



# YOUNG ALUMNI EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Association of Graduates recognizes recent  
USAFA graduates making a difference



**Maj. Hila  
Levy '08**



**Maj. Jennifer  
Walters '11**



**Maj. Nichole  
Ayers '11**



**Maj. Julian  
Gluck '12**



**Mr. Loyd  
Bradley '14**

**F**ive USAFA graduates have been named as this year's honorees for the Association of Graduates' Young Alumni Excellence Award.

The award, first presented in 2015, recognizes graduates within 15 years of their graduation who:

- Have obtained a high level of professional or philanthropic accomplishment (civilian/military).
- Possess high standards of integrity and

character.

- Reflect positively on the Academy as leaders of character.

This year's honorees are Maj. Hila Levy '08, Maj. Jennifer Walters '11, Maj. Nichole Ayers '11, Maj. Julian Gluck '12, and Mr. Loyd Bradley '14. The following pages include brief bios of the honorees.

Thirty young alumni were nominated for this year's award, including 25 active-duty personnel, three Reserve personnel and two civilians. Graduate years repre-

sented among the honorees were from 2008 to 2014. Honorees are selected by a committee of peers.

This is the eighth year the Young Alumni Excellence Award has been presented, and a total of 39 alumni have received the honor so far.

Online nominations for next year's Young Alumni Excellence Awards opened Sept. 1. Visit [usafa.org](http://usafa.org) for more information or to submit a nomination packet.



## MAJ. HILA LEVY '08

As an 11-year-old growing up in Puerto Rico, Maj. Hila Levy '08 set her sights on becoming a USAFA cadet after attending Space Camp one summer.

Her parents figured the youngster would later change her mind — after all, many kids express fleeting career aspirations early in life. Levy never wavered.

By age 16, Levy's parents paid for flying lessons and started her on the pilot track. She also joined the local Civil Air Patrol chapter, knowing that involvement increased one's chances of gaining an appointment to her future school of choice — the United States Air Force Academy.

"Those were the days of dial-up internet," she chuckles. "I would go to the Academy website and print out the catalog, one page at a time, for all these courses. I was really into it."

Just as she planned, Levy joined the Academy's Class of 2008 to pursue her goals.

A member of the flying team, she had hopes of becoming a test pilot and then an astronaut. But then something unexpected happened. As she learned about the full range of opportunities to serve within the Air Force, her career trajectory shifted.

Levy switched her major to pre-med, with a goal of working in public health and addressing infectious and tropical diseases common in Puerto Rico.

"It was a real pivot for me," she admits. "But I wanted to have more of an impact on the world."

As a cadet, Levy had the chance to travel to Venezuela, where she trained rural phy-

sicians and technicians on how to better diagnose dengue fever using PCR (polymerase chain reaction).

"Nowadays, people know what PCR is because of COVID," she says. "But at that time, access to it was much more difficult."

As USAFA graduation neared, Levy was assigned a pilot slot, but she applied to several medical schools as well. Then word came that she'd been selected as a Rhodes Scholar.

"Everything kind of got shuffled around and put on hold after that," she shares.

Levy obtained a master's in historical research and a master's in biology. She studied hunter-gatherer tribes in Africa, blending research in genetics, archaeology and linguistics.

Her research also took her to Antarctica, where she became an expert in population genetics while working with penguins.

Following graduate school, Levy began a career as an intelligence officer.

"It's a career I've really enjoyed," she says. "I love the variety in it."

Levy first became the chief of the analysis, correlation and fusion cell at the 607th Air Operations Center at Osan Air Base, Korea. She served as the command briefer to the Seventh Air Force commander/Air Component commander, reporting on the dynamic threat landscape of the Peninsula when Kim Jong Un came to power. She concurrently served as a crisis augmentee to the 5th Reconnaissance Squadron (U-2) at Osan and a Joint Personnel Recovery Center intelligence planner.

Next, she led the Combat Intelligence Cell, Mission Planning Cell, and Intelligence Standardization and Evaluation program at the 35th Operations Group in Misawa Air Base, Japan, serving as a senior intelligence evaluator and instructor.

After transitioning from active duty to the Air Force Reserve, Levy completed a doctorate in zoology at the University of Oxford, where she returned as a Clarendon Scholar. She continued her work with penguins, studying disease transmission. That research landed Levy on the Joint Acquisitions Task

Force in 2020 during the global pandemic, where she assisted the military and nation in ramping up diagnostic procurement.

