

STAFFORD SCOUT CEREMONY IS 'BITTERSWEET'

A dozen Eagles soar in troop's swan song

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Years of hard work, determination and cooperation finally paid off for Noah and Jonah Boyd this past weekend as the brothers earned the rank of Eagle Scout along with 10 other boys who belonged to Boy Scout Troop 1945.

But the joy of their success was tempered by other emotions because the troop, sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at 10 Boscobel Road in Stafford County,

decided to sever its ties with the Boy Scouts because of controversial changes in the organiza-

tion's policies.

"It's bittersweet, too, to know this is the end of their Scout journey and

now, on to bigger things and newer things," their mother, Lynlee Boyd, said after pinning Eagle Scout medals on 16-year-old Noah and 14-year-old Jonah on Saturday.

"They're both all grown up now, I guess," she added. "It's kind of hard to think of life without Scouting after such an intense push to get this accomplished."

According to Scouts BSA, only 4 percent of all Boy Scouts ever reach Eagle status, so it's uncommon to have such

SEE SCOUTS, A5

a large group receive the rank at the same time.

In 2009, 11 Scouts from Troop 600 in Bellevue, Wash., earned the rank together, and last October, 13 boys from Troop 13 in Houston donned their Eagle Scout red, white and blue neckerchiefs at the same ceremony.

“I think they will look back on this day as one of the greatest things that they ever accomplished,” Boyd said.

To become Eagle Scouts, each boy had to earn at least 21 merit badges demonstrating a variety of skills and pass grueling boards of review. Then each Scout started a labor-intensive, 130-hour service project.

Noah Boyd restored an 18th-century cemetery at Henry Farm in Woodstock.

“It made me feel good to do that project,” he said. “It helped me connect to people who have died and fallen and made me think a lot about our nation’s history and the family members who had died there.”

Other Eagle projects completed by troop members included the construction of walking paths, stream rehabilitation, fence building and barn restoration. While each Scout planned, organized and managed his own project, they were quick to credit fellow Scouts, troop leaders and their parents for their support.

“It was daunting at first; it was hard,” said Isaac Avery, 16, who cleared and restored a stream at Stafford’s Doolittle Farm. “I had so many great people helping me, so it was a lot easier.”

Isaac credits his fellow Scouts, as well as his parents, who gave him personal guidance and support throughout the entire Eagle project effort.

Troop-wide, parents played an important role in each of their boys’ individual Eagle projects.

Isaac Turley, 13, produced an evening of music for the residents of Stafford’s Harmony at Falls Run assisted living center. He plays the piano and invited his chorus teacher from school, as well as his piano instructor, to perform. Several boys from Troop 1945, who are also musicians, participated in the show as well.

“As I watched him complete his project, I saw him grow and mature in ways that I didn’t know he could at such a young age,” said his mother, Lorinda Turley.

At its peak, Troop 1945 had over 20 boys on its roster. But early last year, the Boy Scouts of America changed its name to Scouts BSA to reflect the organization’s change of policy to allow girls to join the organization in separate, gender-specific troops.

The Scouts in 2013 had agreed to allow openly gay members and in 2017 welcomed transgender Scouts into its ranks.

In wake of the changes, the LDS church officially severed all ties with Scouts BSA, including Troop 1945. The two organizations jointly determined that as of Dec. 31, 2019, the church would no longer be a chartered partner with the organization.

As a result, Scouts in the church have shifted their allegiance to their church’s own youth program.

It was a huge membership loss for Scouting worldwide, as Mormon youth, the largest participants in the program, made up nearly 20 percent of the world’s total of 2.3 million Scouts.

