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Scout's honor — earning every badge — is a merit few can achieve

By MEREDITH RODRIGUEZ
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Michael Liebig can light a fire without a match, bake chocolate-chip cookies using a box and tin foil, and sleep soundly between two inconveniently placed rocks.

In January, he had to go scuba diving. In Missouri.

Scuba was merit badge No. 121 for Liebig, an 18-year-old Eagle Scout who has earned every merit badge in the book, plus two that have been retired since he earned them.

Liebig learned about the scuba badge only three months before his 18th birthday deadline, so he and his dad dived into the water of a flooded mine.

Badge No. 122 was the hardest. Bugling isn't Liebig's thing, but he now can toot 15 songs.

Liebig received his final merit badges in a ceremony Monday night at Lee's Summit Christian Church.

For reference, it takes only 21 badges to become an Eagle Scout, a milestone Liebig achieved when he was 13.

In this school year at least one other local scout, Conor Killen of Platte City, earned every merit badge, said Randy Kidder, a spokesman for the Heart of America Council.

Only 4 percent of Boy Scouts reach Eagle status. Fewer than 1 percent earn all the badges available, said Renee Fairrer, a spokeswoman for the national Boy Scouts office.

Despite stiffer requirements, the number of scouts who achieve Eagle status and beyond has increased dramatically in the last 10 years, officials said. Some officials speculate that the boys may be responding to pressure from colleges that require community service, Fairrer said.

Liebig recalled feeling motivated to outdo the son of his scoutmaster.

"I just kinda had the oomph in wanting to do something good in scouts," he said. "I've always been the competitive type."

Liebig's parents instilled in their son a commitment to civic involvement mostly by example. Debra Liebig is a nurse who volunteers often. Mark Liebig is a police officer from a long line of military servicemen.

Liebig's parents volunteered as den leader and cubmaster when their son was in the Cub Scouts, but their son set his own goals.

"For the most part, he has done his own thing," Mark Liebig said of his son. "We've been there to support him and drag him around all of creation to get it done."

They canoed 78 miles in Minnesota and kayaked five miles in the Florida Keys. Family vacations often turned into merit-badge missions.

Liebig never would have discovered a love of theater had it not been for the theater badge. He is the sound technician for productions at Lee's Summit North High School, where he is a senior.

Liebig helped to build a turntable for the musical "Les Miserables" that helped his school win best overall production at a local awards ceremony.

Liebig also serves as a role model in the DARE anti-drug program and has been active in Junior ROTC, drill team and his church youth group.

Teachers and other adults describe him as someone they can depend on. "He is one of the most decent young men I know," said his physics teacher, Chuck Stephenson.

Liebig will graduate in May with 11 college credit hours and will attend Metropolitan Community College-Longview before transferring to the University of Missouri.

Liebig aspires to become a biochemist, but he doesn't want to put his parents in debt while he gets there.

The scout law, he said, taught him to be thrifty and to depend on himself.

"If I got lost with Michael in the wilderness, I know I'd be OK," Debra Liebig said. "He can start a fire like no other."

Even without a match.

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