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Scout earns every possible merit badge

By **Melissa Bower**

Fort Leavenworth Lamp

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“Merit badges have such a diverse range,” he said. “They’re really to pique an interest in a lot of different things.” McWilliams got to try out a lot of possible careers through earning merit badges. Inventing gave him an idea of what an engineer does. He made a multi-tasking camp tool out of PVC parts that can be used to build a tent, a water bucket stand, and other camp items. Working on other badges gave him a taste of journalism, history, surveying and drafting, robotics, agriculture, and many other career fields.

McWilliams earned his Eagle Scout rank in 2008 in Washington state. He earned the required badges to become an Eagle Scout. Those that the Boy Scouts consider necessary skills like citizenship, environmental science, personal management, first aid, and emergency preparedness. In all, a Scout must earn a required 12 badges, then complete an additional 10 elective badges to reach Eagle rank.

Eagle Scout candidates must also work on a service project, and McWilliams helped a local parks and recreation department with a camp for inexperienced campers. He arranged for sponsorship so that tents and sleeping bags would be provided, and organized volunteers and planned activities.

McWilliams’ badges also include four historic, discontinued badges that were re-instated in 2010 for the centennial of the Boy Scouts: pathfinding, signal, tracking and carpentry. For the signal badge, he learned Morse code and semaphore signaling.

Last year, Scoutmaster Rick Lockwood surprised him by helping him earn a public speaking badge. He invited McWilliams to help with a Boy Scout Troop for special needs children in Kansas City, Kan. McWilliams gave the boys an impromptu presentation.

Fort Leavenworth, Kan. — After Curry McWilliams earned his Eagle Scout rank, he did not stop there. He pushed on to earn all 132 merit badges available to Boy Scouts — an achievement accomplished by only a handful of Scouts each year.

The 17-year-old Leavenworth High School junior realized he had half of the possible merit badges in two years ago, and decided he would attempt to earn all 132 by the age of 18 — the age at which he can no longer work toward merit badges. McWilliams was recognized at the Fort Leavenworth Court of Honor May 21.

McWilliams said he’s learned a lot about leadership and communication through his Scouting. “I’ve learned that we have to work together, even if you are a good leader, you can’t do it alone,” he said.

Moving around as a military child made things a bit more challenging. To earn all the merit badges, McWilliams looked for “merit badge colleges” that local Scout troops would host to help him earn a particular badge.

His father, Lt. Col. Rob McWilliams, who works at Combined Arms Center-Training, and his family enjoyed some of his son’s merit badges, like whitewater rafting. They planned fun activities around his son’s merit badges.

“One of my greatest enjoyment over the past few years has been watching him do this,” McWilliams said. “We’ve gotten to spend a lot of time as father and son.”

Sometimes while working on one badge, he’d find out about another opportunity. For example, while visiting Arkansas to do whitewater rafting, they found out about the Toltec Mounds at State Park and linked up with a helpful park ranger to earn the archaeological merit badge. He said that he never felt like he missed opportunities while working on all his merit badges. “I said was given opportunities through Boy Scouting.

of Scouting and what it means to be a high-achieving Scout. Since then, McWilliams has served as a junior assistant that troop. This summer he'll accompany them to Scout camp, where he will also receive training to become a full as scoutmaster.

"After Boy Scouting ended for me as a youth, I definitely wanted to give back any way I could," he said. "I've learned leadership techniques I can use. I've absolutely enjoyed working with (other Scouts)."

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Scout grabs elite goal: all 132 merit badges

Importance of family, helping others is the lasting lesson for 18-year-old Curry McWilliams.

BY DAWN BORMANN
The Kansas City Star

American presidents and governors have taken the Boy Scout oath to obey God and country.

Sixty percent of astronauts learned the “leave no trace” camping ideals as children.

And among the elite corps who became Eagle Scouts, it’s been part of a path to the Oscars, to the highest court in the land, and to the head of the FBI.

Yet a Leavenworth teenager stands out among the bunch.

Curry McWilliams managed to earn all 132 merit badges offered during his Scouting career. It’s a feat so rare there’s no badge to honor it.

Boy Scout officials estimate that perhaps a dozen accomplish it each year. That’s only a rough guess. The organization doesn’t encourage collecting so many badges, so it doesn’t keep track.

“But we’re all pretty much in awe when somebody comes along who did it,” said Bill Steele, director of the National Eagle Scout Association.

A little perspective: A mere 4 percent of Scouts attain the elite Eagle rank. Eagle Scouts need 21 badges, including some that take nearly a year to accomplish. A recent study gives scientific backing to the idea that Eagle Scouts tend to lead for the rest of their lives.



The Kansas City Star

Curry McWilliams, 18, earned enough merit badges to be an Eagle Scout six times over. He now hopes to use his experience to help others.

The Eagle Scout reputation is so impressive that West Point, Annapolis and their sister academies give the rank an edge in admissions. The military gives Eagle Scouts automatic promotions after basic training.

McWilliams, who just turned 18, added the Eagle patch in 2008. He was just getting warmed up.

There was more to do. Like water ski, white water raft and bike 50 miles.

Prompted by a badge, he joined the track team at school, went scuba diving, learned to ride a horse and polished his public speaking skills.

McWilliams tackled it all as his family moved several times and while his dad, Army Lt. Col. Rob McWilliams, was deployed twice and away at far-flung training assignments.

