

INSPIRED

Minneapolis teen girl breaks down barriers to become a rare Eagle Scout

Isabella Tunney's weekend activities have been tied to her pursuit of earning all 137 merit badges — in categories ranging from American business to woodworking.

By Joel Rippel (<https://www.startribune.com/joel-rippel/10645806/>) Star Tribune |

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A weekly discussion over the last 18 months between Isabella Tunney and her friends starts with the same question.

“They’ll ask me, ‘What are you doing this weekend?’” said Tunney, a 16-year-old junior at St. Paul Academy. “One week my answer was scuba diving. The next week the answer was welding. It’s kind of a running joke.”

Tunney’s eclectic weekend activities have been tied to her pursuit of earning all 137 merit badges — in categories ranging from American business to woodworking — offered by Scouts BSA. When the formerly boys-only Scouts BSA started accepting girls on Feb. 1, 2019, Tunney was among the first to join.

Tunney, who lives in south Minneapolis, also has met all of the criteria to earn another rare honor — Eagle Scout. Only about 8% of scouts annually earn the title. She’ll be part of the small inaugural class of female Eagle Scouts, to be recognized in February.

“Isabella stands out as an accomplished and driven, yet humble, natural leader who exemplifies what Scouts BSA is all about,” said Bev Verweg, scoutmaster of Tunney’s Troop 384, based in Richfield. She describes Tunney as poised and mature, “with leadership skills beyond her years.”

After helping to found Troop 384, Tunney immediately set a goal of earning all 137 merit badges, a feat attained by fewer than 500 scouts in the 110-year history of the organization.

After completing 136 merit badges, the final one turned out to be the most challenging: Bugling, the least completed merit badge in scouting.

“It can be completed on the trumpet or the bugle,” she said. “Most of those who earn the badge do it on the trumpet because they already play the trumpet.

“I don’t play an instrument. To earn the badge, you have to be able to sound 10 (different) bugle calls. In the beginning, I could barely make a noise. I practiced in front of a mirror. I watched tutorials on YouTube. It took months and months of practice. It was very difficult. For awhile I didn’t think I would get it done.”

She eventually did.

“I pushed through it,” said Tunney, “and it taught me a lot about myself. It’s helped me to realize that when I think I’m done, I’m just getting started. I’m proud that I did each one thoroughly and didn’t just pencil-whip through them.”

More than 150,000 girls joined Scouts BSA in 2019. “My older brother Eugene was in Scouts,” said Tunney. “It was amazing and so cool to see all of the experiences he had.”

Eugene’s experiences including becoming an Eagle Scout at 14. The biggest consideration to becoming an Eagle Scout is that the candidate must create and fulfill a service project related to serving their community.

Tunney designed and organized a monthlong donation drive to benefit [Simpson Housing Services of Minneapolis](https://www.simpsonhousing.org/). (<https://www.simpsonhousing.org/>) The drive collected items such as shower shoes, pillows, books, magazines and arts and crafts supplies for



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Eagle Scout Isabella Tunney

Simpson's clientele (simpsonhousing.org).

"I started volunteering when I was 6 years old," said Tunney, "first, with our neighborhood group and then with our church — St. Thomas the Apostle. Simpson does such incredible work helping those in need, those in dire situations, and then Simpson also helps with the next step — landlords and affordable housing. I was so happy to help and the guests were so grateful."

Nahrissa Rush, volunteer coordinator for Simpson Housing Services, said that "throughout the entire process of setting up the donation drive and delivering the items, Isabella was thoughtful and conscientious of ensuring that the drive would meet Simpson's needs. The effort that she put in for the video and website to promote the drive was so unexpected and overwhelming! I honestly cried watching the donation drive video, so touched at the amount of work that Isabella put into it. I am so impressed with Isabella and it's youth like her that help to give us all hope for the future."

Earlier this year, Tunney was one of 13 delegates — chosen from 2.1 million scouts nationwide — to present Scouts BSA's annual report in Washington, D.C.

The annual trip included meeting elected officials in Congress, a visit to the Oval Office and tours of landmarks around the District of Columbia.

"It was an extreme honor to be nominated and selected to represent the national organization," she said.

A highlight of her trip was visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

"I was able to find the name of my grandmother's cousin — John C. Driver," said Tunney. "It was really special to see his name."

Tunney, who is a straight-A student, emphasizes that school remains her top priority. She's considering a career in a STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) field after college.

"What's great is that a lot of the badges were introductions to STEM subjects," said Tunney. "I'm not set on where I want to go, but I do want to go into one of those fields."

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