In her parallel civilian career, Levy has worked on every continent, and is a published geneticist, ecologist, virologist, undergraduate educator and translator in six languages.

As a reservist, she served as the chief of training at RAF Molesworth, providing theaterwide and strategic analysis through regional crises, coup attempts and terror attacks.

"It is all a very twisted career path," she acknowledges.

Today, Levy is a key contributor on the White House staff. She serves as the assistant director for ocean, polar and natural security with the Office of Science and Technology Policy. She's also director for science, technology and workforce strategy on the National Security Council. She works for the climate and energy team doing climate and environmental security policy as well.

"I kind of have three split jobs," she explains. "It is sometimes challenging to juggle. But I'm really enjoying the impact that we can have in coordinating a lot of inter-agency strategies and processes and trying to make the national security enterprise work better."

Levy recently received a presidential appointment to the USAFA Board of Visitors.

"I really cherish the opportunity to give back and help keep the Academy on a path toward success, because the Academy did so much for me," she says.

The mother of three finds time to give back in other ways as well. She served as a sexual assault response coordinator and victim advocate. Levy also has been active with Civil Air Patrol and is involved in outreach to young women interested in STEM careers, among many other volunteer efforts.

As for advice to the next generation of leaders, Levy says cadets should remain flexible as their careers kick off.

"You never know what you can achieve until you try, and you never know what door might open unless you go for it," she says. ►

## MAJ. JENNIFER WALTERS '11



As Maj. Jennifer Walters '11 looked out at the crowd attending USAFA's 2021 graduation ceremony, she couldn't help but feel she'd come full circle.

Just 10 years earlier, Walters and her classmates threw their hats into the air at Falcon Stadium and commissioned into the Air Force to begin varied careers.

But on this day, as chief speechwriter for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, she was holding the remarks she'd written for her boss, Gen. Mark Milley, to deliver to the newest graduating class.

"It was pretty surreal," she admits. "When I was a cadet, it didn't occur to me that the speechwriter position for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs even existed. But it turned out to be one of the most consequential phases of my career so far."

The role is just one of many career detours that Walters never expected.

When she arrived at USAFA, Walters wasn't necessarily sold on becoming a pilot upon graduation. She later became a soaring instructor at the Academy.

But as a cadet, she also experienced an enlightening semester abroad program in Saint Petersburg, Russia. That experience and others whet her appetite for possible future roles in international relations, public policy and diplomacy.

Her budding interest led to an assignment to Pardee RAND Graduate School right after her graduation from USAFA, earning her Ph.D. in policy analysis.

Eventually, however, she followed in her

father's footsteps to become an Air Force pilot. She advanced to the role of flight commander in the KC-10 community. Her husband and her brother, by the way, are KC-10 pilots, too.

"I call it the family business," she laughs. "I really enjoy this dynamic of all of us serving together at different times. I think it brings us really close together, just having that shared experience."

Walters' education, along with her operational background, helped her land the speech writing role in 2021.

"It was a very busy time," she admits. "My second day of work was Jan. 6 [when the U.S. Capitol Building was breached during the certification of the 2020 presidential election]. And then we had the retrograde from Afghanistan and the war with Ukraine starting. Crisis was always kind of the normal."

But Walters says she enjoyed witnessing history and playing a role in crafting senior leader responses to such global crises.

"I got to take all these pieces of my career so far — that all kind of had their root in the Academy — and bring them together to serve a very impactful purpose," she says.

Throughout her career, Walters has found time to volunteer as well. With the help of a fellow KC-10 pilot, Walters launched Reach Athena, an Air Mobility Command working group striving to modernize policies related to women serving in the Air Force. The group's successes include amendments to female hair standards, designated sanitary areas for mothers to express milk, policy changes allowing women pilots to fly while pregnant, and redesigns of flight suits and ejection seats to better fit female aviators.

Walters is also involved with Girl Security, an organization that matches female mentors in national security with high school and college-aged women interested in such careers.

In addition, she serves as executive director of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, a digital think tank whose mission is to gen-

erate editorial pieces, panel engagements and podcast content exploring topics on the changing dynamics of warfare.

Most recently, Walters was elected to the board of directors of the Association of Graduates, where she is excited to give back to her alma mater and the graduate community.

