

## Cal State LA student wants to be an astronaut, but first he'll serve as an officer in the U.S. Marines

John Griffith has been reaching for the stars since before he can remember.

At just 19 years old, he is graduating this month from California State University, Los Angeles and will be on his way to becoming an officer in the United States Marine Corps. His ultimate goal is to become an astronaut and to explore the vast unknown.

"Earth is nothing compared to the billion-light-year expanse of blackness above our heads," Griffith says. "But I don't see that as a reason for accepting insignificance. I see a challenge."

Griffith rocketed straight from middle school to Cal State LA through the University's Early Entrance Program (EEP), which is a unique opportunity that allows gifted students as young as 11 to enroll in college. Though he was only 14 at the time, Griffith says it wasn't an overwhelming experience for him. The program, which is offered by the Honors College, provided a supportive environment. He excelled as he had done in middle school.

**"The only difference was the material."**

Military service runs in the Griffith family. His father, uncles, grandfather, and great grandfather all served. Griffith's father was a Marine attack helicopter pilot during Desert Storm, and his grandfather was an Air Force communications officer stationed in a top-secret outpost in Laos during the Vietnam War, he says.

Griffith "displays a maturity and sense of self-awareness beyond his years," says Capt. Edison Feisal, Griffith's Officer Selection Officer (OSO).

Griffith says his maturity is a reflection of his parents and the way he was raised. His father, now retired from the Marines, works in his own law office as an aviation and space-flight attorney. His mother works in her husband's office and at the 2nd District Court of Appeals. She also owns a talent agency.

"They raised me to...carry myself in a dignified and professional way, which conveniently the Marine Corps really emphasizes," Griffith says.

Griffith has already graduated from Marine Corps Officer Candidates School, a 10-week program he completed during summer break in Quantico, Va. Candidates go through a series of evaluations of academic ability, physical fitness, and leadership skills. Griffith says it was a humbling experience. He learned how he responds to pressure and how he can make mistakes he wouldn't ordinarily make.

When he first started the application for the Marine Corps, Griffith says he was "by no means qualified." He wasn't physically prepared for the training required by the Marines. But he pushed

himself to get in better shape and gain weight. He is now an avid hiker and has scaled Mt. Baldy twice.



After he completes his mechanical engineering degree at Cal State LA, Griffith will be commissioned as a second lieutenant and return to Quantico for six months of Basic School. From there, he will attend flight school in Pensacola to become a naval aviator.

"Based on his character and drive, I can foresee John achieving a myriad of things," Feisal says. "His determination and dedication for excellence, combined with keen competition he will face within our organization, will set the stage for him to assume roles of greater responsibilities and reach higher levels of leadership."

Griffith will use his military career to eventually launch his space flight career. He has long-dreamed of becoming an astronaut. His mother worked in the casting department for Apollo 13, which became one of his favorite movies and further inspired him to pursue a career in space flight.

While in middle school, Griffith received a tour of SpaceX from a family friend who worked with the aerospace manufacturer. Awed and inspired, he built up his résumé over the next few years, working with Paragon Space Development Corporation when he was 16 and building his own projects. He and a friend built a weather balloon and conducted experiments.

"It went up to 100,000 feet," Griffith recalls. "We got some pretty good photos out of it."

All of his work paid off when he received his dream internship with SpaceX. He was fortunate enough to work with the company two summers in a row. He printed 3D plastic avionics boxes and hooked them up to hardware or electrical lines to test

them out. He also analyzed workflow on composite pressure tanks that held high pressure helium; he identified any bottlenecks and worked them out with the manufacturing teams.

"I couldn't work on anything that flew up in space, unfortunately," Griffith recalls. "But it was a pretty fun summer."

Griffith returns to his middle school almost every year to run a rocket workshop for eighth graders. The students build rockets over the course of a few days and launch them from the school's baseball diamond. Griffith says it's been a successful program that teaches the fundamentals of Newton's laws and allows the kids to be creative.

**"It's a fun project, and I enjoy running it every year."**

He runs the workshop with eighth grade science teacher Simon Constantinides.

Says Constantinides: "I have been a classroom teacher for 20 years and I would have to rate John as one of my most creative students who has a knack and interest in extraordinary and unique ideas and approaches to design and engineering...I believe [John] will have a very successful future and will achieve his goals because of his work ethic and the belief that nothing is given, it is earned."

Griffith says he'd be in a totally different position than where he is now without the University.

Because of the Early Entrance Program, Griffith is on track to accomplish his goals at a younger age than most people.


Being the youngest person in a lot of situations makes him stand out—for better and for worse.

"You get on the radar of recruiters and people you want to know you," he explains. "But it makes it a little harder for other people to relate to you since your experiences are different."

Through the difficult moments when he worried about grades, Griffith says he never considered quitting. Whenever those feelings occur, he always picks himself up and pushes forward toward his goal.

"I think a lot of people would be surprised by how far ambition and drive can carry you," he says.

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