from perfect.

"We don't have it bad at all," he stated. "People have seen we're going to have to support America if we're going to get through this at all."

He said he keeps up on the war by following the nightly news. "I figure you'd better know what you're getting into."

Up to this point, John has led an activity-packed life. At St. Jude's Parish in Gates he's been an altar server, eucharistic minister, lector and Vacation Bible School volunteer. The second oldest of six children, John and his family helped make hundreds of rosaries that were distributed to people affected by 9-11.

At Hilton High he was in the band and stage crew, and had also been involved in Model UN — a program that simulates the operation of the United Nations — since seventh grade. He even played football for the first time last fall so he could get in shape for military training.

John is slated to spend four years at the Air Force Academy, followed by at least five years of active duty. Although John won't be eligible for military action for at least six years, he said he'd be ready and willing if such service is required.

"If you go into the military you're expecting to be called into duty," he said, asserting that people who dismiss that possibility should not enlist.

Yet John also emphasized that he's not gung-ho about engaging in warfare — rather, he would do what is necessary to serve and defend his country.

"I don't know too many people who would openly say, 'I want a war.' They may support a war, but they don't want it," he remarked.



Photo courtesy of John Ayers

Ayers (right) said the highlight of his eight-day trip to Washington, D.C., as a representative of the American Legion Boys Nation was meeting President George W. Bush at the White House July 27, 2001.

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