



***Esten Foss:
From Bethlehem to West Point***

By: Katherine Grandstrand-Quail

In just a few short weeks, Esten Foss will be at a major turning point in a life he hopes to build on service and leadership.

While most high school graduates have until August to say goodbye to friends they've known for years or even decades, Esten must complete basic training ahead of his freshman year at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

Part of the Central High School Class of 2026, Esten has been a lifelong member at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. His family moved to Aberdeen a few years before he was born, and he was baptized here. Esten's parents are Kevin and Kerri.

"He has always had a lot of moxie in that he has never been afraid to try new things and has always given everything he does 100% effort," Kerri said. "He is very much an introvert, but can show leadership when the situation demands it."

The principles of service and leadership are tenets Esten said he learned at Bethlehem – starting as a Sunday School student, through Route 67 and onto confirmation and beyond.

"It means a lot," Esten said of the support he's felt from Bethlehem. He said he currently serves on the Stream Team, which runs the streaming broadcast on social media so people can watch services from their home or anywhere. That can affect which service he attends.

"We usually go Wednesday nights, but sometimes we go Sunday," Esten said.

He also helps with special events, like the Halloween Trunk-or-Treat.

The lessons he's learned at Bethlehem will carry him forward to this next chapter of his life.

"It's come full-circle," Esten said.

While there's no hesitation in his decision – West Point has been in his sights since middle school – having to say an early goodbye to his friends and family is starting to become a reality.

The trip between West Point, N.Y., and Aberdeen is nearly a 24-hour drive. Once he makes the trip in June, Esten said he doesn't plan to come back to the Hub City until Thanksgiving break in November.

"I'll be meeting new people and making new friends," Esten said, adding that he'll miss the friends from back home – some he's known his whole life.

It's not just his contemporaries – **the team here at Bethlehem has been a set of role models**, Esten said. This includes pastors Jeff Whillock and Matt Spoden and Stan Jung, Director of Youth and Young Adults.

Those men, along with others at Bethlehem, modeled leadership that helped Esten set lofty goals and meet them.

Getting into West Point is a challenge in and of itself. The application process took months and included interviews with Sen. Mike Rounds and Rep. Dusty Johnson. Esten said he had to travel for his exams to earn his medical clearance.

"Once I had my medical clearance, then they looked at my grades and gave me the final approval," Esten said.

Esten's acceptance was announced by Sen. Round's office in December.

"Esten is committed to serving our country in the United States Army after receiving a top-notch education at West Point. He's worked hard to get to this point, and we know he will excel at the Military Academy," Rounds said in the announcement. "I wish Esten all the best as he finishes out his senior year and continues to prepare for the next four years."

The application process is just a sample of the rigor expected of cadets at West Point, who are members of the U.S. Army. Those attending the academy do not pay tuition or room and board. They are prepared for a military career.

"He quietly works hard on things and doesn't make a big deal out of his successes and is confident in what he can accomplish," said dad Kevin. "He is always listening, taking in information and looking to do the right thing. Fairness and loyalty have been values he's held since he was little but has understood life isn't always fair."

At this point, Esten isn't sure if he'll stay in the Army beyond his required five years service after graduation or if he'll earn an advanced degree from another institution and move to the private sector.

The one thing he does know is that he wants to lead people, Esten said. That's something he's been able to practice here at Bethlehem.

"I've been able to build my relationship with God," Esten said.

The peace that comes with that knowledge will help provide the strength needed to rise to the challenges in the months ahead, Esten said.

"While we are proud of all of his academic and athletic accomplishments, we are most proud of the fact that he is a humble and kind young man," mom Kerri said.



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