The church’s program, for youth ages 7 to 18, is built around a religious core. It focuses on youth discovering and becoming the best they can be

TROOP 1945 EAGLES AND THEIR PROJECTS

- Ian Archibald, 13, Hartwood Elementary School bridge and walking path construction
- Isaac Avery, 16, Doolittle Farm stream clean up and restoration
- Jonah Gabriel Boyd, 14, Doolittle Farm barn restoration
- Noah Jordan Boyd, 16, Henry Farm 18th-century cemetery restoration
- Matthew Christian Dudenhefer, 13, Construction of Lake Mooney benches
- Lance Ekel, 14, George Washington’s Ferry Farm fence reconstruction
- Peyton Hopper, 15, Doolittle Farm barn heating system restoration
- Owen Olson, 17, Motts Run multiple birdhouse construction
- Milton Owens, 15, Mary’s Shelter landscaping project
- Hans Bennion Stone, 15, English and Fritter family cemetery restoration
- Isaac William Turley, 13, Created the program, performed, and led a musical concert at Harmony at Falls Run assisted living center
- Bryson Wright, 13, Rappahannock River cleanup

through activities, service, learning and growth.

“It’s both family and individual based,” said Troop 1945 Scoutmaster David Boyd. “There are no uniforms, but it’s very close to [Scouts BSA] in values.

“We needed an all-encompassing program for our young men and our young women internationally ...,” he added. “Our children need a program that’s equitable to all members of our church.”

Looking back, Boyd said Scouting always served a great purpose for boys, and it’s an organization that is “very near and dear” to him, as it is to other career Scouts.

“It’s sad to me that the

church is breaking away,” said Preston Cockram, 17, who earned his Eagle rank in Troop 1945 late last year. “I wish we could continue to do Scouts along-

side our church activities. But it’ll be interesting to see how the new program goes.”

Camp lets teens take byte out of summer

BY CATHY JETT

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Blythe Sheppard knelt behind a strip of blue tape, placed her small robotic car on the carpet and let it chug through a grid laid out on the floor.

It went straight, turned right and then went slightly wide of the square of tape where she'd programmed it to stop and blink its lights.

A few tweaks of the robot's programming and its plastic wheels, and the rising Stafford County freshman was ready to join her 10 teammates in competing against the rest of the 21-member class at the American Cyber League's junior summer camp at the Quantico Cyber Hub on July 31.

The students, who ranged in age from 13 to 17, had spent the

SEE CYBER, A5

morning fine-tuning the battery-powered robotic cars they'd assembled earlier in the week-long camp. Their goal was to send the little vehicles to specific spots within the grid faster than the other team. They yelled with delight when Joel Scharlat, the Cyber Bytes Foundation's director of operations, clocked them at 5 minutes and 29 seconds.

That put them ahead, but they still had one more challenge. They had to troupe up to the unfinished third floor of the building at 1010 Corporate Drive and fly the drones they'd made through an obstacle course composed of tables, trash cans and hoops. If their total time for both challenges was better than the other team's, they'd win.

And they did win. By 14 seconds.

The challenges added a level of excitement to the last day of camp, but the real purpose was to have the students have fun using the teamwork and lessons they'd learned about drones, robotics, cybersecurity and programming over the past four days, Scharlat said.

The summer camp was offered by the Cyber Bytes Foundation, a nonprofit whose mission is "to accelerate the development of a stronger cyber workforce and increase cybersecurity awareness within our communities through education, innovation and outreach," according to the foundation's Cybersecurity Career Guide. Both the foundation and the American Cyber League are located at the Quantico Cyber Hub.

The foundation was started by Cesar Nader, president and CEO of X Corp Solutions, and Brian DeMuth, CEO of GRIMM. Both companies do cybersecurity work and are located at the Quantico Corporate Center. They realized the need to interest people in the cybersecurity field and provide training because they were having a hard time finding qualified employees, said Matt Weaver, the foundation's director of development.

The average starting salary for someone in the cybersecurity field who has security clearance and certification was \$75,484 last year, yet Virginia alone has thousands of positions that are unfilled, he said. According to the 2019 Cybersecurity Workforce Study conducted by (ISC)², there's a nationwide shortage of nearly half a million skilled professionals to fill cybersecurity jobs.

American Cyber League began its first summer camp for teens in early July with 18 students from the Young Marines, a national youth leadership and service organization, who flew in from around the county. The second, which was held the last week in July, was advertised on social media and attracted students from Northern Virginia to Richmond, as well as several from the Junior ROTC program at Columbia Heights Educational Campus at Bell Multicultural High School in Washington.

