Grandson of local resident achieves rare feat in scouting

Special to The Saline Courier

Dylon Nottingham, of Allen, Texas, Troop 131, and grandson of Carol Thomas, of Bryant, recently received special recognition at his Troop's Court of Honor, where he was presented with a plaque noting a rare achievement in Scouting.

Nottingham earned all of Merit Badges offered by Scouts BSA. Earning all the merit badges is a difficult and uncommon feat. Less than 500 scouts have earned this distinction out of the millions of youth involved in scouting since the inception of Boy Scouts of America in 1910.

He is the son of Jeff and Liz Nottingham.

Completing 138 merit badges is quite an undertaking and requires the involvement, assistance and sometimes encouragement of many people. Nottingham said while his parents and his scoutmasters have been a great influence on him, his granddad, whom he calls Big Papa, has also been a tremendous source of motivation.

"Big Papa was in Scouts himself in Arizona and when he was senior patrol leader there, he led his troop to win the state Jamboree and he's very proud of his time in Scouting," Nottingham said. (Big Papa) seems to have few regrets, but one regret he mentions often is that he did not make it to Eagle. He didn't have much support when he was a kid. So he wanted to make sure that I did."

He explained that on every phone call and every visit, his grandfather would ask how he was doing in Scouting and what merit badges he was working on because he credited scouting with teaching him some of his greatest leadership skills and he wanted to make sure Nottingham was always moving forward and that he would say every time "when you get your eagle, I'll come to Texas to your court of honor." And he did.

He has been a great mentor and source of inspiration and motivation. He did not just encourage, he participated. One of Nottingham's early merit badges was Snow Sports.

He met some of the requirements while skiing with his dad and granddad at Sugar Bowl near his granddad's home in northern California.

Nottingham's grandmother helped, too. He told a story about kayaking with his grandmother from Arkansas.

"A lot of grandmas are supportive but my Nana Carol did a bit more than that," Nottingham said. "She went kayaking with us on the Elk River near Noel, Missouri. She patiently paddled around in her kayak while I practiced strokes and various kayaking skills. While she did not plan on helping me practice my water rescue skills, a little ways down stream the current picked up and there was a change in plans. At a bend in the river, giant rock, jutted up in the middle of the river. Nana's kayak hit the rock and out she went along with all of her stuff." Nottingham's rescue skills were put to the test.

In his pursuit of all the merit badges, many of Nottingham's family members participated.

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Dylon Nottingham, grandson of a local resident, hikes to earn one of his 130 Boy Scout Merit badges.

He read stories to his five year old niece for the Reading Merit Badge. He practiced first aid on his sister and others. His great-aunt happily related family history to him for the Genealogy Merit Badge. Through that merit badge, Nottingham learned that he is a direct descendent of the last Beloved Woman of the Cherokee Nation, Nancy Ward and a descendent of a patriot from the American Revolution.

Nottingham's parents felt the information provided and the elements required by each merit badge were such an educational experience that they integrated merit badges into their home-school curriculum. Scouting is not just about camping, fishing and tying knots. STEM fields are an integral part of scouting. Some of those merit badges include nuclear science, environmental science, electronics, sustainability, plant science and engineering. Reflecting on his seven-year journey, Nottingham said his favorite merit badges were cinematography, cooking and game design, though he liked horsemanship so much that he took it twice — once at a summer camp in Oklahoma and then again in Tennessee.

But also enjoyed space exploration, for which he actually went to NASA and visited with astronaut John Blaha, who gladly autographed the Scout's Space Exploration merit badge book. And, he considers the backpacking merit badge the most difficult, citing the numerous trips and equipment required. It culminates with a five day, four night 30 mile excursion.

To earn all the merit badges, Nottingham traveled across the country, attended summer camps and merit badge universities, worked independently and met both in-person and virtually with merit badge counselors, many who are specialists in their field.

To earn some of the more obscure merit badges, his parents drove him to other regional councils to attend Merit Badge Universities. Many other merit badges also involved traveling to other states. In California he visited a movie studio for the cinematography merit badge and northern California for snow sports, Florida for SCUBA diving, White Water Rafting took them to Colorado, Tennessee and Missouri, and water skiing on Grand Lake in NE Oklahoma.

Nottingham said that earning all the merit badges has taught him that you can do just about anything if you just decide to do it and work at it until you get it done.

He joined Boy Scouts as Cub Scout, when he was 9 years old. He had earned 62 merit badges and secen Eagle Palms by the time he became an Eagle Scout in 2018. He now has a total of 16 Eagle Palms to go with his 138 merit badges.

If earning all those merit badges was not tough enough, Dylon also earned many other awards and attended National Jamboree and World Jamboree and was admitted into the Scouting Honor society of Order of the Arrow where he has advanced to level of Brother and is also a crew member of Sea Scout Ship 1899 where he has earned the Sea Scout Marksmanship award.

