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FEATURED

Provo Scout soars past Eagle, earns all 137 merit badges

By Genelle Pugmire Daily Herald
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Neal Smalley, of Provo, displays his Boy Scout sash and the 137 merit badges he has earned. Nov. 6, 2020.
Courtesy Smalley family

When Neal Smalley, of Provo, was an 11-year-old Boy Scout, he attended a 14-year-old friend's Eagle Scout Court of Honor. He left that Court of Honor vowing to earn his Eagle Scout award at an earlier age than his friend had.

Two years later at age 13, Smalley became an Eagle Scout.

With the Eagle Scout being the ultimate pinnacle of success for Boy Scouts, Smalley could have taken that Eagle and just sailed through the rest of Scouting. Instead, he soared.

According to his mother, Pam Smalley, Neal had more to learn.

When family and friends asked what he would do next, he announced that he was going to aim high and earn all 137 merit badges in the Scouting program.

The now-17-year-old Smalley just recently accomplished his goal and joined a small, elite group of young men to earn every merit badge available in Scouting.

"I have been in Scouts since I was 11," Smalley said. "I locked down and aimed for this goal after I got my Eagle at 13. (Earning all 137 merit badges) was the result of four years of focused merit badge work."

His Scoutmaster, Scott Anderson of Troop 707 located in Orem and Provo, was one of several people who helped Neal on his journey. In all his years in Scouting, Anderson has known only one other young man who completed all 137 merit badges.

"It is extraordinary he was able to do that," Anderson says. "You definitely have to be committed to accomplish it. Neal is very focused and committed. He had some struggles with a couple of merit badges and had to work hard to get them."

Looking back, Smalley agrees that the last two merit badges were the most difficult, especially SCUBA diving, which took two years and multiple tries to finish.

"SCUBA diving was the hardest by far," Smalley said. "All the other merit badges require some type of skill like tying a knot or hiking forever. But SCUBA is a mental thing. You are under water, and it's not a natural thing to breathe under water. It's darker and a little disorienting. I had a good counselor, Darren Gibson, who helped me through it."

Pam Smalley agrees. "His last badge (SCUBA) was so hard," she said. "It took him two years. There were physical and psychological things to overcome."

His diving badge was accomplished at The Crater geothermal diving area at the Homestead in Midway.

"It looks like aliens built it," Pam Smalley said. "You can go down 60 feet and then it looks like there is no bottom."

During his second dive, Smalley got disoriented and confused. "He was shaken," Pam Smalley said. "He took a bit of a break and talked with us (his mom and dad), and then said he was ready to go again."

He had to go through four dives at different feet, take the breathing apparatus out of his mouth, rise to a certain level and do other safety requirements, Pam Smalley said.

"He stuck with it and overcame the obstacle," she said. "He doesn't brag about anything. He did it for himself. There is no award for getting all of the badges."

She added that her son knew he couldn't do it without the help of many people and he appreciates all who worked with him through the years.

Another challenging merit badge for Smalley was bugling. He ended up borrowing a bugle and eventually was able to finish the requirements.

What was his favorite merit badge?

"I really liked welding," Smalley said. "The mentors were encouraging and nice, and it was a fun topic. Welding is fun."

In fact, Smalley signed up for an advanced welding class at Timpview High School as a result of his merit badge experience. He also enjoyed earning his horseback riding merit badge.

It was Smalley's parents that really worked with him. His father not only took SCUBA lessons with him, but also went hiking and backpacking with him.

On one occasion they decided to go camping. The ranger told them to be careful about bears in the area. Once they got to the campground, they realized it was hunting season and had to have someone deliver orange shirts to their camp so they wouldn't get shot by hunters.

Smalley's scouting sash is filled up front and back with all the merit badges he has earned, including a few on the inside because there isn't enough room to put them all on one sash.

"I think if you enjoy scouting and have all the people who will help you follow through with that goal, it is worth pursuing. There are a ton of memories I now enjoy that I would have missed out on if I hadn't done it," Smalley said.

Smalley started Scouts in a troop sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When the church dropped Scouts, he joined Troop 707, which meets in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Provo. The troop has 29 boys and 11 girls.

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A 36-year veteran of covering news in Utah County, Genelle covers Provo, Orem, Vineyard, Faith/Religion, including the LDS Church and general assignments.