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Well-merited: Two brothers near rare Scout achievement

Monday, September 8, 2008

BY MIKE KERWICK
NorthJersey.com
STAFF WRITER

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You need only 21 badges to become an Eagle Scout, but Brendan and Brian blew past that barrier long ago.

The brick patio in this Ramsey back yard offers two kinds of clues - the kind that breathe and the kind that don't.

Exhibit A: Two rented bikes.

Exhibit B: A female dog.

Bikes and dogs don't share much in common, but here they are two components of the same 121-piece puzzle. Even with the dog and the bikes, you might not guess that Brendan and Brian Ridings have become partners on a remarkable ride into the history books.

Their father Richard exits the house, his arms lugging Exhibit C out to the patio. It is a clear box, filled with dozens of Manila envelopes. The box is heavy. Richard has a second one inside, down in the basement.

Each envelope houses the requirements and documentation necessary to obtain a Boy Scout merit badge.

"When they earned around 20 or 25 merit badges," Richard Ridings said, "I think somebody asked one of our sons, 'What are you trying to do, earn all of them?' And the answer was 'Yes.'"

Brendan, 17, and Brian, 16, are closing in on a rare feat. The two Ramsey siblings are days away from earning their 121st merit badges. They backpacked and bugled, cycled and canoed, golfed and gardened. They even adopted a dog en route to earning their dog care merit badges.

And now these two boys are hoping to join a small collection of kids who have earned every merit badge possible.

"Most people only get about 30," Brendan said, "because they don't feel they need to get any more."

You only need 21 to become an Eagle Scout, but Brendan and Brian blew past that barrier long ago. A spokeswoman for the Boy Scouts of America said the group does not keep official records of how many boys have earned every merit badge during the organization's 97-year history, but she did acknowledge that it is "a very rare occurrence."

The categories are a varied lot - some physical, some mental, some a combination of both.

"They can solder pipes," Richard Ridings said. "They can clean out drains. They've repaired toilets. Painted roofs."

"Fun stuff, too," said Maria Ridings, the boys' mother. "They went ... boarding as well to earn the water sports. They learned to ski for the snow sports."

They kept a three-month log of their expenses to earn the personal management merit badge. They carried tents and sleeping bags on their backs for 12 days to earn their backpacking merit badge. They made model teeth out of clay for their dentistry merit badge.

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"I wish they had housekeeping [badges]," Maria said.

One of the boys joked that the Boy Scouts should offer a merit badge on the topic of girls.

"You can't have a badge for girls," said Eric Koch, a merit badge counselor and assistant scoutmaster, "because you can never master that subject."

Koch visited the Ridings home on a recent Friday to certify the boys in cycling. Days earlier, they went down to a bike path on the Delaware River to complete some of the cycling requirements, which include two 10-mile rides, two 15-mile rides, two 25-mile rides and a 50-mile ride.

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