"Having been away from the Academy for 12 years now, you just start to appreciate that experience more and more with each passing year," she says. "I wanted to get involved, and I have a little extra time to give back to the Academy right now."

This summer, after spending several months in language training, Walters moved to Aix-en-Provence, France, to study as an Olmsted Scholar.

She describes the assignment as another unexpected opportunity.

As one of five Young Alumni Excellence Award honorees this year, Walters says current and future cadets are in for an exciting ride once they enter the Air Force or Space Force.

"An Air Force or Space Force career allows you to develop this tapestry in a career," she explains. "When you're a cadet, you think there's this path that you have to follow, and if you stray from it you'll irrevocably end up where you don't want to be. That's just not true."

She recommends future officers not worry too much about twists and turns encountered, but instead excel in the job where you're assigned.

"By doing your best, being optimistic, and having energy and confidence, all those doors will open for you," she says.

Those opportunities begin during one's cadet experience, she adds, and continue in the years that follow. It may be hard for new fourth-class cadets who arrived at the Academy this summer to envision the exciting jobs ahead, but they'll come, Walters adds.

"It doesn't help to think about that when someone is yelling at you," she laughs. "But in the end, it's very worth it." ►



## MAJ. NICHOLE “VAPOR” AYERS ’11



Not everyone can say their biggest dream came true, but Maj. Nichole “Vapor” Ayers ’11 can. In October 2021, she learned of her selection as an astronaut candidate.

Ayers is the second female USAFA graduate selected as an astronaut candidate. Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Susan Helms ’80 — a veteran of five space flights from 1993 to 2001 — logged 5,064 hours in space.

Ayers and her 10 NASA classmates officially started their training in early 2022. Training includes preparing for spacewalks, developing robotic skills, operating the T-38 training jet and improving Russian language skills. Most recently, Ayers has been learning to operate International Space Station systems.

“That’s where I’ve been spending most of my time in the past few months,” Ayers says. “The Space Station is the most complicated aircraft or spacecraft that exists. We’re learning all the systems and learning how to react when something works or doesn’t work as expected.”

Ayers says she is looking forward to joining the astronaut corps at the end of this year.

As a potential member of the Artemis generation team, Ayers could be among the next astronauts to launch to the moon, the future lunar Gateway or beyond. With the current class of astronaut candidates, NASA now has selected 360 astronauts since the original Mercury Seven in 1959.

In the midst of her astronaut training, Ayers was recently notified of her selec-

tion as a USAFA Young Alumni Excellence Award honoree. She admits she’s humbled by the unexpected recognition.

“When you look at the group of people who’ve won the award in the past, it’s quite an amazing group of human beings,” she says. “I’m just honored to join their ranks and be named part of that team.”

Ayers’ path to space began in Divide, Colorado, just a short distance west of USAFA. As a youngster, she was inspired to attend the Academy after watching the Thunderbirds perform every year for graduation.

“I always had an affinity for the sky and an affinity for space,” she recalls. “Growing up in the Space Shuttle era, I learned early on that you could be on the Shuttle, or you could fly the Shuttle. I wanted to fly the Shuttle. That was my little kid dream.”

While at the Academy, Ayers was a member of the Falcon volleyball team. She eventually went on to major in mathematics and minor in Russian. (Note: Proficiency in the Russian language is a key requirement for astronauts launching to the internationally operated International Space Station.)

Following her USAFA graduation in 2011, Ayers completed a master’s degree in computational and applied mathematics at Rice University’s George R. Brown School of Engineering.

After pilot training, she flew the T-38A at Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Virginia as the adversary role for the F-22s. Then she became an instructor pilot in the T-38, leading the adversary mission.

In 2018, Ayers completed the F-22 basic course and headed back to Langley to fly the F-22 with the 27th Fighter Squadron.

Prior to her selection as an astronaut candidate, Ayers was assigned to Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska with the 90th Fighter Squadron, serving as an F-22 instructor pilot and the squadron’s assistant director of operations.

During her Air Force career, Ayers amassed 1,250 flight hours in the T-38 and F-22 Raptor, including 206 combat hours during Operation Inherent Resolve over

Iraq and Syria.

“I had a pretty fulfilling F-22 career,” she says. “I got to do a lot of things, and I was able to fly all over the world. I think that’s probably one of the things I’m most proud of so far.”

When she has free time, Ayers gives back in a variety of ways. She’s been involved in a high school outreach program designed to encourage young women to pursue aviation careers. She’s also mentored students interested in STEM careers.

