

FAMILY TIES:

ACADEMY BONDS RUN DEEP WITH SPENCER-PRATHER CLAN

Football might've been too much of a priority for Joe Spencer '92 during his time at the Naval Academy. From that perspective, he appreciates the way his son, Gabe Spencer '25, USN, coped with the pressure of Bancroft Hall life.

Gabe has made "a lot more right decisions," his father said. That has meant regular appearances on the Superintendent's List. He was chosen as an Admiral Frank Bowman Scholar. He reported for nuclear power submarine training following graduation on 23 May. Gabe participated in a research internship the summer after his second-class year and in a special research-based learning opportunity during his first-class year.

"I was young and immature and wanted to play football more than anything," Joe Spencer said. "The thing that makes me burst the breast buttons is that he's deliberately chosen what he does with his time off, how focused he is on academics and how he chose his extracurriculars. It shows me he's applying 100 percent of his learning. Watching that from afar is a very proud parent moment."

Gabe is a second-generation alumnus who anchored an influx of two cousins and a family friend to the Academy. The links between the Spencer

and Prather families are bonded by U.S. Naval Academy football, classmates and a complicated family tree. Joe Spencer and Dan Prather '92 were friends who were on the Navy football team together. Their sons, Gabe and Midshipman Daniel Prather '26, USN, followed their paths to Annapolis as did two cousins, Midshipman Chris Spencer '26, USN, and Midshipman Harry Spencer '26, USN.

The connections strengthen the families' ties to the Academy. Joe Spencer said the Academy is a consistent thread binding every major event in his life including marrying his Ring Dance date, Meg.

"It's not what I learned at the Academy, but it was the experience," he said.

That experience brought Joe Spencer (quarterback) and Dan Prather (offensive line) together on the football team where they admit they did a lot more practicing than playing. Prather was a ground supply officer in the Marine Corps after commissioning while Spencer entered the fleet as a surface warfare officer.

They would eventually both reside near Kansas City, MO, where their kids would attend the same schools. Adding to the family connections, Prather's wife has a sister who married Spencer's brother. Confused? Please refer to the chart on the next page. What matters is: Chris and Harry Spencer were friends with Gabe and Daniel and they were inundated with tales of Annapolis.

