



Education through service

Sutton Norris, left, hugs his brother, Forde, at a First Salute ceremony after graduation. The flag behind them was that of their grandfather, who died during a training exercise in Vietnam.

Courtesy of the Norris family

By Deborah Dietzler

West Point.

The very name conjures up an ideal: a soldier and a scholar—one committed to a life of service.

West Point's role in our nation's history dates to the Revolutionary War, when Gen. George Washington considered it to be the most important strategic position in America.

To this day, West Point remains America's oldest continuously occupied military post.

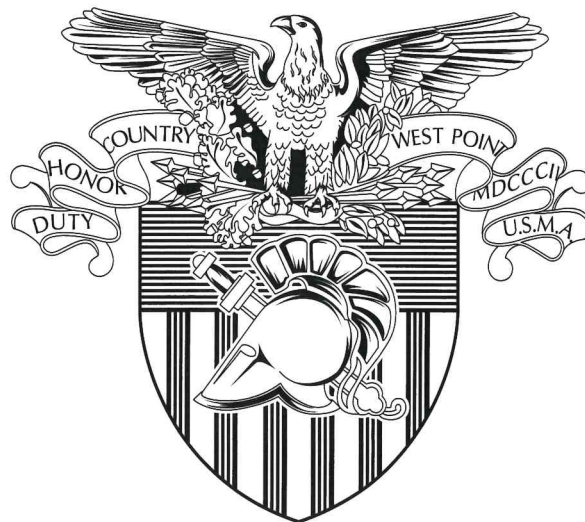
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West Point's place in America's academic landscape came about when some of the Founding Fathers suggested "the creation of an institution devoted to the arts and sciences of warfare." In 1802, President Thomas Jefferson signed legislation establishing the United States Military Academy.

West Point has a 10 percent acceptance rate. Yet, there's a school in Oconee County that holds the distinction of having four young men admitted to West Point over the last five years. That school is Prince Avenue Christian.

In 1978, Prince Avenue Baptist Church founded Prince Avenue Christian School to provide a Christ-centered environment. Today, PACS is led by Col. Seth Hathaway, a Citadel graduate and retired officer of the United States Marine Corps. Hathaway is in his fifth year as headmaster, having previously served as principal from 2012-2014.

Hathaway said that it is very unusual for a school of PACS' size to have four admissions to West Point in such a short time frame. It would be more common to have one student admitted every 10 years. However, PACS is not your usual school. And



Sutton Norris (PACS '15, West Point '19), Forde Norris (PACS '17, West Point '22), Daniel Parrish (PACS '18, West Point '23) and Christian Parrish (PACS '19, West Point '24) are anything but common young men.

A grandfather's legacy

Sutton Norris is the namesake of his paternal grandfather, a naval aviator who died in a training accident during the Vietnam era. Throughout his young life, he heard stories about this American hero. When Sutton was 6 years old, he asked to be taken to his grandfather's grave in Chattanooga. Young Sutton saluted at the grave, turned to his father, Tab, and said, "I'm going to serve our country, just like my grandfather." And he has never wavered.

Being two years apart, Sutton and his brother, Forde, are very close. They grew up together, played football together, and have hunted and fished together all their lives. They also have hearts for service. While in high school, Sutton founded the nonprofit Wood for Warriors, which involved cutting wood to raise \$20,000 over five years for veteran aid projects. When Sutton left for West Point, Forde kept the business going.

Hathaway remembers that when Sutton was in seventh grade, he shared his dream of attending one of the service academies. Although Sutton was initially interested in becoming a Navy man like his grandfather, the family visited Annapolis and United States Military Academy his freshman year. As soon as they visited West Point, Sutton knew he had found his place.

In the summer of 2014, Sutton participated in West Point's prestigious Summer Leadership Experience, a program for those considering the Academy. At the closing ceremony, Tab was in the audience chatting with another parent when he heard

Sutton's name called as the recipient of the Outstanding Leader Award. He remembers thinking, "There are 500 people in that group; how did he win?" And then he realized that Sutton was made for this.

At West Point, Sutton was originally pursuing infantry but changed his focus to aviation after he spent three weeks in the summer of 2018 at Fort Bragg, where he got up close with Apache helicopters. Following his graduation from West Point this May, Sutton began flight school at Fort Rucker.



Sutton Norris received his appointment to West Point through U.S. Rep. Jody Hice. From left, Elizabeth Norris, Jody Hice, Sutton Norris and Tab Norris.

Courtesy of the Norris family



Courtesy of the Norris family

The Norris Family are proud to have two sons attend the United States Military Academy. From left, Forde, Elizabeth, Sutton, Tab and Ella.

Sutton is quick to credit PACS for preparing him for success at West Point and beyond. He says high school football had the most profound impact on his life and often quotes Coach Richard Bell's maxim: "The hardest person to beat is the person in the mirror." This concept became important during his time at West Point, where everything is a competition, and it is designed to have one fail at some point. Bell's lessons were essential in developing the tenacity, discipline and teamwork that comprise the servant leader.