"What we tried to do is put together a curriculum for them that goes across a bunch of different STEM activities," said Scharlat.

The students first learned Python, a programming language, and then earned Federal Aviation Administration certification for building and flying a drone, which they got to do. The camps also covered the basics of artificial intelligence and how it applies to robots, and then students got to build and program the ones they used in the competition.

There was an introduction to defensive cybersecurity and hands-on exercises in a commercial-grade system. During lunch, they got to ask questions of such speakers as state Del. Josh Cole, Virginia first lady Pamela Northam and two people who work at GRIMM.

Etsub Kebede, a rising senior at Columbia Heights, said the camp was an amazing experience. She found out about it through Maj. Luke Wright, her JROTC instructor. She told him that she was interested in extracurricular activities during the summer, and he asked if she was interested in cybersecurity. She looked over the information he provided about it, and decided that she was.

Etsub said that she'd taken an honors engineering course her freshman year in high school, and got to help build and program a race car using Python in a summer camp in 2018. She'd thought about becoming an engineer, then considered studying to be a neurologist or neurosurgeon. Now, after being at the camp, she's eyeing a career in technology, science or possibly cybersecurity.

"It's really fun. It's something that I actually like doing," she said. "I've never really had the opportunity to, like, practice hands-on medicine, and having hands-on experience on cyber, it's like oh, wow, this is fun. It's something that I can use on a daily basis."

Amat Guye, a rising junior who also participates in the JROTC program at Columbia Heights, said he's thinking about what he wants to study in college, and the summer camp expanded his ideas of what he could become.

He's considering becoming a medical engineer, and said technology could provide new tools for such things as heart surgery and to help those with disabilities. He said he also enjoyed flying drones, and realized they could be useful in a variety of situations such as delivering food during a flood.

Blythe, who is homeschooled, normally spends four or five hours a day in dance practice and plans to open a dance studio one day. She's also interested in STEM, and her parents found out about the summer camp on LinkedIn. While much of what she learned was fairly new to her, she said she really got into it and thinks what she learned would help with the business end of running a studio.

The Cyber Bytes Foundation got sponsors to help underwrite most of the summer camp's costs, and the students got to take home the robotic cars and drones they made. Wright was able to get enough funding to cover the cost for Etsub and the other students from his JROTC unit, while the rest paid \$250 each.

The foundation is seeking sponsors for its next summer camp, which will focus on 3D printing and be held next week. Participants will learn to assemble, operate, diagnose and repair a 3D printer, which they'll get to keep. Registration is available at bit.ly/ACL3DP, and the fee is estimated to be \$250.

The summer camps are just a small part of what is underway or being planned for the Quantico Cyber Hub, Scharlat said. The first floor of the three-story building is

dedicated to cyber training and education, and the second floor is for cyber research and innovation. The third floor, which is still unfinished, will house cyber operations and support services.

"There's nothing in the region like this," Scharlat said.

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STAFFORD VETERAN RAISES BIRDS FOR RACING

Pigeons are man's fast-flying infatuation

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Sam Pixley's passion for homing pigeons extends well beyond the routine care and feeding of his birds.

"It's a hobby that requires you to read and understand a number of sciences," said Pixley. "You have to learn how to be an amateur meteorologist, amateur veterinarian, how to feed the bird, how to condition the bird."

Pixley trains and conditions about 200 birds that occupy a 16-by-8-

foot elevated loft near his rural Hartwood home. Unlike common pigeons, Pixley's birds are specifically bred for long races.

"We keep good pedigrees and we're constantly looking for that genetic bank that has speed or endurance for the long races," said Pixley.

For more than 40 years, Pixley has been a member of the Washington Metropolitan Racing Pigeon Concourse, headquartered in College Park, Md. The 72-year-old Stafford

SEE PIGEONS, A5

PIGEONS

► FROM A1

County environmental inspector is also a member of the Fredericksburg Racing Pigeon Club and serves as the first vice president of the International Federation of Homing Pigeons.

Every year, Pixley joins hundreds of fellow pigeon enthusiasts at a convention hosted by the Oklahoma-based American Racing Pigeon Union and International Federation. In addition to the usual workshops and seminars, the convention also features a race.