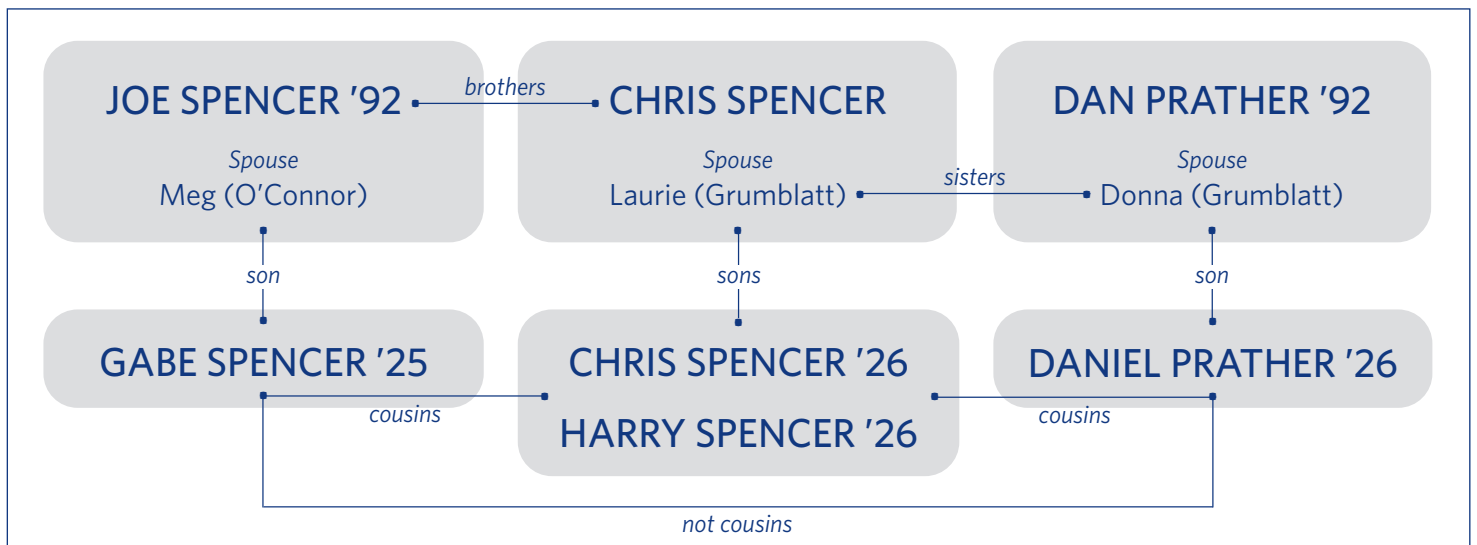
PHOTO BY KELLY ESKELSEN



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE SPENCER '92

Above: Joe Spencer '92 pins the ensign bars on his son, ENS Gabe Spencer '25, USN, following the Class of 2025's graduation on 23 May.

Left: From left to right: Joe Spencer '92 and Dan Prather '92 with their sons then-MIDN Gabe Spencer '25 and MIDN Daniel Prather '26, and Dan's wife, Donna. The fathers played football together at the Naval Academy.



Their relationships brought them together for Army-Navy games as well as connected them with classmates and friends of the Academy. Gabe Spencer visited the Yard a couple of times growing up but said his main exposure to the Academy was through Navy football, “watching most of the games, and celebrating every year when Navy would beat Army.”

Joe encouraged Gabe to attend Summer Seminar and immerse himself in Academy life before making a four-year obligation.

“That was when I really fell in love with the idea of being a midshipman and attending the Academy,” Gabe said. “As I went through the application process, I learned more about the Academy and its purpose, and all of that just made me want to attend more.”

Gabe spent a year at The Kiski School—an Athletic & Scholarship Programs, U.S. Naval Academy Foundation prep school—before joining the Class of 2025 during Plebe Summer. His father offered some simple but prescient advice.

“He made sure that I knew not to let all the craziness and pressure bother me, or as he more eloquently put it, treat it all ‘like water off a duck’s back,’” Gabe said.

FAMILIAR FACES

When Daniel, Harry and Chris arrived in Annapolis in 2022, they had each other for support and Gabe as a guide. Most Sundays they gathered after Mass for doughnut hour.

Just having familiar faces eased some of the sting of being away from home and enduring plebe year.

"I loved the idea of Chris, Daniel, Gabe and myself all being here at the same time," Harry said. "It's just awesome that it worked out this way. Since I went through Plebe Summer with Dan and Chris, the homesickness never really set in ... We also hang out a lot up here and it's nice to have such close relatives a few doors down."

Gabe said having a built-in support system at the Academy was refreshing.

"The day-to-day grind of the Academy is very difficult, and simply seeing a familiar face that I have known nearly my whole life really helps in the tough moments to put things in perspective and lift the mood," he said.

Harry and Chris started their applications at the same time without the other knowing. Chris is three years older than Harry. He prior enlisted in the Marine Corps and served four years before spending a year at the Naval Academy Prep School.

Chris had two years remaining on his enlistment and expected to separate following his initial commitment. However, as a recently promoted corporal, he was encouraged to apply to the Academy by leadership at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in Havelock, NC. He said he wasn't inclined to apply until his buddies said he was "too dumb to get in."

"I was like, 'I don't think I am,' so I started applying just to get in," said Chris, a member of the Academy's heavyweight crew team. "That's when I called Uncle Dan and Uncle Joe asking for tips because I just wanted to show these guys that I could get in."

