



## Gathering of Eagles Speech

Written for Robert Mazzuca, Chief Scout Executive, Boy Scouts of America  
2009

When you stop to think about it, the Eagle Scout badge is a pretty unremarkable piece of jewelry. It's barely three inches long, it weighs just half an ounce, and it isn't nearly as glitzy as an Olympic medal or a championship trophy. Down at the local Scout shop, an Eagle badge would set you back less than \$20.

Yet for all that, the Eagle badge holds an honored place in our culture—and I don't just mean within the Scouting community. People I meet invariably know that being an Eagle Scout is a very good thing—even when they don't understand just what the badge signifies or how somebody earns it. And when I meet a man who *almost* became an Eagle Scout, he can typically remember exactly why he didn't make it. Perhaps he moved across the country and never found another troop. Perhaps he discovered girls or took an after-school job. Perhaps he couldn't rescue that 300-pound lifesaving instructor at summer camp. You know, the guy who could have played linebacker for the Chicago Bears.

Those of us who do wear the badge have memories, too—of struggling to learn the Scout Oath and Law ... of coming home cold and wet—and happy—from a weekend in the woods ... of our first, feeble attempts at leading our peers ... of our success at rescuing that 300-pound lifesaving instructor.

And those memories break the bonds of time. Whether we became Eagle Scouts in the jazz age or the space age, whether we're part of the Greatest Generation or Generation X, Y, or Z, we are united in brotherhood with other Eagle Scouts by that unassuming red, white, and blue badge—and by all that it stands for. Because we know exactly what it signifies. While others may be defined by career or creed, age or ethnicity, we are defined by our character, our service, our leadership, and our achievement.

One of my joys as chief Scout executive is that I get to hear about the impressive achievements of so many of our Scouts. Let me share a few stories I've heard recently.

A few months ago, I received a note from a long-time Scout leader named Ken Hood, who wanted to brag about his son, Thomas, a newly minted Eagle Scout. Ken had reason to be proud. Before becoming an Eagle Scout, Thomas had already earned the 50 Miler Award, a Hornaday conservation medal, and three Roman Catholic religious emblems. He had participated in the National Scout Jamboree and the National Order of the Arrow Conference, where he competed in Indian dancing. He's also involved in Venturing, where he has completed the Kodiak leadership course and has begun working on his first Bronze award.

What makes Thomas' story so special is that he has Asperger's syndrome, a disorder that's related to autism. He functions quite well—as his Scouting résumé indicates—but he has always lacked the physical and social skills that his peers take for granted. Despite his disability, however, Thomas became an Eagle Scout without any special accommodations. Not one. His dad wrote me to thank the Boy Scouts for helping his little boy become a man and—perhaps as importantly—for helping him become just one of the guys.

Ken Hood's letter was poignant, but not nearly as poignant as a chance encounter I had with a waitress in Omaha last summer. You may remember that on June 11, a tornado devastated the Little Sioux Scout Ranch in nearby Iowa, killing four Scouts and injuring 48 others. As soon as I heard about the tragedy, I knew I had to go to Omaha, but I had no idea just how meaningful the trip would be.

That waitress I mentioned saw me in a Scout uniform and approached my table with tears in her eyes. She wanted to tell me how proud she was of the Scouts at Little Sioux, young men she called "her boys." She had just watched an interview with one of the injured Scouts and was deeply moved when he said, "Thank God that this happened to us and not somebody else who wasn't prepared."

What a powerful sentiment and what a true statement. Because of their training, the Little Sioux Scouts responded to disaster with poise and professionalism. Before first responders could even reach the scene, the Scouts had secured the camp, set up a triage system, and saved many lives. As Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman would say later, the Scouts responded in "true Boy Scout fashion."

When I visited Omaha, I had the chance to meet many of the Scouts who became victims or heroes—or both—at Little Sioux. One injured Scout told me that he would have bled to death if a friend had not held his scalp together with his hands. That friend had suffered a broken leg but had put his friend's needs above his own.