During October's convention, Pixley earned \$8,700 in prize money after two of his birds placed fourth and 26th in a 322-mile race from Bristol, Tenn., to the Washington area. Before the race, drivers transported the birds to the starting point to begin their 5 1/2-hour journey to home lofts located within a 40-mile radius of the White House, a central landmark chosen by the group. More than 500 birds competed, some finishing with speeds of over 70 mph.

The factors to calculate a bird's speed include release time, arrival time and distance covered, and a number of mobile apps make the calculation simple. A bird's results are then compared with others in the race to determine which returned to their home lofts at the highest speed.

An auction followed the race in which the top 15 birds were sold. Pixley's fourth-place bird brought in \$11,250. As the bird's breeder, Pixley received 40 percent of that amount, with the remaining 60 percent going to support the concourse.

Pixley said training young pigeons for long races begins as soon as they start venturing away from their home loft.

"When young birds disappear for an hour, an hour and a half, that means, in theory, they could have flown out as far as 45 miles from the loft," said Pixley.

To begin training, Pixley transports young birds 5 miles from his home loft, releases them and returns home. He continues the process until the birds eventually beat him back to the loft. Once they achieve that milestone, the birds are gradually taken out to 10, 20, then 40 miles away from the loft. Pixley said it takes about four weeks of training for young birds to reach the 40-mile mark.

"Once they're successful [at 40 miles], they're ready for release at 100 miles," said Pixley. "If they come home consistently from this range, I can bring them to a long race."

Pixley said studies, conducted by the U.S. Army and several universities over a number of years, still lack concrete answers to the mystery of how a pigeon is able to successfully navigate back to its home loft.

"How they know how to get there, no one knows," said Pixley, who is willing to speculate. "It's a combination of smell, sight, the sun's position, and natural instinct."

Pigeons also face a number of hazards along the way, both natural and manmade, including power lines and wind turbines.

"The hawk population, that's our biggest loss," said Pixley.

Pixley said he has driven more than three hours on several occasions to recover downed pigeons belonging to fellow enthusiasts.

"We take that very seriously," said Pixley. "I've had pigeons recovered and sent to me by people in Florida."

Pixley said homing pigeons have enjoyed a long history of friendship and camaraderie with humans, and some have been memorialized for their heroics on the battlefield.

During World War I, the U.S. Army established the Signal Pigeon Corps at Fort Monmouth, N.J., and by World War II, 3,150 soldiers and 54,000 war pigeons were assigned to the corps.

Pixley said the Army built hundreds of identical, portable lofts that were moved by troops as an offensive progressed.

"Birds flying in any direction with incredible vision located those lofts and would fly into them," said Pixley.

Some wartime aviators even brought along the birds to send in the event help was needed on a mission.

"When they went down, they'd put their coordinates on a message and the pigeon would locate

a military loft and deliver the message to spark the recovery of the downed pilot," said Pixley.

In October 1943, pigeon USA43SC6390, affectionately known as G.I. Joe, was credited for saving the lives of over 1,000 soldiers and residents in a small Italian village placed at the top of the Allied forces' bombing list. A message flown by the bird informed troops the British had captured the village, and they were able to call off the bombing mission. G.I. Joe was awarded Britain's Dickin Medal, reserved for heroic animals, and later, America's Animals in War and Peace Medal of Bravery, created in 2019 as an equivalent to its British counterpart.

"Many guys who got out of the military got into pigeons," said Pixley. "In fact, the Navy's first Black Admiral [Samuel L. Gravely Jr.] was a pigeon man. He was a good friend of mine."

Today, two pigeons are included in the ship's crest of USS Gravely, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer commissioned in November 2010.

Pixley, himself a U.S. Army veteran who served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968, gained an interest in the hobby before his military service. He earned a pigeon raising merit badge in the Boy Scouts.

Today, Pixley finds solace and friendship with his flock of pigeons, which instantly recognize him and greet him every time he returns home.

"I care for the pigeons as much as a person cares for their dog or cat," said Pixley. "I sit outside when I come home and watch them fly for hours at a time. I have a high amount of love for those pigeons."

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