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A rare goal that few accomplish

A Rancho Bernardo Eagle Scout earns all 139 merit badges

By Elizabeth Marie Himchak (/staff/elizabeth-marie-himchak/) 6 a.m. Feb. 26, 2015

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Eagle Scout Anthony Pyka, center, with his fellow Boy Scout Troop 685 members at their Court of Honor on Tuesday night at Monterey Ridge Elementary School in 4S Ranch. During the ceremony, Pyka was presented his 139th merit badge, one for fly fishing, the last merit badge available for him to earn. Erwin Mascardo

A couple years after joining Boy Scouts, 13-year-old Anthony Pyka set a goal — to earn every merit badge available before his 18th birthday.

On Tuesday night, during Rancho Bernardo Troop 685's Court of Honor, Pyka was presented his last merit badge, bringing his total to 139.

It is a feat that has been accomplished by around 250 Boy Scouts in the national organization's 105-year history, according to Karl Shelton, spokesman for Boy Scouts of America's San Diego-Imperial Council.

"A very small percentage are doing something like this," Shelton said. "It is a unique, personal goal the scout sets that is not part of the planned advancement program."

Shelton said it has been a few years since a member of the San Diego-Imperial Council has accomplished the feat, but he knows of a small group of boys who are taking on the challenge.

To continue earning merit badges long after the 21 required to become an Eagle Scout "takes concerted effort ... (and) a lot of discipline is required," Shelton said.

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After achieving their organization's highest honor, Eagle Scouts can earn an Eagle Palm, which represents an additional three months of active membership, leadership and five additional merit badges. During Tuesday's ceremony Pyka was also presented his ninth Eagle Palm. He has been an Eagle Scout since 2010.

While Pyka said he was able to "knock out several badges easy peasy" by going to several Boy Scout summer camps, he said the task became increasingly harder when working on those last badges, like his final one, which was for fly fishing.

"The last requirement was to catch a fish using a fly rod, which was very difficult ... and took four weeks of trying," Pyka said, who in early November caught that elusive fish. His deadline was Dec. 27, his 18th birthday, after which Boy Scouts can no longer earn merit badges.

Another hurdle Pyka faced was his goal, which kept moving away from him.

"When I joined there were 121 merit badges possible, but when I ended there were more than 130," he said.

There are currently 135 merit badges available, with the number fluctuating over the years due to some badges being discontinued and others added. Over the seven years Pyka was a Boy Scout a total of 139 merit badges became available.

"A lot of adults helped me," Pyka said, explaining that to earn each he needed an adult adviser who could guide him in the topic.

Pyka said his favorite was a merit badge for welding because he got to work with molten metal. "It was fun and I learned how much work goes into it," he said. Another favorite was for rifle shooting because "normally when you're a kid you do not get to handle a firearm for a long period of time."

Scout Master John McCutchen said Pyka is the first member to earn every merit badge since Troop 685 formed in 1994. He has been Pyka's leader all seven years and while surprised when he learned of Pyka's goal a few years ago, McCutchen said he was not shocked that he achieved it.

"He's a great kid who works hard and has fun in more than just scouting," McCutchen said. "He's a great guy ... a big backpacker who enjoys the outdoors."

McCutchen said of the troop's current 125 members there are a few young scouts who have expressed an interest in following in Pyka's footsteps.

Pyka, the son of Rancho Bernardo residents Ellyn and Werner Pyka, is a Del Norte High senior who said his future plans include earning bachelor's and master's degrees in chemical engineering, a career field inspired by the composite materials merit badge.

"It was a new concept I had never heard of (before earning the badge)," he said.

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After college, Pyka said he is interested in coming back to the troop as an Eagle alumnus to help other boys earn their badges. In the meantime, his advice is to “don’t give up and ask your mom to help you with it. I was not a very social kid around 13 and 14, and she helped me ask (people to be my merit badge advisers).”

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