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EAST AURORA HIGH'S UNIT LEADS NATION

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After seeing a presentation on the Navy Junior ROTC program at East Aurora High School, Juan DeLaTorre saw a possible path to a better life.

Then, a few days later, on April 16, 2007, when his older brother, Jesse DeLaTorre, was killed in Iraq, his decision was sealed. Juan became a Navy Junior ROTC cadet to escape the temptation of the streets and to honor his brother's memory.

"When I was an eighth-grader, a lot of my friends were involved in drugs and gangs, and I was getting too close to that," said DeLaTorre, 16, now a junior at East Aurora. "When I joined ROTC, I became a better person. It helped me a lot."

DeLaTorre is one of more than 638 cadets in East Aurora's successful Navy Junior ROTC program. In 1995, the program started with just 30 cadets, and by 2005, there were more than 500.

This September, more than 300 freshmen volunteered for the program, making it the largest Navy Junior ROTC unit in the nation.

While the growth of East Aurora's program parallels the nation's continuing war in Iraq, school officials and student cadets said the reasons for the program's popularity run deeper than patriotism and are more closely related to socioeconomic status, tough family situations and students' aspirations. ...

... DeLaTorre said he knew several students who joined the program because they lacked family support at home.

"Everybody needs to be loved and cared for. Everybody needs to hear congratulations and be able to be proud of yourself. And some people don't get that from their parents or anybody else. ROTC just gives it to you," he said.