

[Mike Donoghue, Burlington Free Press](#)

For Christopher Gratton of Burlington and Amber Menard of Walden it's been a dream from a young age to attend one of the nation's military academies as a way to serve their country.

They were among 29 teenagers honored Sunday during a reception at the Vermont Statehouse to acknowledge winning a prestigious nomination from the state's congressional delegation.

"This means my future. This is everything to me. This is what I wanted," said Gratton, who received nominations for the Air Force, Military, Navy and Merchant Marine academies.

Gratton attended Rice Memorial High School in South Burlington for three years and is now taking his final year at Camden Military Academy, in Camden, S.C. He hopes to play lacrosse wherever he attends.

"We are awfully proud of him. He will make a phenomenal military man. There is no doubt of it," said his father, Jim. His mother, Bernadette, said her father was retired from the Air Force.

"So there is a connection there," she said.

Menard, one of four Vermont girls winning nominations, hopes to attend the Air Force Academy.

"It's been a really long process. I grew up in a military family, but I've always wanted to be in the Air Force. I've always wanted to fly. It has been my biggest dream ever since I was a little kid," said Menard, a St. Johnsbury Academy senior.

She said her mother, father, two uncles and a brother all have served in the military.

"They are really strong supporters of it, but they also want me to do my own thing," Menard said.

Her mother, Kathleen, who has been in the Army Reserves for 16 years, said her daughter started talking about flying when she was in the fourth grade.

"We all laugh at what our kids want to be when they grow up and that's because we don't know what we want to be yet. We are looking for ideas. We are very proud of her, very proud of her. Unpredictably here we are," she said.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt. has hosted the annual reception for several years and he has been joined in recent years by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., for the presentations.

Each congressional member offered comments about the hard work each nominee had to complete to be considered.

One by one, each honoree was called forward by John Tracy of Leahy's staff, received the formal certificate, and then posed with pictures with the family and the Congressional delegation.