

COMMUNITY



Photos by Will Waldron / Times Union

Scoutmaster Doug Kemp, left, and Eagle Scout Erick Christian, right, hold a sash displaying all of Erick's 138 merit badges. About 400 Scouts have earned all of the organization's available badges since the organization was founded in 1910.

Eagle Scout joins exclusive group

Bethlehem High student has earned every merit badge, one of about 400 ever to do so

By Lynda Edwards

Bethlehem

At 17, Bethlehem High School student and Eagle Scout Erick Christian has become one of about 400 individuals in the history of the Boy Scouts to earn all of the organization's merit badges.

The badges are about the size and shape of Snapple bottle caps. Each embroidered badge pops with bright colors and clever designs. The exploration badge boasts an Indiana Jones-like fedora and a coiled whip, for example. And he earned them all, including rare ones for bugling (he chose to learn the bagpipes), labor unions and electricity. ("I built a buzzer for that," he said, pointing to his creation which shows a fist grabbing lightning bolts from the air.)

Earning the 138 badges required varying levels of time, dedication and — for wilderness survival, especially — physical strength and guts.

When Erick is asked if his peers ever



trash-talked him for devoting time to Scouting that he could have spent playing Fortnite or Halo, he rolls his eyes and nods.

"Sometimes I wonder if they're jealous because it's weird they'd care what I do in my free time," he replied. "If I want to go hiking or camping or horseback riding or sailing instead of sitting on a couch staring at my phone or a TV, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to let someone who doesn't know how to do any of those

things change my mind."

His girlfriend cheered Erick on. And his mom inspired his pursuit of the entrepreneurship badge by sharing her recipe for berry jams. Erick calculated the cost of each jar and the cost in volume, figured the appropriate price point and devised a marketing plan. When he gave his economics teacher a jar of strawberry jam to taste test, Erick waved away the offer of payment.

Included in the 138 badges on the sash of Eagle Scout Erick Christian is one for wilderness survival which required him to find his way from New Mexico's high desert back to a camping lodge. He and other Scouts were given an incomplete map and had to find their way back.

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"Then he told me if I didn't charge him, then he hadn't really taught me how business worked — so I asked him to pay \$5," Erick said.

His father, the troop's chaplain, points to a badge with a swimmer in a black wetsuit slicing across blue water.

"That's scuba diving, the badge that almost gave his mother and me a heart attack," the Rev. Dean Christian said.

Erick loved scuba diving and spent six days on a 55-foot sailing boat navigating the Florida waters around Key West.

He even enjoyed wilderness survival which required him to find his way from New Mexico's

high desert back to a camping lodge. He and a few other Scouts were given an incomplete map — it had three trail options when there were four and omitted many landmarks. Erick chose which trail to follow.

There were adults, including Dean, along as observers, but they were not allowed speak to the teens unless the team was confronted by immediate danger or injury.

"I had a 50-pound backpack strapped to my shoulders under the hot sun and I was sure Erick chose the wrong trail but I wasn't allowed to say anything," Dean recalled. "We would have had to backtrack miles out of our way to get back to the right trail. But that's what you have to do when you volunteer to go along as an adult."

He added a bit sheepish-

ly. "It turns out Erick chose the right trail after all."

After earning a badge that requires Herculean effort, a Scout can enjoy an easier effort like teaching a trick to a pet. Erick taught a rabbit to hop over his foot.

And in an era when fewer and fewer schools can afford civics classes, there are badges that require a Scout to learn volumes about the Constitution and Bill of Rights and state laws.

Erick's following a path that older brother Ethan had already walked years ago. Like Erick, Ethan attended Bethlehem High and earned the rank of Eagle Scout as a member of Troop 75. Both brothers were chosen for the Order of the Arrow, Scouting's National Honor Society. Ethan graduated magna cum laude from the Uni-

versity at Buffalo with a bachelor of science degree in nursing. He received the Anne Walker Sengbush Award for leadership in school and community volunteerism. He was a member of Sigma Theta Tau, the national nursing honor society.

Ethan was a registered nurse in the Trauma ICU at the Erie County Medical Center when he died in 2013.

Erick admired and loved his brother. Earning the badges spurred good memories of him. But Erick discovered his own career interests were linked to business and teaching rather than medicine.

The Boy Scouts of America does not track the number of Scouts who earn all the merit badges. But MeritBadgeKnot.com keeps a running tally of the

instances it can verify.

Erick's troop leader is Doug Kemp, an Eagle Scout who is also an assistant New York state attorney general. The troop has 46 members including its first two female Scouts. In the past, the national organization has been accused of homophobia and criticized for banning atheists. But Scouting is now open to all young people and in 2017, it welcomed its first openly transgender members.

Kemp says the Scout ethos still embraces the idea of a "higher power" but "I've never turned anyone away for their spiritual beliefs."

"In our troop, the girls will have their own leader and a mother has volunteered," Kemp said. "We've decided to let the kids discuss and choose which

activities will be coed and which will be separate for girls and boys. We want them to have the chance to choose the activities, too."

Kemp's troop will host an open house for anyone who wants to learn more about the program at 7 p.m. Wednesday at St. Thomas School in Delmar.

Erick will be there ready to answer questions about his experience.

"There was one badge that almost made me lose my mind: computer programming," he admitted, pointing to one decorated with binary code. "But honestly, it was a great experience. I always learned something interesting, useful or got to talk with someone new — or just had a lot of fun."

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