

TEENS

# Learning life's lessons on path to Eagle Scout

## Skills brought to bear in youthful quest for merit badges used again and again

By CHASE UNTERMAYER

ONE of Houston's leading citizens, bearing a name found on many a cherished local institution, once told me, "I'd rather my son became an Eagle Scout than win the Heisman Trophy."

Though sometimes people may chide a clean-living man by calling him "an Eagle Scout," my friend's sincere respect for those who actually reached the highest rank of Boy Scouting is more typical. There is special distinction in the honor that lasts a lifetime, not just a young man's teenage years.

One reason is the phenomenal roster of prominent American men who were Eagle Scouts. The list includes the late President Gerald Ford, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Commerce Secretary and former Washington state governor Gary Locke, Gov. Rick Perry, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, five serving U.S. senators, and astronauts Neil Armstrong, James Lovell, and Guy Bluford.

Eagles comprise one of every eight students at the Naval and Air Force academies and one out of every five cadets at West Point. (The academies add together Eagles and those who received the Gold Award, the highest Girl Scout rank, so these numbers are approximations.)

And the list goes on through every community in the country. For example, when 50 years ago this month I received the Eagle Scout award, so did Houston land developer and tort reform leader Richard W. Weekley.

The principal reason it's a distinction to become an Eagle Scout is because it requires a young man to set a significant goal for himself; make out a plan to

achieve it; and then execute that plan, earning 21 merit badges and performing a service project along the way. Few adults, and even fewer teenage males, ever accomplish as much. It shows a future employer or dean of admissions or voter that the man before them is a doer, qualitatively ahead of those who may have been successful in school or sports but who lacked a very special life credit.

On those occasions when I've spoken at a court of honor, the ceremony at which Eagle Scout awards are presented, I've of course praised the recipients for having the dream and the drive to get where they are. But I've chiefly aimed my remarks at the other Scouts present, telling them that they can become Eagles, too, if they set for themselves the same worthy target and work hard to reach it.

The phenomenon that's occurred after every one of these courts of honor, during the cookie-and-punch reception, is that several fathers have come up to me and said something like, "I'm sorry I never made Eagle;

I only got as far as Star" or that they regretted dropping out of scouting altogether.

Why would these grown men, many with successful careers and families, make such a confession to a stranger? I believe it was because they felt they had missed out on something truly important in their lives, some-

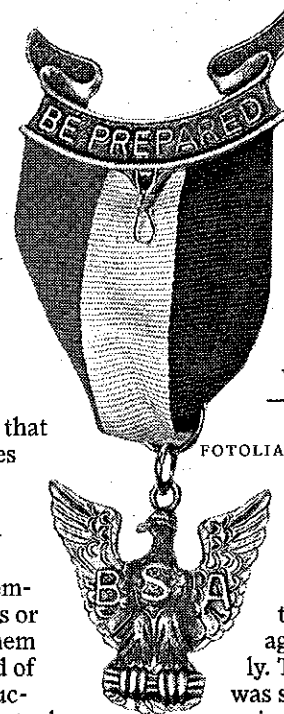
thing they could have achieved with the right motivation and effort.

I am grateful to my parents for encouraging me — though at times it seemed like nagging — to strive to become an Eagle Scout. Once I became my own motivator, they supported me in every way. There are few things more valuable that a parent can do for a son. Compared with this, all desirable ends — from making the varsity to making the bed — pale in life-long importance.

Looking back, I view becoming an Eagle Scout as my job, akin to going to school. And when that job was completed, I moved on to other things. (I also never again went camping voluntarily. This classic Scout pleasure was something I gladly let others enjoy.) Whatever task I faced, the skills brought to bear in "making

Eagle" — goal-setting, plan-making and relentless execution — were employed again and again.

In sum, the young man who becomes an Eagle Scout sets himself apart from the crowd of his contemporaries. He is already well on his way to adulthood, with all its challenges and all its potential rewards.



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