Sutton shares the value of the mentorship he received at PACS, and the examples modeled by Track Coach Col. Dale Autry—an Air Force Academy alumnus—and Coach Billy Meeks, who was instrumental in nurturing the spiritual side of life as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. Sutton emphasizes that he is forever indebted to PACS, especially Hathaway.

Following brother's footsteps

Visiting his older brother at West Point, Forde was moved by the patriotism that pervades the atmosphere. Hathaway remembers a chat with Forde early in his junior year, as Forde began considering joining his brother at West Point.

Forde is known for his perseverance. To prepare for West Point, Forde tweaked his course load at PACS, attended a summer leadership program and took the SAT six times and the ACT nine times so that he could present the highest scores possible.

His determination paid off. Forde was awarded a prestigious USMA Alumni Association Scholarship, which allowed him to attend the Marion Military Institute, the nation's oldest military junior college, before going to West Point.

Hathaway emphasizes that only 40-50 of these scholarships are awarded each year. Those who pursue this path to West Point will experience two plebe years: one at Marion and one at West Point. It is not for the faint of heart.

Having just finished his first year at West Point, Forde said that being on the PACS football team helped him learn about life and prepared him for any obstacles he faces. Sutton's friends also looked after Forde. That mentorship resulted in Forde being invited to the elite Cannon Crew, the group that fires the cannon each time the Army scores during football games. Forde told his parents, "West Point is helping me become my best self."

Although their time together at West Point lasted only a year, Forde and Sutton express their shared goal of being part of the "long gray line"—the term used to describe West Point alumni. Very close before West Point, the brothers believe the experience has drawn them even closer.



Courtesy of the Norris family

Forde Norris was chosen as Mr. PACS during homecoming of 2016. His mother, Elizabeth, was presented with flowers.

Sutton says it was a tremendous experience to be at West Point with Forde, seeing him operate in a new and different way. The older brother remarks, "I've never been so proud. He's far exceeding me. He's my role model."

From Bethlehem to the Big Stage

Like the Norrises, Monika and Geoffrey Parrish have reason to be proud. They have raised four boys, sons Beau, 28; Tyler, 24; and Daniel, 19; as well as their nephew, Christian, 19—all of whom played football for PACS.

The family lives on a farm in Bethlehem, where Geoffrey has devoted himself to fatherhood. A quiet man of deep faith, Geoffrey was an industrial engineer, but he left that profession and purchased the farm to allow him the flexibility to be a stay-at-home dad. To this day, he has never missed a football game for any of his sons.

Although Geoffrey played high school football, he is quick to note that it was a different world back then. When his sons expressed interest in the sport, he wanted to do all he could to prepare them physically, while also helping them to be the best men they could be.

Originally attending another school in the area, the Parrishes transferred to PACS when the Oconee campus opened. Geoffrey drove his sons to school each day. The commute was a time to impart values and talk about what's important in life.

Daniel grew up watching his older brothers play football and



Courtesy of the Parrish family

Daniel Parrish graduated from the United States Military Academy Preparatory School.

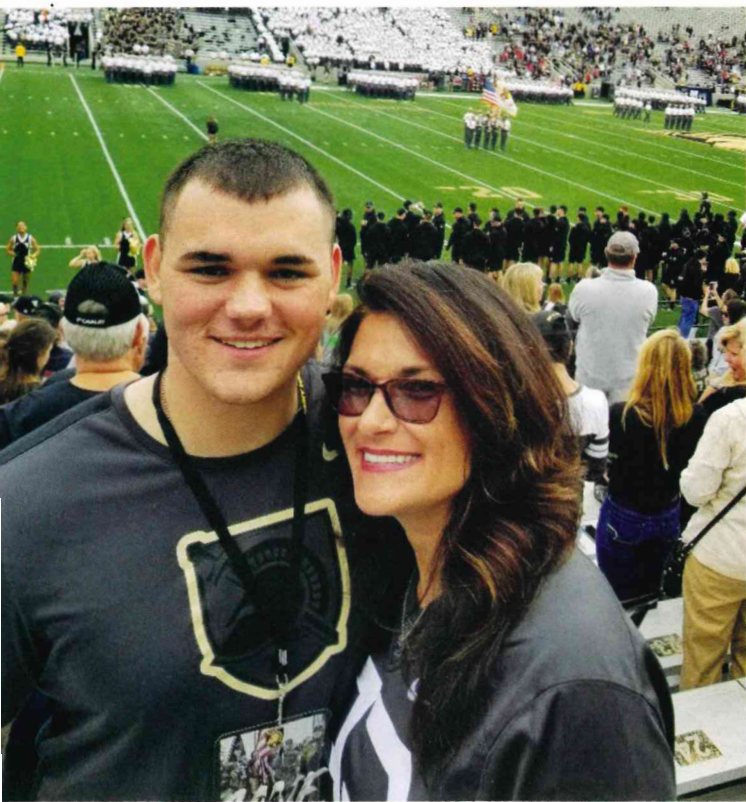
started playing at 8 years old. As college drew near, he talked about playing at the next level as a way to pay for his college education. Attending a friend's birthday party at Sanford Stadium solidified that dream.