She volunteered to be part of an Air Force Recruiting commercial and a Captain Marvel photo shoot, and then later was selected to promote Air Force career opportunities while attending the Indianapolis 500.

As Ayers reflects on her eventful career so far, she encourages current cadets and fellow USAFA graduates to always work hard to assemble quality teams to achieve each mission.

“Wherever I was, I surrounded myself with a great group of human beings,” she explains. “In flying, you don’t go anywhere by yourself ... you always take a wingman. You always go as a team. And I think spaceflight is probably the biggest team sport that we have. Nothing substitutes for teamwork and hard work, and then you’ll be able to achieve pretty much any goal you want.”

As for what the future holds, Ayers says it’s anyone’s guess what missions she may be a part of. It’s possible she could fly on SpaceX’s Dragon, the Boeing Starliner or the Soyuz.

“It’s an exciting time in human spaceflight,” she says. “There are a lot of different options and a lot of different spaceflight opportunities for us.” ►



## MAJ. JULIAN GLUCK '12

"I enjoyed these challenges as a young aviator," he says. "It was the kind of challenging, enjoyable leadership experience that I had sought as a high school student and Civil Air Patrol cadet dreaming of becoming an Air Force officer."

Gluck has deployed twice during his career, participating in Operations Inherent Resolve and Freedom's Sentinel with the 96th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron and the Continuous Bomber Presence in Guam and Diego Garcia with the 20th EBS.

"Helping the good people of Iraq and Syria by combating the threat of ISIS was incredibly important to me," he says. "That period flying with a close-knit crew is something that will stick with me forever."

During both deployments, Gluck volunteered with local nonprofits — including the Knights of Columbus, which he joined as a cadet — to help impoverished immigrants, mentor students and even perform underwater dive-site clean-up.

He also became the USAFA Class of 2012's first Polaris Society donor (graduates who include the Academy in their estate plan) and one of the only young alumni with the Academy listed in his estate plan. Additionally, he has consistently found time to mentor cadets and help others while directing national nonprofit programs focused on leadership.

These military and volunteer efforts led to his selection as the 2018 Air Force Times' Airman of the Year.

In addition, he received the 2019 Secretary of the Air Force Leadership Award as the top graduate of Squadron Officer School for the academic year and was later named to the 2020 Forbes 30 Under 30 list — one of three USAFA alumni over the years to be recognized as a rising star in industry or policy through this honor.

More recently, Gluck was named a 2023 recipient of the distinguished Junior Chamber International USA Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award, celebrating his exceptional contributions to the fields of military leadership and volunteer service.

In his next military role, Gluck served as the aide-de-camp to the commander of Seventh Air Force in South Korea, where he also continued his charitable work and became more active with think tank fellowships and writing. Following that, he served at Air Combat Command concentrating on advanced energy oversight.

Gluck has made a recent career transition and is now studying as a full-time MBA candidate at the Harvard Business School while on terminal leave from active duty. He is an incoming part-time reservist at the Defense Innovation Unit in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

He is hoping to expand his horizons with a slightly different college experience, although he will still be balancing a handful of national nonprofit leadership roles with his Reserve duties.

Gluck says he was humbled to be selected a 2022 Young Alumni Excellence Award honoree but is no more worthy of praise than those who chose a different path.

"I've met so many incredible USAFA graduates — on our bases and out in communities — who are doing a phenomenal job serving as ethical leaders inside and outside the military," he says.

If current USAFA cadets could learn anything from his career and life, he emphasizes discovering one's own path.

"I do enjoy being perhaps overly involved, but you don't have to be swept up into the 'hustle culture,'" he admits. "It is important to think about what's meaningful in your own life with the limited time that you have available, whether it happens to be family, faith, work, travel or hobbies. Unless it is what you feel driven to do, you don't need to be firing on all cylinders in your career, particularly if you are steering away from pursuits aligned with your purpose."

Since graduating from USAFA in 2012, Maj. Julian Gluck admits he hasn't had much time for leisure or recreation. He has been exceptionally focused on his Air Force service, giving back to various causes and striving to have an impact in the world.

"I have been missing a lot of pop culture references these days," he chuckles. "Maybe I will finally catch up on the past 10 Marvel movies at some point since starting the films as a cadet."

With extensive military history in his family, Gluck set his sights early on attending the Academy.

