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Scout Soars Far Beyond Eagle

Chevy Chase Teen Earns Every Badge Possible, a Feat Deemed 'Extremely Rare'

By Paul Duggan
Washington Post Staff Writer
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It's not easy making Eagle, the highest honor in Boy Scouts. You need at least 21 merit badges, some required. Only 2 percent of Scouts get that far. A remarkable achievement. So what adjective should be used for James Calderwood, who has attained 121? Scout's honor.

The Chevy Chase teen has every badge available, from American business to woodworking. He even has one they don't give out anymore, so make it 122.

So many that he couldn't wear them the normal way. "I actually had to make my own sash, where I took three sashes and sewed them together," he said.

The Boy Scouts of America doesn't keep records of Scouts who have earned every badge. But not many have done it, said Deborah Dean, program director for the Scouts' National Capital Area Council. Dean confirmed Calderwood's achievement, calling it "extremely rare."

Calderwood, the most decorated Scout in memory in the council, reached the 21-badge mark for Eagle in 2002 and left it in the dust.

"Bugling was probably one of the most difficult," Calderwood, a high school senior, said from his home in Chevy Chase last night. "I've never been very musically gifted. And I was on five different continents over the summer, so I didn't have much time to practice. . . . I brought my mouthpiece with me. I brought it to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and everywhere else I was, and I tried to practice."

Everyplace else he was over the summer (besides the top of a mountain in Tanzania): in Japan, with exchange students; in Costa Rica, working with an ecological program; and in northern Kenya, helping open a medical clinic.

"Then when I got back to the United States," he said, "I met with a music teacher two to three times a week and just kept practicing and practicing."

And finally, in January, he passed his bugle test, two days before his 18th birthday, which is the age cutoff for getting merit badges -- and that was it, the final badge, No. 122.

Calderwood, who will soon graduate from Georgetown Preparatory School, is the only child of Jim Calderwood, an antitrust lawyer, and Joyce Johnson, a retired Coast Guard admiral who is vice president of a health-care concern. He joined the Boy Scouts in sixth grade. Most of his free time since has been devoted to one thing.

"I never planned on getting them all," he said. "First, I just sort of concentrated on the ones that went with my hobbies. And then I just thought I should keep going."

Here's how he did it.

Astronomy: "I studied astrophysics at Johns Hopkins University one summer."

Cinematography: "I filmed a video on the proper use of knives that was shown to cooks in the military. Like if you want to cut a thick fruit as the garnish, I demonstrated the proper way to cut it."

Indian lore: "I spent a lot of time with the Native Americans. I stayed with the Hopis and the Navajos in Arizona."

Crime Prevention: "I visited the Montgomery County Detention Center and had a tour with one of the guards. The whole place. And I mean, it was fascinating. Really, really fascinating."

Salesmanship: "Right now, I have a job where I'm the middleman for a T-shirt company. I find groups of kids who want T-shirts for something, and I design them."

Dentistry: "When my mom was surgeon general of the Coast Guard, she organized a merit-badge day, and she had some of the dentists come in."

Family life: "A lot of it is sort of communicating with your family, learning about what you have to do to be a responsible member of your family, to help maintain the cohesion of the family unit."

Plumbing: "Man, I've fixed more toilets in this house."

For Calderwood, next comes college. He said his high school grade average is about 91 percent. He participates in theater, debating and other activities. And he is well-rounded in terms of personal interests. Just check out the badges.

"I want to be a doctor," he said. "I want to go into medicine in the developing world."

He said he applied to 13 colleges. "One of my essays was about climbing Kilimanjaro. One of my essays was about my first time being a surgical assistant. One of my essays was about the first time I worked in the developing world."

Acceptance letters have poured in from universities: from Drexel and Villanova, from Creighton and Fordham, from the universities of Pennsylvania and Maryland. On and on. Some offered him slots in high honors programs.

He isn't sure where he'll go.

He has to make up his mind this month, and, finally, with no more badges to earn, he has the time to think about it.

Least favorite badge: "Insect study was something I wasn't as fascinated by as much as the other ones," he said. "But there wasn't a badge that I dreaded getting. I mean, every single badge intrigued me."

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