In his troop, Nottingham has been elected to and served in nearly all the leadership positions. As patrol leader of his patrol, they were the first in the troop to earn the National Honor Patrol. When another Patrol had no one who would step up and be the patrol leader, Nottingham agreed to take the lead. He led that Patrol, the Dragons, to earn the National Honor Patrol Award five times.

Other notable awards that he has earned include:

- National Outdoor Achievement Award
- Aquatics, Camping, Conservation, Hiking & Riding
- The Dr. Bernard Harris Supernova Award
- National Park Service Scout Ranger Award
- Outdoor Ethics Awareness Award
- Outdoor Ethics Action Award
- Messengers of Peace
- World Conservation Award
- International Spirit Award
- Historic Trails Award

A first: US Senate confirms transgender doctor for key post

By David Crary
AP Writer

Voting mostly along party lines, the U.S. Senate on Wednesday confirmed former Pennsylvania Health Secretary Rachel Levine to be the nation's assistant secretary of health. She is the first openly transgender federal official to win Senate confirmation.

The final vote was 52-48. Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine joined all Democrats in supporting Levine.

Levine had been serving as Pennsylvania's top health official since 2017, and emerged as the public face of the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic. She is expected to oversee Health and Human Services offices and programs across the U.S.

President Joe Biden cited Levine's experience when he nominated her in January.

Levine "will bring the steady leadership and essential expertise we need to get people through this pandemic — no matter their zip code, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability," Biden said.

Transgender-rights activists have hailed Levine's appointment as a historic breakthrough. Few trans people have ever held high-level offices at the federal or state level.

However, the confirmation vote came at a challenging moment for the transgender-rights movement as legislatures across the U.S. — primarily those under Republican control — are considering an unprecedented wave of bills targeting trans young people.

One type of bill, introduced in at least 25 states, seeks to ban trans girls and young women from participating in female scholastic sports.

One such measure already has been signed into law by Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, and similar measures have been sent to the governors in Tennessee, Arkansas and South Dakota.

Another variety of bill, introduced in at least 17 states, seeks to outlaw or restrict certain types of medical care for transgender youths. None of these measures has yet won final approval.

Issues related to transgender rights also are a major factor in Republican opposition to the proposed Equality Act, which would extend federal civil rights protections to LGBTQ people across the U.S. The measure has passed the Democratic-led House but likely needs some GOP votes to prevail in the Senate.

Former Houston Mayor Annise Parker, president of the LGBTQ Victory Institute, alluded to those developments as she welcomed the Senate's vote on Levine.

"At a time when hateful politicians are weaponizing trans lives for their own perceived political gain, Dr. Levine's confirmation lends focus to the contributions trans people make to our nation," said Parker, whose organization recruits and supports LGBTQ political candidates.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who voted no, had confronted Levine about medical treatments for transgender young people — include hormone treatment and puberty blockers — during her confirmation hearing Feb. 25.

"Do you believe that minors are capable of making such a life-changing decision as changing one's sex?" Paul asked.

Levine replied that transgender medicine "is a very complex and nuanced field with robust research and standards of care" and said she would welcome discussing the issues with him.

In the past, Levine has asserted that hormone therapy and puberty-blocking drugs can be valuable medical tools in sparing some transgender youth from mental distress and possible suicide risk.

The confirmation vote was assailed by the conservative Family Research Council, which contended that Levine, in addition to her stance on transgender medical care, had supported "a variety of pro-abortion and anti-religious freedom proposals" while serving as Pennsylvania's health secretary.

"Levine may be the most extreme radical ever confirmed by the Senate," said Travis Weber, the council's vice president for policy and government affairs.

A pediatrician and former Pennsylvania physician general, Levine was appointed as Pennsylvania's health secretary by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf in 2017. She won confirmation by the Republican-majority Pennsylvania Senate.

However, Sen. Pat Toomey, a Pennsylvania Republican, voted against Levine's confirmation Wednesday.

"In Pennsylvania, the pandemic struck seniors in nursing homes disproportionately hard compared to other states," Toomey said. "This was due in part to poor decisions and oversight by Dr. Levine and the Wolf administration."

He also said an extended lockdown advocated by Levine "was excessive, arbitrary in nature, and has led to a slower recovery."

A graduate of Harvard and of Tulane Medical School, Levine is president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. She's written in the past on the opioid crisis, medical marijuana, adolescent medicine, eating disorders and LGBTQ medicine.

Praise for her accomplishments and her handling of the pandemic have coincided with a steady stream of vitriol directed at at her on social media.

As reported Tuesday by the Associated Press, Levine was among the targets of a private Facebook group called the Pittsburgh Area Police Breakroom whose participants included many current and retired police officers.

Dozens of group members fueled days of transphobic posts about Levine for her role in statewide social-distancing mandates to stop the spread of COVID-19.

"Someone needs to shoot this thing!!" one retired officer wrote.

In January, a Pennsylvania legislator shared on Facebook an image mocking Levine's appearance, then offered a general apology.

State Rep. Jeff Pyle, a Republican, said on Facebook that he "had no idea" the post mocking Levine "would be … received as poorly as it was" but that "tens of thousands of heated emails assured me it was."