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121 reasons to be proud

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RIVERVIEW

Ever the optimist, Harrison Hatcher chose the supersized sash when he purchased his first Boy Scout uniform at age 11.

The sash overwhelmed his adolescent frame and was devoid of any of the circular patches Boy Scouts covet for achieving feats of skill, talent and intellect.

Six years later, Hatcher has justified his choice.

Now the olive green sash is barely visible behind all of the merit badges neatly sewn in rows on both sides of the garment.

The Riverview teen is one of only a minuscule number of Boy Scouts in the organization's 100-year history to earn all the Boy Scout merit badges. The Merit Badge Knot, a group that tracks rare Scouting achievements, is compiling a registry of Scouts who have achieved the feat. They've confirmed 108 so far.

It's an honor that surpasses achieving the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest rank in Boy Scouting.

"This is very unusual," said Al Harrell, director of field service for the Gulf Ridge Council of Boy Scouts, which includes more than 40,000 Scouts in Hillsborough, Citrus, Hardee, Hernando, Highlands, Pasco, Polk and Sumter counties.

"It's never happened in this council before," Harrell said.

"It takes a great deal of work and commitment."

Unfortunately, unlike receiving the Eagle rank, accumulating all 121 Boy Scout merit badges doesn't earn a Scout a congratulatory letter from the president of the United States or a court of honor.

Nor will Hatcher, 17, receive an autographed photo of Pope Benedict XVI, as he did when he attained the rank of Eagle Scout at age 14 with Troop 610. Under the leadership of scoutmaster Mike Mann, Troop 610 meets at St. Stephen Catholic Church in Valrico.

"They really don't do anything for getting all of the merit badges," said Hatcher, a member of First Baptist Church of Brandon. "I guess it's because it's so rare."

The national organization doesn't track Scouts who have earned all of the merit badges.

Hatcher said he doesn't mind that there's no hoopla behind the achievement. His reward, he said, is the accomplishment.

"I enjoyed the challenge," he said. "Once I hit 70 badges, I announced I was going for all of them. Everyone thought I was crazy, but I just decided to do it."

Harrell said Hatcher's achievement won't go unrecognized. Harrell, who officially verified the teenager's accomplishment, said the Gulf Ridge Council will honor the Scout at its annual banquet in March. Hatcher also will receive a letter of commendation from the national council, which has been notified of his achievement, Harrell said.

Ranked third in his senior class at Bloomingdale High School, Hatcher has always been a high achiever, according to his parents, Brenda and Dave Hatcher.

"Everything he's ever set out to accomplish, he's done," Dave Hatcher said. "We push a little, but he has a lot of self-motivation."

Hatcher began his Scouting career in Alabama and continued with Troop 610 as a sixth-grader when his family moved to Riverview. He had just two merit badges at the time, including his first, the swimming badge.

By the time he was 14 and preparing for his Eagle project — renovating office space at America's Second Harvest food bank in Tampa — he'd earned 60 badges. Only 21 are required to become an Eagle Scout.

Once he decided to go for all 121 merit badges, Hatcher began earning them at a rate of one every two weeks.

"I earned a lot of them at summer and winter camping trips," he said. "Others took a little longer."

The dog-training badge proved a challenge mainly because the family had no dog. Hatcher had to borrow a neighbor's dog for several months, a 12-year-old golden retriever that the family grew fond of and hated to part with when the required training was over.

Hatcher incorporated the snow sports badge into a family vacation to Montreal.

Not content to start on the bunny hill, Hatcher began his snow-skiing foray on the expert slope and ended up rolling down the hill on his first try.

The woodworking merit badge netted Brenda Hatcher a well-constructed wooden trunk decorated with carved trim.

"Every single merit badge was a learning experience," Hatcher said. "They helped me in school or in choosing a hobby or career."

Hatcher decided to become a dentist while shadowing a friend's father as he earned the dentistry merit badge.

He said earning the geology and environmental science badges gave him a head start on his environmental science studies at Bloomingdale High School.

Hatcher said the lifeguard certification badge was the most difficult to obtain.

"Getting up at 5 a.m. and going through all the drills and then the coursework, it was very intense," he said. "I didn't get to bed until 11 at night."

As for the most memorable, he points to a merit badge bearing the likeness of a canoe. He earned both his canoeing and fly-fishing merit badges on the same trip to the boundary waters between Minnesota and Canada.

"It was so incredibly beautiful there," he said. "We saw so many bald eagles, I couldn't believe it."

Among his favorite merit badges is the scuba diving badge, which he earned on a night dive in the Keys with fellow Scouts.

"It was amazing," he said, describing how his flashlight illuminated a 700-pound goliath grouper asleep in the water. "That was the most fun."

With no more badges to earn, Hatcher is working on his 12th Eagle Palm award, presented to Scouts for their longtime participation and leadership in Scouting. He also serves as a mentor for senior patrol leaders, an experience he said taught him leadership skills. He looks forward to sharing that experience with younger Scouts.

"It's not all about fun," he said. "Scouting is about responsibility and commitment. It teaches moral and character development. The fun stuff just holds your interest."

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FAST FACTS

The badges

While most of the Boy Scout merit badges involve typical Scout activities like archery, hiking and safety, some delve into more obscure interests. Here are a few unusual badges and the tasks Scouts must complete to earn them.

Pulp and paper merit badge

Scouts must:

- Tell the history of papermaking, describe the part that paper products play in society and the economy, and list trees that are major sources of papermaking fibers.
- Visit a pulp or paper mill or recycled-paper facility, list paper products found in the home, describe how paper is made and find three career opportunities involving paper.

Labor union merit badge

Scouts must:

- Learn about concerns of the American worker, including working conditions, safety, hours, wages, seniority, unemployment, layoffs, discrimination, outsourcing, benefits, profit sharing and health care.

- Visit a local union or labor council and explain mediation, arbitration, lockouts, grievance procedures, collective bargaining and strikes.

Composite materials merit badge

Scouts must:

- Explain the precautions taken for handling, storing and disposing of resins, reinforcements and other materials used in composites.
- Give a history of how composites were developed and visit a company that manufactures or repairs products made with composites.

Source: Boy Scouts
of America

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