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Scout's honor: OC Eagle Scout earns every merit badge

By Christian Marnon Editor

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David Neuhalfen

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Less than 10% of Boy Scouts earn the “Eagle” rank in their career.

Far fewer have earned every merit badge, which total 138 today.

Recent North Oldham High School graduate David Neuhalfen accomplished both.

In BSA's 113-year history spanning more than 110 million scouts, Neuhalfen joins around 500 others to reach that milestone—or .00035%.

The fruits of that labor were on display Friday when Neuhalfen visited the Era office in full regalia. Draped over his standard BSA khaki short-sleeve and green slacks was a sash, kaleidoscopically dotted with a lifetime of badges.

Some badges conjure standard scout associations—a pair of oars for “canoeing,” a tent for “camping,” a lure for “fly fishing” and a bow for “archery.”

Others seem unorthodox—a quarter for “coin collecting,” a jetliner for “aviation,” a stock chart for “American business,” a computer circuit board for “digital technology,” a pair of beagles for “dog care” and many more.

Neuhalfen, who started as a Tiger Scout in first grade, confided during his interview that the obscure badges occasionally tripped him up more than those with steep athletic difficulty.

He quickly points to “bugling,” which requires a scout to learn not only “Taps,” but nine other calls, along with composing a bugle call for his troop to signal a group activity such as meal time or striking a campsite. Another called “skating,” tasked him with learning numerous, sometimes complex ice and roller skating maneuvers like “widespread eagle,” “Mohawk,” “figure-eight” and more. Worse, that badge intersected with COVID-19, requiring a virtual “audition-style” video submission to earn it.

Neuhalfen endured his fair share of physically taxing badges as well, including his very first badge, “swimming,” which must be earned to attain the Eagle rank. It also shares some requirements with the United States military, including freestyle laps and staying afloat for more than a minute.

Swimming serves as a prerequisite for “lifesaving,” which, beyond CPR training and in-water rescue training tactics, required Neuhalfen to recover a 10-pound weight in approximately 10 feet of water using a “feet-first” dive.

The individual difficulty of certain badges aside, time management, resource access and ultimately, persistence were necessary to reach the milestone, Neuhalfen said.

He graduated from NOHS this year not only with the Eagle rank and badge achievement, but a 4.53 GPA through weighted AP Classes and a decorated marching band career as a four-year All-District and All-State trombone player.

David Neuhalfen Sr., seated next to his son, recalls waiting in the band parking lot with meals to-go.

“Speaking to his commitment, I remember times sitting at band practice with food in the car and while he’s sitting in the car [eating] we’re driving straight to a scout meeting,” he said.

Scouting camps, retreats, and merit badge workshops dominated most of Neuhalfen’s summers from an early age, which allowed him to get a strong jump on badges.

Before moving to Oldham County as a high school freshman, Neuhalfen also earned certain badges such as welding in collaboration with technical schools in his native Texas.

Summer camps alone carried the opportunity to earn up to seven merit badges ranging from first aid to basket weaving. David Sr. said he never had pay a dime for summer camps since his son was always top of his troop in door-to-door popcorn sales.

“He made enough money to pay for his own summer camps,” he said. “I never wrote a check and I’m very proud of that.”

Scouts cannot earn badges until age 11. By 13, Neuhalfen had 68.

David Sr. said he remembers the exact day his son vowed to earn every badge.

“We were driving home from San Antonio, we went down a merit badge college,” said David Sr., who is a merit badge instructor. He noticed his son counting various badges and asked what he was doing.

“Dad, I have 68 badges. I think I’m going to get them all.”

Merit badge attainment came with other BSA honors for Neuhalfen, including acceptance into the Honor Guard and the Order of Arrow, the organization’s honor society.

Both father and son went through the Order of the Arrow “ordeal” which requires 24-hours of fasting and complete silence while camping on a tarp under the stars.

“My dad taught me that work ethic translates to merit badges and you have to have persistence to get through it,” Neuhalfen said, adding that resource access also presents a hurdle to most scouts.

The Scuba Diving badge, for instance, requires the scout to become open-water certified, a two-week training.

“That can be cost-prohibitive,” he said.

One of Neuhalfen’s least favorite merit badges, “computer science” became his postsecondary career path. He currently works as a cybersecurity intern and plans to attend Texas A&M this fall to major in computer science and minor in project management.

“Computer [programming] was a hard badge,” he said. “I didn’t really like it at the time, but I thought it was interesting. I guess I do like a challenge.”