"I wanted to serve as an Air Force officer and contribute to this country, which has given my family so much," he says.

Gluck was particularly interested in leadership, technology and foreign languages when he arrived at the Academy.

"I was certainly not disappointed in the academic rigor and in the variety of extracurricular activities and opportunities," he says, "from boxing to the In the Stairwell a cappella group."

After graduation, he was selected for Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training and then served as a B-52 Stratofortress pilot, the sort of impactful role he had desired. Gluck's leadership was tested early in the cockpit and as a flight commander at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. He helped guide his team through the pandemic, a major hurricane and various contingency operations during his tenure.



## MR. LOYD BRADLEY '14

Following an injury on the football field, Loyd Bradley '14 discovered a new path to a successful future.

The son of a 22-year Army veteran, Bradley confesses he never expected to serve in the military. But his football skills led the Air Force Falcons to recruit him as a defensive back. On his official visit to USAFA, Bradley was immediately hooked.

"I fell in love with the area," he chuckles. "As a Texas boy, there aren't any mountains where I'm from in Arlington, Texas. I was taken aback by the scenery, and I was taken aback by the Academy opportunity. I was actually happy to follow in my dad's footsteps and serve."

After the injury, Bradley shifted his attention from football to gaining leadership experience.

"I took on as many leadership experiences as I possibly could in the Cadet Wing," he says.

He served on wing staff in standardization and evaluation during his two-degree and Firstie years. He also was selected for key roles during basic training, serving as superintendent for all the Jacks Valley courses his two-degree year, and then as commander of the courses as a Firstie.

"It was a very rewarding experience to be able to lead so many different people at that young age," he says. "It really showed me how to become a great leader."

Those leadership lessons throughout his Academy career have paid huge dividends

ever since.

"It gives you an edge because it's not often that someone between the ages of 18 and 25 has the opportunity to lead in that capacity," he says. "It definitely gave me the advantage once I joined the active-duty military and then especially on the civilian side. It set me apart from my peers as far as leadership is concerned."

During his first assignment at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, Bradley was the deputy budget officer managing a \$500 million budget. Next, he earned his master's degree in cost analysis from the Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

Then he served as the lead cost analyst for a highly classified project supporting the B-21 bomber aircraft. By adopting Bradley's proposals, the team saved the military \$1 billion.

In his final active-duty role, Bradley worked for the Air Force Cost Analysis Agency at the Pentagon, supporting space and missile programs.

Following his transition, Bradley started attending The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to pursue his master in business administration. During summer break, he worked at Goldman Sachs. He will return to Goldman Sachs as an investment banker in the Industrials Group in 2024.

In addition, Bradley and three of his USAFA classmates have continued the real estate company they launched while cadets. Diversity Ltd. LLC buys and sells real estate in various states and has transitioned into entrepreneurship through acquisition. The partners have acquired and now operate three luxury spa franchises in Colorado.

"What can people learn from my experience?" he asks. "It's that hard work with consistency definitely pays off. It's been a consistent effort over a few years that has gotten me to where I am today."

Aside from his rapid career progression, Bradley says he's particularly proud of his volunteer efforts through the years.

"I've always tried to give back wherever I'm planted," he says.

Bradley led the Way of Life Committee as a cadet, and later served as vice president and then president of the Way of Life Alumni Group. During his tenure, he helped recruit 615 Way of Life mentors offering advice to members of the Cadet Wing. He continues to serve on that organization's board of directors.

In addition, Bradley has volunteered for various congressional selection boards assessing applicants seeking service academy appointments. He's also been a volunteer football and track coach at the high school and college levels.

As a young officer, he served on the board of directors for the Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center, the largest health center in Alaska. Plus, Bradley donated his time and talents to the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce Young Professional Group.

Bradley continues to mentor current cadets and graduates as they explore career and educational opportunities. He's always motivated by helping the next generation of Academy alumni.

"I routinely visit USAFA to meet with permanent party, cadets, and the AOG and Foundation staff to find ways that I can continue to serve and make a difference," he says. "As graduates, we should not wait multiple years prior to returning to USAFA. We have the ability to make an immediate and meaningful impact on the lives of current cadets and our graduate community. We owe it to our institution and the Long Blue Line."

When notified that he'd been selected as one of this year's Young Alumni Excellence Award honorees, Bradley admits to being surprised.

"The award was not something on my radar," he admits. "I'm very proud and humbled, to say the least." 