

Serving their country

Suzie Burks, David Amenityro and Stephen Daniels have conquered the rigorous application process

By [Jenna Nielsen](#)

(Updated Wednesday, May 31, 2006, 1:08 PM)

Don Burks still remembers riding on the plane.

It was the plane to New Jersey with his daughter Jessica when he had to give her a hug and say goodbye.

After a few tears he knew she was off to the United States Military Academy at West Point in New York for four years.

And on June 23, he will do it again.

Burks' youngest daughter Suzannah, whom everyone knows as Suzie, is leaving for the same academy Jessica will graduate from in 2007.



With her mom Mary, dad Don and brother Jonathan behind her, 18-year-old Suzie Burks will leave in June to start her military and educational career at the United States Military Academy at West Point.
Photos by Jenna Nielsen

She is one of three students in the Mountain Area who received a Congressional nomination from George Radanovich in April.

Mariposa resident David Amenityro and Oakhurst resident Stephen Daniels also received nominations to West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis respectively.

Suzie will leave this summer to start her four-year military and educational training.

"I am going through a lot of different emotions right now," Suzie said. "I am very excited to leave and at the same time sad to leave my family, but I am growing up and will be starting a new chapter in my life and I am really looking forward to that."

When Suzie first visited the U.S. Military (Army) Academy at West Point with her dad, mom Mary and younger brother Jonathan to see her sister, she liked the area but thought it just wasn't for her.

"I think I matured a lot since I first visited," Suzie said. "I placed less importance on socializing and appearance and homeschooling had a lot to do with that. As I got older, I felt the lifestyle was more for me because I didn't have a lot of peer pressure and wasn't concerned with wearing certain clothes. I just got out of the high school mentality, I think."

Jessica said she didn't know exactly what changed Suzie's mind, but that it probably had to do with the structure and lack of distractions from other people.

"Everyone here is focused on the same goal, so everyone is kind of working as a team as far classes, fitness, etc. goes," Jessica said. "It's very different from mentalities from my counterparts at other schools, where everybody is basically focused on getting just themselves through."

It wasn't until she participated in a summer leadership program at West Point last year when

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Suzie began thinking it was for her.

"I really wanted to serve my country and I want to get a good education," she said. "And West Point is exactly that and it also felt most like home for me because my sister was there."

Suzie also attended an Air Force summer leadership program and applied to and visited other college campuses like Santa Clara.

"The Air Force was a second choice but after visiting I decided I didn't want to go," Suzie said. "It just didn't feel as structured and it was different than West Point."

Don said the family wanted to make sure Suzie was choosing a school for herself.

"West Point is similar to an Ivy League education, but it shouldn't be the reason and you should never apply somewhere because somebody else wants you to."

Suzie is a recent graduate of Glacier Mountain Home Charter School. She finished high school at semester and graduated in December.

Suzie was very active in high school on an educational, leadership, sports and community service level.

Beyond getting excellent grades, Suzie filled her spare time with tutoring eighth graders in math, helping other kids and teachers in classrooms.

She also was part of the original group that founded the Glacier High School Associated Student Body Government (ASB) and served on the Glacier Charter Council as a student representative while she was ASB president.

"She is very determined, focused and very mature in pursuing her education," said Glacier High School Principal Michael Cox. "She is diligent and not easily distracted by things most teenagers are distracted by. She keeps her eye on the mark."

When Suzie wasn't tutoring or busy running cross country, she also took classes at the Oakhurst College Center for both high school and college credit.

To get into any military academy, a candidate must go through a rigorous application process and must get a Congressional nomination.

Bob Small, a staff assistant for Congressman Radanovich and the coordinator for the U.S. Military Academy nominations, said the procedure is not easy and it is very difficult to get a nomination.

First, he said candidates must send in a résumé with reasons why they want to attend a military academy and include three letters of recommendation. They must also take the SAT, and the ACT is recommended.

Small said the candidates usually send in their résumés in September or October. In November, the candidate must go through an hour-long intense interview process with the Congressman's nomination board.

The board is made up of some retired military personnel and others who are knowledgeable in the field. It then takes about two or three weeks for the board to decide who will receive a nomination.

"It's not an easy process," Small said. "They go through a lot just to get nominated."

By the end of January, Small said he has all the nominations in to the academies.

After the nominations are submitted, the candidate must still be accepted by the academy. A Congressional nomination does not guarantee a candidate an appointment into an academy.

"It's so competitive," Small said. "Just to be nominated is a great honor."

