

HUMAN INTEREST

Eagle Scout Ben Hayes, 14, Accomplishes Rare Feat in Earning All 139 Merit Badges the Boy Scouts Offer

The Michigan teenager has so many badges — in hiking, emergency preparedness, moviemaking, reptile studies and much more — they don't all fit on the front of his sash

By **Jeff Truesdell** | Published on September 26, 2022 01:04 PM



Eagle Scout Ben Hayes, right, with mentor Shirley Scheffler. PHOTO: COURTESY OF REBECCA SHANNON

for his second.

"I like trains," says Hayes, whose parents enrolled him in the Boy Scouts hoping it would help their son — who has autism and faced bullying in elementary school — develop new social skills.

By age 13, Hayes had earned the required 21 merit badges to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout, the organization's highest. But he didn't stop there. Before the COVID-19 pandemic halted face-to-face instruction and approvals, he'd collected 99 merit badges — and then, forced online and onto Zoom calls, he kept earning more badges.

And more.

And then *still* more.

He finally ran out this summer after earning all 139 merit badges the Scouts offer — a feat achieved by only one-half of 1 percent of Scouts, reports [WZZM-TV](#).

"Because Ben is on the autism spectrum, it looked like when COVID hit and all the structures in life started falling apart, that Ben was going to be in real trouble because he requires a lot of structure," says Doug Ogden, pastor of Lebanon Lutheran Church, the charter sponsor for Ben's Troop 1048 in Whitehall, Mich.

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"Instead of falling apart," Ogden tells PEOPLE, "he grabbed onto every single one of those [badges], including some Scouting awards that some of us didn't even know existed. He's very computer savvy to begin with, so he learned how to reach out to things going on in other parts of the country and other parts of the world, and was just drawn into all the possibilities."

"Scouting is such a wonderful network nationally and internationally that there were people willing to talk to him online from all over the place,"

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All of us at the very beginning were making sure that counselors and award-givers weren't going easy on him because of some of his challenges," he says. "But it was pretty clear that the integrity of the counselors was at its highest and he was doing everything that was being asked."



Ben Hayes, at right, with his mom and stepdad Rebecca and Mike Shannon. PHOTO: COURTESY OF REBECCA SHANNON

Hayes' mom, Rebecca Shannon, says, "I don't think it was any less fun because he got to do it on Zoom." But it did create the occasional scheduling hiccup — like when Hayes' partner for completing his merit badge in home repairs turned out to live in Japan.

"There's a gigantic time difference," Shannon says. "So doing home repair at 3 a.m. because someone didn't tell you that he chose to do it [then] was interesting."

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you do a merit badge normally, you do the work, you meet with a merit badge counselor, and you discuss or you show the work one-on-one. These kids worked together in different time zones, doing videos together, so it was more interactive. So, I think he got more out of them, honestly."

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Starting with hiking — "It means a lot of walking," Hayes says — and railroading were easy choices for the super Scout. Asked if her son has any model trains set up in the family's home, Shannon replies: "Just a few, like 500."

"When other teenagers collect baseball cards, mine collect rare trains," she continues. "When he went and got the merit badge, he pretty much could teach it. He wants to be a locomotive engineer when he gets out of the Air Force."

Hayes also breezed through his badges for art and first aid and emergency preparedness, which requires that "a scout must provide a clear plan on how to assist people in any number of situations," according to the organization.

Dog care, fire safety, law — check, check and check — followed. One of his favorites was the merit badge in moviemaking. To earn that one, Hayes created and filmed a video that he posted to his [YouTube channel](#).

"It was just mainly a movie with trains in it," he says.

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Ben Hayes, at left, with Troop 1048 Scoutmaster Luke Cole. PHOTO: COURTESY OF REBECCA SHANNON

The one badge that gave Hayes' mother pause was reptile and amphibian study. "I didn't think he'd do that," she says.

Truth is, if it meant having a snake in the house, Shannon really didn't want him to do it, either. "I got lucky," she says. "One of his math teachers had one in the classroom, so he got to observe it five days a week, which fell into the category of what he needed to do."

The final badge he earned, for golfing, "was kind of difficult," Hayes says, "because I'm left-handed, and everybody else that did golfing is right-handed."

Which others presented challenges? "Swimming, because I had to get over my fear of water," he tells PEOPLE. "And also climbing, same thing, because I have a fear of heights."

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grow with his achievements, which now include the public speaking merit badge.

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Hayes hopes to meet his scattered online friends in person next year at the National Jamboree in West Virginia and the World Jamboree in South Korea — trips he'll subsidize with his share from an ongoing troop fundraiser. "Now that he's got his social skills down, he can get up and speak for himself to anybody," Shannon says. "Last year he sold \$40,000 in popcorn."

By raking yards and mowing lawns, Ben also collected money to fill and deliver more than 150 snack bags a month over the past two years for staffers working through COVID at a local hospital, a project he undertook "just because that's what he wanted to do," says Shannon.

With all his accomplishments, Hayes created a different sort of challenge for his mom: Where to sew all those badges on his uniform?

"They stopped making the 40-inch sash [for merit badges] because there wasn't a lot of people earning them all," Shannon says. "So, we got inventive. He has the 36-inch [sash] and it holds about 120-something, and the rest of them are sewed on the inside."

Says Ogden: "I think his fellow Scouts have a newfound respect for him because of all that he's done, and the way he's pursued his goals. Some of them have been challenged, maybe, to pursue merit badges a little more aggressively because he's knocking them out one right after another."

"He's really emerged as a confident young man," he says, "and they know that."

Hayes does, too.

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