While visiting colleges that showed an interest in Daniel, Geoffrey felt this would be a tough decision. With an August birthday, Daniel was often the youngest in his class. As he was being recruited to play college football, he received at least nine offers. His father saw the benefit of an additional year of physical development and encouraged Daniel to take advantage of the opportunities that would be afforded by attending USMA's prep school.

Hathaway says Daniel personifies servant leadership. Even as a senior, he would help roll up mats after a pep rally. At prep school, he was named Warrior of the Week.

Daniel has always pursued a sound body. He loves the weight room and holds a squat record at PACS. He's so tough that he broke a bone in his hand, which required surgery with two pins but only after he played a game and practiced for a week. He is also a scholar who took all the advanced coursework PACS offered. In a 2018 interview, PACS Coach Greg Vandagriff said, "I could not imagine anyone more equipped and prepared to attend West Point than Daniel. He is an excellent leader not only on the football field but in the classroom as well."

Monika calls the prep school year "a gift" and credits it as being crucial in Daniel's preparation for this journey.



Courtesy of the Parrish family

Daniel Parrish attends a West Point football game with his mother, Monika.

Another Parrish at West Point

Christian Parrish was in eighth grade and living in Rockdale County when his Uncle Geoffrey attended one of his football games. Observing Christian's talent as an athlete, Geoffrey suggested to his brother that it might be a good idea to consider PACS, a place where Christian would have a better opportunity to reach his full potential.

Christian made the move to Bethlehem in June 2016, sharing a room and bunk beds with his cousin, Daniel, who inspired him and taught him to always give 110 percent.

Christian accompanied Daniel on all his college visits and as his time for a decision drew near, he was thrilled to have the opportunity to follow his cousin to West Point. Like Daniel, Christian will spend an academic year at the prep school and then join the Corps of Cadets in Fall 2020.

A highly accomplished athlete, Christian is thankful his

extended family brought him to PACS and helped him to excel on and off the field.

Geoffrey has long taught his boys to live by Luke 2:52: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." The Cadet Prayer references the need to "strive to live above the common level of life."

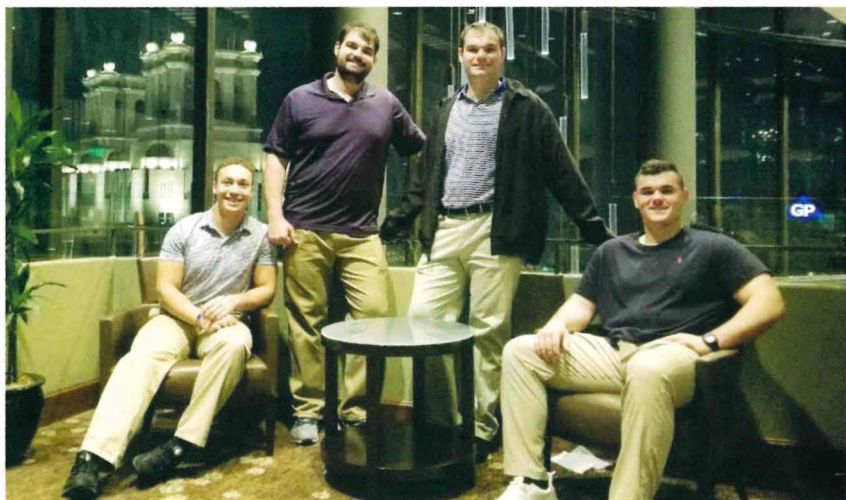
The Parrish family enjoys being part of the larger USMA family. They purchased a second home near the campus, which has allowed Monika to become deeply involved in the Parents Association, as her job in tech sales is headquartered in New York City. She is grateful to serve as a surrogate mom to other cadets who don't have family nearby.

Monika is also the co-secretary of the West Point Club of Georgia and finds the relationships she has made to be very beneficial.



Courtesy of the Parrish family

Christian Parrish was inspired by Prince Avenue Christian School Head Coach Greg Vandagriff to continue playing football at West Point.



From left, Christian, Beau, Tyler and Daniel Parrish all played football for Prince Avenue Christian School.

PACS Proud

Both families commend the strong commitment exhibited by everyone at Prince Avenue Christian School. Monika Parrish notes that even with the growth over the last 12 years, the school maintains its sense of community.

The families agree that PACS is much more than a school; it is a community that is truly invested in all its students but differently based on their individual needs. This community guides them, prays with them, loves them and works with parents to get them back on the right path when needed.

Elizabeth and Tab also exude enthusiasm about the PACS experience. Both boys had taken AP courses and were dual enrolled. PACS' hallmark commitment to the success of its students set Sutton and Forde up to excel. The Norrises are marking their 14th year as a PACS family, as their daughter, Ella, is a member of the Class of 2023.