The uber-Eagle Scout knows there are plenty of people who consider his work obsessive. But he didn't set out to earn every last badge until 2010, when he realized that his natural curiosity had put him within reach. The actual target changes regularly as new badges are released. Once McWilliams set the goal, he plotted out how to do it and never turned back.

Proven leaders

That goal-after-goal-after-goal orientation hardly surprises Baylor University social sciences professor Byron Johnson.

The university released a [study](#) in April that gives scientific backing to the countless anecdotes of Eagle Scouts running the world.

"Their preparation is really off the charts," said Johnson, who helped author the study.

It's a teach-'em-young thing.

Johnson said the traits picked up in such extraordinarily ambitious Scouting stick around well into adulthood.

Eagle Scouts are more likely than non-Scouts to set and achieve goals and to be in professional and personal leadership positions. Eagle Scouts tend to do better even than the high bar set by Boy Scouts generally.

"They're more likely to know their neighbors. They're more likely to report really solid relationships with their siblings. They're more likely to have respect for other faith traditions," he said. "They're more likely to give to charity, both secular and religious."

It makes sense, of course. These guys are outliers.



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“But at some level it’s pretty shocking,” he said. “Ordinarily in statistics, we find pretty much people are not different” from each other.

Johnson said an adult once told him: “Being an Eagle was one of the most important things I’ve done in my life and it affects everything I do.”

If history is any indication, it wouldn’t hurt to rub elbows with McWilliams now — while he’s unknown.

Famous Eagle Scouts include the likes of President Gerald Ford, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Walmart founder Sam Walton, and explorer Steve Fossett.

As for McWilliams’s future? Oh, he’ll lead the charge, all right, Steele figures.

“I’m sure to some distant planet,” he said.

If so, another Eagle Scout is leading his way right now.

“I just got an email from the International Space Station,” Steele said.

It was from astronaut and Eagle Scout Don Pettit, who is writing a [blog](#) for Scouts from the space station.

Curiously, the national organization isn’t keen on Scouts following McWilliams’s path. Merit badges are about quality, not quantity, said Renee Fairrer, a spokeswoman with the Boy Scouts of America’s national office in Dallas, Texas.

“We want, ideally, for them to try different things,” she said.

Just not necessarily everything. Rather, she said, the organization hopes the intense work of becoming an Eagle Scout kindles a deeper interest in a hobby or two that becomes a passion or in a field that drives them to a vocation they’ll love.

But if a Scout wants to learn a lot about a lot of things, the organization doesn’t stand in the way.

Fairrer was impressed to learn McWilliams accomplished the task while the family moved repeatedly with the military.

“He’s probably had an uphill battle,” she said.

Lasting lessons

Scouting helped McWilliams adjust as the family moved so often, his dad said.

“Curry used Scouting to help him integrate into the new environment,” said Rob McWilliams. “It gives that commonality.”

Every badge brings back memories of Scout troops at West Point, Washington, Fort Leavenworth and elsewhere. There were summer camps, national jamborees and merit badge counselors across the country who helped.

Curry McWilliams learned horsemanship in Washington state, robotics at the Kansas Cosmosphere and environmental science at West Point, where his dad was an instructor years ago.

“Everybody who helped me out earned them too,” he said. “Every time I look at the merit badges I think of all the people that helped me out.”

Looking back, the merit badges will make great stories to tell. But the time spent with family was the best part, he said.

“My dad and I were out ... probably every weekend if not every other weekend going to places as far as Memphis, Branson, Missouri, Grand Island, Nebraska,” he said. “We would definitely have a lot of time to talk.”

Once it was clear that McWilliams enjoyed Scouts, earning Eagle was a must for his parents.

“That was kind of a non-negotiable,” his father said.

But he didn’t need that push or any other thereafter. McWilliams was hooked.

Summer Scout camps proved an ideal time to add to five or eight badges to his sash. He easily earned 20 at the National Scout Jamboree in 2010 that celebrated Scouting’s 100th anniversary.

Only once did someone try to sign off early on a badge. McWilliams wouldn’t have it.

“That would kill me,” the teenager said.

McWilliams slowed himself down only when his dad was deployed to Iraq.

His mom, Peggy McWilliams, went biking with him and was prepared to do more. But Curry McWilliams had a nagging feeling his dad should be there too.

“I didn’t want him to miss out on important events,” McWilliams said.

His public speaking merit badge — something he expected to complete and move on from quickly — was likely the most lasting.

McWilliams had planned to deliver an impromptu speech to Troop 133 in Kansas City, Kan. Moments before taking the stage, he learned the Scouts had mental disabilities.

His speech was so engaging that the scoutmaster asked him to return to volunteer regularly. There wasn’t another badge in it for McWilliams, but he has barely missed a meeting in the year since.

He attended Camp Naish with the Scouts last week and was named an assistant scoutmaster for the troop when he turned 18 this month.

“I’ve learned just as much as they have,” he said.

The next badge is set to come out any day, but McWilliams’s 18th birthday signaled the end of his collecting days, per Scout rules. Instead, he’ll use his experience to help others.

“I’m really just trying to give back now to not only all the people that helped me out,” he said, “but go above and beyond and help other people.”

To reach Dawn Bormann, call 816-234-7704 or email dbormann@kcstar.com

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