

“NOT LIKE OTHER INTERSHIP SITES”: PROJECT SEARCH AT HOLLOWAN AFB



Five interns from Alamogordo and Tularosa comprise the first group to participate in **Project SEARCH at Holloman Air Force Base** in Otero County. Their three rotations over the course of the 2021-'22 school year include working in the lodging facility on the base—in housekeeping, reception, or maintenance—or at the fitness center, library, outdoor recreation department, or kitchen in the child development center.

Working on a military installation means the expectations are higher than with other Project SEARCH locations around the state and country, asserts **Alexandrea Rios** of Partners for Employment at the University of New Mexico: “It’s not like other internship sites.”

“There’s a built-in sense of community, orderliness, and discipline,” says Alamogordo Schools Job Skills Developer **Michael Valadez**. “They’re getting a sense of that. They’re feeling the camaraderie. They’re getting a dose of how to show respect.”

During a presentation from **Command Chief Tom Temple** in February, the interns realized the significance of participating in Project SEARCH at Holloman. Temple related the Air Force’s core values of integrity, service before self, and excellence in all they do.

“In the Air Force, if you don’t stand up for these values, someone’s life is on the line,” says Project SEARCH Instructor **Lydia French**. “Even on the job site, what one person does affects everybody.”

Recalling the core values, 19-year-old intern **Alyssa Bailey** says, “I’ll take them wherever I decide to work. Putting others before self. And integrity is doing what’s right when no one’s watching.”

Temple then gave the interns the Air Force’s Challenge Coin, only bestowed to those who accomplish something exceptional. He commended the group after hearing lots of positive feedback from mentors. Receiving the coin told the participants they had become part of the Air

Force family. The interns appreciated that not everyone gets a coin, and they were impressed by both the physical weight and weightiness of the meaning behind it, according to Valadez.

“I was honestly surprised,” intern **Adrian Alonso**, 18, says. “I can just feel the importance.”

“It meant that kids with disabilities can learn and can go on the right path,” adds Bailey. “It meant a lot to me.”

As with all Project SEARCH locations, participants at Holloman AFB have a safe place to make mistakes while acquiring job skills. At the same time, they learn the importance of punctuality and how to be both mentally and physically healthy so they can put in a full day’s work.

French has seen remarkable growth in the maturity level of Holloman interns. “Some of them thought they could never work, that their disability would get in the way,” she says. “Project SEARCH has really built their confidence in themselves.”

“Before coming into this program, I didn’t think I was capable of doing anything,” says Alonso. “**I’m more capable and have more confidence.** The internships are like real jobs. They train you and work with you.”

“**With encouragement, I believe that I can do great things,**” Bailey assuredly declares.

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