

# 4-H military program youth makes mark in academics, photography, community service

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SAN ANTONIO — David Zulli, 18, a recent graduate of the John Jay Science and Engineering Academy at John Jay High School in San Antonio, might not have his driver's license yet, but he has already excelled at various academic, artistic and altruistic endeavors.

Zulli, who has been involved in the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service 4-H Military Partnership and Outreach Support Program for the past six years, has been offered about \$300,000 in college scholarships, begun his own business and helped improve communities in three foreign countries.

"David has been a little busy with other things, so he hasn't been able to get his license yet," said Cindy Zulli, his mother.

One of Zulli's long-time interests has been his affiliation with the Boy Scouts of America. He became an Eagle Scout at the age of 16. (Photo courtesy of the Zulli family)

"A little busy" is an understatement considering the number and variety of activities that have diverted Zulli's attention from more typical teenage pursuits. In addition to the 4-H military program, Zulli has been involved in Boy Scouts of America – he became an Eagle Scout at 16 – the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and the National Honor Society.

"Sometimes you see a young person and know they have certain qualities you can help them develop so they can become a leader," said Jared Moore, teen director for the Joint Base San Antonio Lackland Youth Programs Teen Center. "David had those qualities."

Moore said The 4-H program at Joint Base San Antonio has more than 4,000 registered members and is the largest military 4-H program in the state.

"We typically have from 30-60 teen participants on each of the weekdays and that goes up to 90 or more on the weekend," Moore noted.

David Wright, Texas 4-H Urban Outreach Program director, said the goal of the AgriLife Extension's 4-H military partnership program is to marshal resources of the land-grant institutions and Cooperative Extension System in collaboration with other organizations to develop and deliver positive youth development through 4-H programs for military-connected children and youth. AgriLife Extension provides support, programming and opportunities to youth through its Texas 4-H Urban Outreach Program.

Deb Willey, chief for Air Force Child and Youth Programs, who provides leadership to over 77 Air Force bases across the nation, said the expertise 4-H offers in STEM subjects, healthy living, citizenship, public speaking and other core program areas provides valuable life skills, curriculum and resources for military youth, staff and families.

"David Zulli is an impressive, talented young man with a bright future," Willey said. "We are extremely proud of his

work and dedication and are also proud of the team of professionals at the Youth Programs Teen Center at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, who offer programs and opportunities to help our youth learn, grow and become positive citizens.”

Along with photography, Zulli has been involved in many public speaking opportunities through the 4-H military program at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland. (Photo courtesy of the Zulli family)

After initial contact with the 4-H military program in Texas, the Zulli family moved to Colorado and Arizona,” Moore explained. When the family returned to San Antonio, David resumed his relationship with the club at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland.

David’s father, Lt. Col. Daniel Zulli, an Air Force chaplain, has been active-duty military for 30 years.

“Our being a military family gave David a much different upbringing and perspective than most kids,” Cindy Zulli explained. “And as a family, we love what the four H’s stand for – hands, head, heart and health — and think those provide a good balance for anyone. (The 4-H military program) has provided David with an opportunity to develop his interests and to develop as a person.”

His involvement in the 4-H military program has been primarily with photography and public speaking, particularly as a presenter at the 4-H Military Partnership conferences in San Antonio.

“One of David’s main areas of interest through the 4-H program has been the use of photography and videography as a means of self-expression,” Moore said. “He has grown a lot through that program and has learned a variety of skills.”

Moore said Zulli has also been an active participant in the program’s leadership club, which focuses on academic success, career development and community service in addition to advocating for youth wellness.

“Because David goes to a different school than the one on base, his leadership abilities really show when he comes to the center and gets down to the business of coordinating activities with our kids so they can collaborate and accomplish their goals,” he said.

David Zulli at the Texas Science and Engineering Fair. (Photo courtesy of the Zulli family)

While photography is Zulli’s artistic outlet, most of his academic success has been in science, Moore noted. Those academic achievements have led to sizeable scholarship offers from such prestigious Texas institutions as St. Mary’s University, Incarnate Word University and Baylor University, as well as the University of Arizona and the State University of New York Oswego, Syracuse.

“I’ve been involved in science fairs since seventh grade and have been able to travel to participate in five international fairs and have done pretty well,” Zulli said. “My main interest is in biological and biochemical research with an emphasis on green energy.”

Zulli recently participated at the International Sustainable World Energy, Engineering and Environment Project, or I-SWEEEP, competition in Houston, a science competition open to high school students throughout the world and touted as “an Olympiad of epic academic proportions.”

Due to his military background, faith and what he calls “an intrinsic motivation to learn about other cultures,” Zulli also has been involved in service projects in the Dominican Republic, Thailand and Cambodia.

“I was trying to make a difference by participating in projects to help the impoverished, improve educational opportunities and raise awareness on the issue of human trafficking, which is prevalent in those countries,” he said.

Zulli also has been involved in blood donor drives and efforts to raise funds and awareness for cancer research.

As a result of his academic and humanitarian efforts, Zulli was recently named 2017 Southwest Military Youth of the Year by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America for an eight-state region. He had previously been named Lackland

Military Youth of the Year and Texas State Military Youth of the Year by the same organization.

Zulli was chosen Texas State Military Youth of the Year by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. (Photo courtesy of the Zulli family)

“In September I’ll be competing with military youth from five other regions throughout the country in Washington, D.C. for national honors,” Zulli said.

Zulli is also busy running his own small photography business.

“Photography has opened a lot of doors for me,” he said. “I’ve shot events, festivals, graduations and other activities. I market myself as primarily a portrait artist and have done portrait photography along with doing head shots for people wanting to be models, actors or singers.”

He has also completed an extensive photography project devoted to other cultures.

“I’ve used that cultural photography project for my AP credit to meet my fine arts requirement,” Zulli said. “I integrated other cultural elements into the photographs to make it even more artistic. The 4-H military program really helped me develop those skills that I’ve used in photography competitions.”

While Zulli has been accepted at several institutes of higher learning, he said he will likely attend the University of Texas at Austin as it has the best degree plan to fulfill his desire to become a research scientist.

“But just because David will be in college doesn’t mean he will cut ties with the 4-H program and the other youth-oriented service organizations he’s been involved with over the years,” Moore said. “David has already committed to continuing to mentor other young people to help them advance.”

Zulli credited youth-oriented organizations like 4-H with helping him broaden his interests and become a more aware and well-rounded individual.

“I’m an advocate for people expanding their horizons through multi-dimensional education and the 4-H military program is one of those programs that provides a lot of supplemental and extracurricular educational opportunities,” he said. “I think of myself as a researcher, photographic artist, Eagle Scout, health advocate and humanitarian. People shouldn’t limit themselves to one area as that will only hinder them as human beings.”