

# Holy Smokes ... It's The Smoaks And Their Friends

Joshua Smoak, at the right, now a freshman (plebe) at West Point, was so skilled in gymnastics that he was chosen a yell leader. "We think this a first for a freshman," his mother Cyndi Smoak-Tolleson said.



It could be a record

## Three Pewitt grads are students at the same time at West Point

By Neil Abeles  
Monitor Correspondent

Joey Marxsen didn't need his West Point uniform to make a strong point as graduation speaker for Paul Pewitt seniors in their caps and gowns.

To bond with them, he needed only to share one personal experience.

Marxsen could genuinely tell them, "I was one of three Naples and Omaha students at West Point at the same time."

The idea 'You could be, too!' must have radiated from the speaker's platform with this unusual occurrence.

For several years during the class years of 2013-2015, Marxsen joined childhood friends Sebastian and Matthew Smoak at West Point. It's not official but it may be a first that three men from such a small area have been at West Point at the same time.

And the three were like brothers growing up here. Regular country boys, say their parents.

Now that the three are out and serving the U.S. Army, another Smoak - Joshua - is a plebe this year at West Point. Joshua, while close to the others, is not a Paul Pewitt ISD alumnus, however.

Here's the tally for the two families.

- Sebastian Smoak, admitted first, was the only one to take the traditional path to West Point, straight from high school.

- Joey Marxsen, admitted second, had a prior year at Louisiana State University.

- Matthew Smoak, the oldest of the brothers, went to

the Marine Corps first for three years and then had one year of prep school before being admitted to West Point.

- Joshua Smoak, now a plebe (freshman) at West Point is by himself, as far as relatives go.

The four are really like brothers, especially the three older. They played on the farmlands of and around Nancy Schlagel Goforth's and Cyndi Smoak's homes.

"They were out in the woods forever, building forts, playing in the creek on these two acres. Matthew, the oldest, was boss, but they'd just disappear all day and come in when I called them for dinner," remembered Cyndi.

"They weren't perfect. They got in trouble. But not in school. They excelled there."

When the boys began to think about the service academy, they did all the work themselves, from getting nominations to the interview process.

"They were determined," one parent said.

Joey Marxsen speaks out frankly today about the experience. This seems part of the West Point personality. They answer directly. If you can't take the answer, better not ask the West Pointer a question.

Here's how he tells of his road to West Point.

"Sebastian and I had been friends from first grade, but we never mentioned West Point until our senior year," Joey explains. "The military was not a special part of our families. I had two grandfathers in the Vietnam army era, but it didn't hit us about service academies until our senior year in high school.

"That's when Sebastian found out and wanted to go. He wanted me to apply with him, but I thought I needed to go to LSU first. I wasn't really where I needed to be, and I wasn't the best at LSU. West Point guided me to be a better person."

Core values explains it, Marxsen says.

"You begin by understanding the seven qualities of leadership and that no one will be a master of all seven ... you learn you must work on your weaknesses.

"You realize we're all here striving to become leaders of soldiers, and it's leadership and integrity that will enable you to lead others well. That and that you are true to yourself."

Being from a small town didn't affect Marxsen that much, he said.

"If there's one thing you don't see in a small town

maybe it's the age gaps. Your teachers are the same age as your parents. There's not someone around in the middle, say, late teenagers or maybe in their early twenties that you can learn from. Someone who can say this is what life's like now, and what you must do to become what you want."

Marxsen said that's what he tried to say in his commencement speech remarks.

"Maybe they could see I live in this middle age group, and I can speak to what life's like now. Maybe I can impart some words to them. This is what's coming, and you can have some expectation management over the next five years of your life. I've lived in this age. Maybe my wisdom can help you better yourself."

West Point wasn't too big a shock, Marxsen said.

"I had had exposure to other cultures at home and especially at LSU. So it wasn't culture shock at the academy."

But not everything is perfect at a service academy, he continued.

"You have some disadvantages at a service academy. Your life lessons aren't the same. It is so structured that, for example, I wouldn't know what it was like to cook for myself or balance a budget. Some life lessons like these you can't exercise at an academy."

Sebastian was the reason Joey said he decided to enter.

"We would talk, and he'd say come here. We have unique relationship. We always pick up where we left off."

But Joey and Sebastian didn't have as much time together at West Point as they might have expected.

"West Point was a very busy time, from wake-up to bed, and Sebastian was always one class higher. He would outrank me. We had the formality, but because of the prior relation as friends, we each knew where we came from."

Low point and high point of West Point?

