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With a final hike, Liberty Boy Scout earns every merit badge

BY RICK HELLMAN - SPECIAL TO THE STAR

07/08/2014 10:39 AM | Updated: 07/08/2014 10:39 AM



Michael Provence Jr., right, says Austin Van Black is a good role model. RICK HELLMAN/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The city of Liberty doesn't normally allow overnight camping in city parks. But when you are as trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent as Austin Van Black, an exception can be made.

Thus, Van Black spent the night of July 2-3 camping in Liberty's Westboro-Canterbury Greenway park to fulfill the final requirement for the backpacking merit badge, becoming just the 230th Boy Scout to earn every merit badge offered by the organization during his tenure.

Clearly, Van Black has followed the 12 points of the Scout Law noted above. Backpacking was his 140th merit badge, and because merit badge offerings come and go, he is just the second Scout to earn a total of 140, according to meritbadgeknot.com.

(<http://meritbadgeknot.com/>) By comparison, a boy is required to earn just 21 merit badges to become an Eagle Scout.

Van Black has earned badges for cooking, citizenship, nature, cinematography, fingerprinting, disability awareness and dozens more. He has traversed several states while earning those badges, attending summer Scout camps in Missouri and Kansas, plus the national and international Scouting Jamborees.

When he completed the last leg of his hike last Thursday morning, about 50 people, from Scouting executives to Liberty's police chief, were waiting to greet the 17-year-old in the parking lot at Liberty High School, where he was a valedictorian this year. He gave some brief remarks, thanking his parents and the other adults who helped him during his Scouting career.

"To my peers, I don't think they fully understand," Van Black said earlier. "Some feel embarrassed to be in Scouting. I've never done that. I promote the movement. I believe everybody should be in Scouting because it teaches values and builds character.

"The values it teaches are in the Scout Law. ... The morals it teaches are in the Scout Oath: On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

"It's in the motto: Be prepared. It's in the slogan: Do a good turn daily. It teaches you to strive for excellence."

Van Black made a big impression on his fellow Scouts and Scout leaders while he was a member of Troop 374, chartered to the First Presbyterian Church in Liberty. Several of them showed up for the celebration at the high school.

"He exudes Scouting," said Bill Moberly, the troop's committee chairman.

"I call him Joe Scout," said assistant scoutmaster Warren Newberry. "He's got time for everybody who needs him. He's such an asset to the community. You're going to hear a lot of things about him over the next 50 years; I just know it."

"I think Austin's future in Scouting is just getting started," said Moberly. "This is not the end; it's just the beginning."

Newberry said younger Scouts look up to Van Black and follow his lead, a lot more than they do adult leaders.

“They listen to him,” Newberry said. “They love him to death.”

Michael Provence Jr., age 13 and a member of Troop 374 who holds the rank of Life Scout, one below Eagle, confirmed that at the celebration for Van Black.

“He has been a really great friend and a role model,” Michael said. “We hang out, play games. He teaches me stuff. He’s an inspiration to me. I’m going to try to get that, too.”

Van Black’s father, Tom Van Black, said he felt certain that Austin’s Scouting accomplishments, in addition to his academic excellence, were a primary factor in the four-year, \$100,000 Buick Achievers National College Scholarship that Austin received from the General Motors Foundation. Austin Van Black plans to attend the University of Missouri-Columbia in the fall and pursue a business degree.