

Teens Completing Eagle Scout Projects

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SYLACAUGA – Six teenagers are investing much time and effort on their way to achieving the highest rank in the Boy Scouts of America. Members of Troop 4027 at First Baptist Church, Anthony Comer, 15, Evan Garris, 13, Dylan Jackson, 14, Isaac Owens, 16, Kantrel Dickerson, 17, and Christopher Dickerson, 15, are completing community projects with the goal of becoming Eagle Scouts. Four have already finished, and the remaining two are well on their way. “These are some of the finest Eagle projects I have seen,” scout master Jon Peterson said. “They’re all really good, and we don’t let anybody get by easy. I’m really proud of these guys.”

In a nutshell, the project “has to help the community and be something that will last,” explained Garris, whose project is restoring a courtyard at SAFE Family Services Center. Scouts have to plan, develop and lead the entire project, including fundraising. Along with Garris - who cleaned the courtyard, built four benches for it and still plans to paint colorful shapes on the sidewalks for preschoolers who use the area - two other projects were done at SAFE. Comer and Christopher Dickerson built raised garden beds for the community garden there. Comer assembled five beds measuring about 3 feet wide and 12 feet long, and mulched a pathway, and Christopher Dickerson constructed two handicap-accessible beds raised 3 feet off the ground. SAFE director Margaret Morton said the projects “will really and truly impact, for many years to come, the people that benefit from the garden and that come to SAFE. I was so impressed at the level of maturity and leadership shown by these young men, and it just shows what can be accomplished when we energize our youth. It’s pretty amazing.”

The other three projects are spread across the area. Kantrel Dickerson mulched, leveled and added toys at a special needs playground at Indian Valley Elementary School. Owens is relocating and refurbishing a flag pole at Knollwood Christian School. He will be adding a rope to the pole to make it more useable and performing a flag retirement ceremony, he said. Lastly, Jackson reblazed and cleared three miles along the Skyward Trail at Cheaha State Park. Completing these projects is not the only requirement to become an Eagle Scout. Scouts must also be active in their troop for at least six months after becoming a Life Scout, earn 21 merit badges, demonstrate that they live by the Scout Oath and attend a unit leader conference. Each of these teens named a different motivation for achieving this high rank, but all said it is a benefit when applying for jobs or schools and even when joining the military.

“I was motivated to get my Eagle because I will go into boot camp the rank everybody else comes out,” Jackson said. “Only 2 percent of scouts get their Eagle, and I want to be one of those 2 percent. Also, my mom said if I want a job, I have to get my Eagle first, so that helps.”

Once the projects are done, they must submit them and successfully undergo a board review, Peterson said, after which the scouts will officially earn their rank. When all have completed the process, Peterson said the troop will likely celebrate with a banquet or other recognition ceremony sometime in February – which is also the last month the Boy Scout troop will exist.

Troop 4027 is disbanding when Boy Scouts of America begins allowing openly gay members and is transitioning to a Christian-based program called Trail Life USA, Peterson said.

“It’s a sad thing that it will be our last batch (of Eagle Scouts),” he said. “The (Boy Scouts) membership standards will change to something that is not tolerable for the church to be the charter organization, and it’s not tolerable for me either. I’ve been in scouting since 1960, and I don’t feel like I’ve left scouting, I feel like it’s left me. So, knowing that this was coming, these guys have had to push really hard to finish their Eagles before February.”

In Trail Life USA, an organization founded by former Boy Scouts, ranks will transfer from Boy Scouts and the group will continue many of the same activities. Troop leaders will be required to give a statement of faith, believing in the Christian God, whereas Boy Scouts only requires that one believes in any god, Peterson said.

“The Boy Scouts of America is blessed with so many camps and just scads of resources that will not be available, to start with at least, but we’ve got a lot of support through the country, and so a lot of parks and resources are saying we are welcome so we can still have camps and adventures,” the scout master of 10 years said. “Hopefully it won’t be very long until society recognizes the highest rank in Trail Life USA is equivalent to Boy Scouts, its just that we haven’t sold our values, so to speak.”

The scouts said they agree with this decision, but still plan to get as much out of Boy Scouts as possible. All the hard work to complete their Eagle Scout projects is already paying off in personal gains.

“Doing this makes you be a better leader and helps you be aware of the difficulties that come along with leadership so next time you’re better prepared,” Christopher Dickerson said.

“When you see the work you’ve done,” Comer said, “and you see people using it, you get that good feeling that you’ve accomplished something and you’ve really helped people out.”

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