Small cited the example that West Point received 10,800 applications this year from candidates throughout the U.S. They were narrowed down to 3,000 and offered only 1,500 applicants appointments.

"That's how competitive it is," Small said. "The best of the best are attending our military academies."

It could be until April or May, depending on which academy a candidate applied to, before they will hear from the academy about whether they were accepted.

"It's a six- or seven-month process and at least a three-month process from the time they send in résumés to the time they do an interview," Small said.

This is also the highest number of Mountain Area students that have received Congressional nominations in a single year.

"Normally we get one or two from the Mountain Area and two alone from the area being appointed. And three nominated is just phenomenal."

In Congressman Radanovich's district, which stretches to Fresno and Tuolumne counties including the Mountain Area, 19 candidates applied and 16 received nominations.

"Even more outstanding is 13 out of 16 got appointments this year," Small said. "I think that is just outstanding and we are really proud of our kids in District 19."

When Suzie found out she had been appointed, she said she was thrilled.

"I was so excited," she said. "I knew West Point was the only place I wanted to go and it made my senior year a lot easier knowing I had been accepted."

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point was established in 1802 by an act of Congress.

The first woman did not enter the academy until 1976 and the first woman graduated in 1980.

Cadets are members of the U.S. Army, and they receive annual salaries of more than \$6,500. This pay covers the cost of their uniforms, textbooks, a personal computer and living incidentals.

There is no tuition and room and board are provided. After successful completion of the four-year course, the graduate receives a Bachelor of Science degree and is commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army with a requirement to serve as an officer on active duty for a minimum of five years.

For her first six weeks of her West Point career, Suzie will go through what is called "Beast Barracks." The intense psychological and physical training program is designed to transform civilians into soldier-cadets.

Her days will begin with 5 a.m. wake-up calls and end at 10 p.m. after days of long runs, obstacle courses, marching and studying subjects ranging from weapons maintenance to preventive medicine.

Everything will be structured and regimented from the number of answers she can use to address questions by a superior to the number of chews she can make to swallow her food.

Many consider Beast to be one of the most challenging periods of a new cadet's career and between five and 10 percent of new cadets will drop out by mid-August.

While Suzie knows it is going to be tough on her, she is at the same time anticipating it.

"I know it is going to be both physically and mentally challenging," she said. "I am just trying to

prepare physically by running and working out a lot and mentally by trying to accept the fact now that I won't be able to talk to my family but it is something I need to get ready for and not let it become a burden while I am there. I need to understand when they are yelling at you it is nothing personal — just something everybody goes through."

Jessica knows Suzie's first six weeks won't be easy, but she has confidence in her sister's abilities.

"If I had any advice for her it would be just to not lose sight of her goals," Jessica said. "The summer isn't going to be a trip to Disneyland but if she can get past the dirt and not sleeping, I think she will be all right."

When Suzie finishes the four-year program, she will serve on active duty for five years.

Another thing she has had to think about is entering the military during a time of conflict.

"It is a part of the job," Suzie said. "I have to accept that I might be deployed to Iraq one day, but it comes with it."

Don and Mary know it is something they have to think about too, but they are confident in both their daughters.

"I am happy knowing that my girls will be in charge," Mary said.

For now, Suzie is happy about attending West Point and is looking forward to being with her sister.

"It will be comforting to have her there," Suzie said. "Especially since it will be the most difficult year to adjust."

Jessica agrees and is excited for the day her sister arrives.

"I'm so excited and I am happy I will always have a work-out buddy and someone to hang around with on the weekends," Jessica said. "It gets depressing sometimes here when you feel like you have no one to hang around with because everyone is so busy but I will always have her."

And it is going to be difficult for the Burks family too.

"Suzie's the party," Mary said. "She is my helper, my assistant and I don't know what I am going to do without her."

And Don is preparing for those tears and that final hug.

When he gets on that plane, he knows he will have to say goodbye to Suzie for months.

"It's never easy," Don said. "When I took Jess, it was an empty feeling and your kids don't just leave, they tear away from you."

Friday's edition of the Sierra Star will feature Mariposa resident David Ameneyro, while the May 31 edition will feature Oakhurst resident Stephen Daniels.



Suzie will join her older sister Jessica, who is in her third year at West Point. Their younger brother Jonathan also has hopes to attend the academy.
Photo by Jenna Nielsen



Burks has had a successful athletic and academic career in high school. She is now preparing both mentally and physically for her four years at West Point.
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