"A low point for me was when I had shoulder reconstruction surgery of the dominant arm. Since I was chemistry major, it was hard to complete tasks for four months. The brace was there for two months. I had to readjust my way of life without skipping steps."

A high point was shaking the hand of the president of the United States.

"Barack Obama was our commencement speaker, and afterward he stayed in back and shook all graduates' hands."

Marxsen also traveled a lot, especially with various internships, some of which included working with civilians. He said he found that exhilarating.

Today, Marxsen is at Ft. Hood in Killeen as a leader in battalion logistics. Sebastian is a captain in the army in Germany. Matthew is guarding the president in Washington, D.C.

One thing is clear to those that know them. They have their life plans.

"Driven," Cyndi said of them.

A last point Marxsen said he would like to make is direct and to the point, also.

"A person from a small school can be just as good. In fact, that's even without going to West Point."



At one time during their class years at the military academy, these three Paul Pewitt High School graduates were at West Point at the

same time and took time for a photo in grey uniforms. They are, left to right, Matthew Smoak, Joey Marxsen and Sebastian Smoak

## Families could be building a legacy for boys attending West Point

"If you want to get technical, there may be at least five Smoaks from West Point." That's Cyndi Smoak-Tolleson, now of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, speaking.

The more technical part is that there might even be six, when looked at a certain way.

Already, three Smoak brothers are West Pointers. Matthew and Sebastian have graduated and are now serving in the U.S. Army. Joshua Smoak is currently a West Point plebe (freshman).

Now comes the technical part. Cyndi and Matt Smoak have an amicable divorce.

Cyndi and her second husband have adopted 10-year-old Jacob. He, too, wants to go to West Point. He won't have the Smoak last name, but he will have the mother and brothers-in-law.

Jacob has been to West Point, New York, Orange County, and the West Point academy, too. He went with his mother when she got to attend Parents Week End, a festive time for which the three brothers pooled their money to pay her way.

Jacob also went to Matthew's graduation ceremony at the academy.

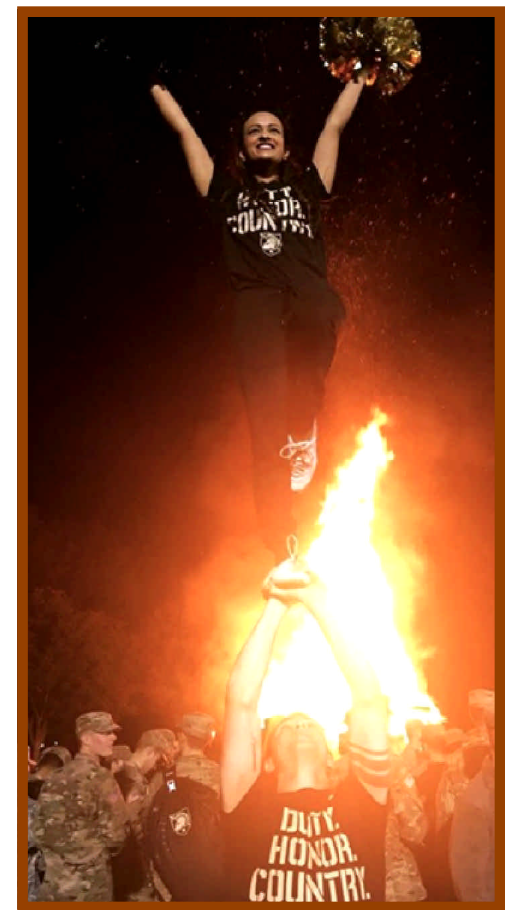
Matt Smoak of Rocky Branch and his second wife also have two sons, now about the ages of 11 and 13. The boys say they want to go to West Point also.

"Matt's a great dad. He'll help see to it that they go," Cyndi said of her ex.

There's likely to be a legacy here. If the second three are like the first three, the Smoaks will keep it going until going to West Point happens.

Take plebe Joshua, for example. On his own, he tried three times until he made the admission's status and enrollment.

"Holy smokes, it's the Smoaks," West Point admissions people might be saying.



Cheering For The Cadets



Marxsen delivers the commencement speech to Pewitt High School graduates at 2017 graduation.



It was graduation day at West Point in 2014 and Joey Marxsen had his officers' bars pinned on him by his mother and father, Nancy Goforth of Naples and John Marxsen of Longview.



## Best dressed in red!

Parents of this West Point quartet say this is their favorite photo of the four local young men who have gone to West Point. In their red

hunting jackets with West Point t-shirts underneath are, left to right, Joey Marxsen, Sebastian Smoak, Joshua Smoak and Matthew Smoak