"I wasn't going to go if I got in."

His Marine Corps support system at Cherry Point changed his mind. "Mainly because I got so many recommendations from officers in my squadron that I really looked up to. They were so bought into the process that if I didn't accept, I knew I'd be run out of there," he said.

Daniel Prather attended Benedictine College for two years before he realized he didn't have anything planned after

Dan Prather '92, front left, with his family in front of Bancroft Hall. His son, Daniel '26 (back right), plans to follow his father's path into the Marine Corps after commissioning. Daniel is aiming for a career as a Marine aviator.



graduation. He'd only been to Annapolis once prior to starting the admission process at the Academy. Daniel didn't tell his father he was applying.

He said his father's experience in the Marine Corps and the brotherhood of his Academy classmates influenced his decision to apply. His Uncle Joe was his Blue and Gold Officer.

"I wanted to go do something with my life," said Daniel, who is aiming for a career as a Marine pilot. "My dad came here, I knew about it and he loved it so much. I thought it would be a great place to go. I planned on telling him at some point. I wasn't trying to hide it."

Dan Prather said he was 'plucked by fate' and landed at the Academy. He was taking an English final his junior year in high school when Navy Assistant Coach Dean Pees asked to speak with him.

Navy was the best Division I program that recruited him. He said the Academy provided the foundation for the rest of his life, including connections that resulted in jobs following his time in the Corps.

"I was given opportunities I could not have imagined," Prather said. "I was developed in a way that I would not have been otherwise. I was given responsibility at an earlier age than I would have otherwise. It changed the direction of my life. I'm eternally grateful."

Like his classmate Spencer, Prather commended his son for performing better than he did academically. He said Daniel calls home more than he did as a midshipman, likely because cell phones weren't as omnipresent in the 1990s.

Prather said he gave his son the same advice he received when he arrived on I-Day.

"Keep your sense of humor," Prather said. "Do what they tell you. Listen more than you talk. There will be terrible days, you have to fight through those."

Daniel Prather said he's benefited from having a father who experienced many of the same things he has at the Academy. A recent conversation centered on attending Leatherneck, a summertime opportunity for midshipmen to experience Marine Corps life during a four-week session at Marine Corps Base Quantico.

"It's nice to have someone who has been through it all," he said. "It's nice to have someone I can call when I need to."

LIFE OF SERVICE

Gabe Spencer saw the Naval Academy as a portal to serving his country. He said he felt an obligation near the end of his high school career to somehow repay the nation that has done so much for him.

He said he benefited from "incredible parents and amazing family" and had the privilege of "growing up in this beautiful country."

"I did nothing to earn these things, and so the least that I can do is to do my part to pay it forward so that others can hopefully experience some of the things that I was able to," Spencer said.



Gabe Spencer '25, USN (center), with his parents, Meg and Joe Spencer '92. Gabe is one of four members of the Prather-Spencer families at the Academy. Joe and Dan Prather '92 played football together at the Naval Academy. Dan's son, Daniel '26, is joined in the Class of 2026 with his cousins, Chris Spencer '26 and Harry Spencer '26.

Dan Prather said there's a balance of pride and concern watching Daniel prepare to lead Marines. He said he knows his son will be ready after receiving the character-driven leadership skills unique to the Naval Academy, but he also understands the realities of military service.

"If I let myself think about it, I get nervous, maybe concerned. I have friends from the football team that have passed away in training accidents," Dan Prather said. "There's that concern. But it is gratifying to see him take on that obligation to serve."

One lesson ingrained in Dan at the Academy is the importance of taking care of your people. He's impressed that upon his family members who have taken the oath to serve their country.

"If somebody is in a leadership position, that position doesn't exist for them," he said. "It exists for the people they are leading. Those are the people who need to succeed. They're doing the work. It's not for you to be there and grab a title or a rank. You're there for a purpose and that's to lead people. I think Daniel has a good understanding of that." 🚢