The Little Sioux story is exceptional, thank God, but putting others' needs about their own is common among Scouts. Consider the story of Eagle Scouts Kyle and Brady Baldwin. A couple of years ago, these brothers learned that low-income families in Los Angeles had no more than two books in their homes—and some had none.

Kyle and Brady decided to start a reading program, but that simple idea soon grew into a non-profit organization called My Own Book. Here's how the program works: The brothers or other teens they've recruited go into an inner-city school, where they read a children's book and act out its story. They talk about how to use the library,

they show off their own library cards, and they hand out library story-time schedules. Then they cover the floor with brand-new books and invite each child to select his or her own book—for free. Since 2006, the brothers have distributed more than 16,000 books, many of which they paid for themselves.

What strikes me about this story is that Kyle and Brady didn't start My Own Book to become Eagle Scouts. They were already Eagle Scouts when the program began, and they viewed their Eagle projects as preparation for what was to follow: a lifetime of service to others. They understood that you *are* an Eagle Scout—never were—and that there is no end to the Eagle trail.

I'm guessing that each of you understands this truth as well and that your service to others had only just begun when you reached Scouting's highest rank.

At the risk of dating myself, I must acknowledge that I became an Eagle Scout before the leadership service project became a requirement in 1965—just a couple of years before, mind you! But I've taken on quite a few leadership projects since then, so I think I'm starting to catch up. For the next few minutes, I'd like to tell you about the latest and most exciting project I've been involved in: the BSA's centennial celebration.

February 8, 2010, marks the hundredth anniversary of the BSA's founding, and we're going to observe that milestone with a year-long celebration. But we won't just be looking back on a remarkable century of service. Instead, we're going to use the centennial celebration as an opportunity to reintroduce Scouting to the American people. For too long, we've hidden our light under a bushel basket. For too long, we've let others define us instead of defining ourselves. For too long, people have been wondering what ever happened to the Boy Scouts—as if we went the way of black-and-white television and rotary phones.

The centennial celebration gives us a once-in-a-century opportunity to capture America's attention, to tell our story our way, and to show that Scouting is as vital and relevant today as it was when our journey began. Our theme—Celebrating the Adventure/Continuing the Journey—demonstrates that this celebration is as much about our future as it is about our past. Over our first hundred years, we've created a strong foundation of leadership, service, and community; through our centennial celebration, we will reaffirm our commitment to inspire and prepare future generations.

The festivities will begin, appropriately enough, on New Year's Day, when a Scout-built float will appear in the Tournament of Roses parade. We're also planning a gala event in Washington, D.C., to coincide with the February 8th anniversary. The celebration will culminate in late summer with the National Scout Jamboree at Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia. Using the latest technology, millions of Scouts from across the country will be virtual participants in a centennial commemoration during the Jamboree. If you've ever been to a Jamboree arena show, you know just how special this time of remembrance and recommitment will be.

We have some other plans in the works as well. Let me cite just a couple examples: First, President Bush signed legislation last October authorizing a special commemorative coin to honor the BSA. These 350,000 coins will be a great collector's item, but they'll be more than that. Sales will generate donations of up to 3.5 million dollars, which we will use to grow Scouting in hard-to-serve communities.

Second, we're creating a Hall of Leadership at the National Scouting Museum, which will honor one individual from each local council—a Scout or Scout volunteer who has demonstrated extraordinary leadership and has modeled Scouting values in serving others. We'll soon begin taking nominations through our website at [scouting.org](http://scouting.org), so be thinking about who you might want to nominate. I must say I pity the folks who will sort through the nominations because I know there are so many great leaders among our 4 million youth members, our 1 million adult volunteers, and our 50 million living alumni.

Beyond the nationwide events and programs, our centennial celebration will reach every community across America in ways both large and small. Local councils are planning special camporees and other events, while Scouts and Scouters will be able to earn patches related to the five pillars of our celebration: leadership, achievement, community service, character, and outdoors.

Individual Scout units are coming up with their own ideas for marking this milestone. For example, the Scouts of Troop 24 in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, have pledged to complete 100 merit badges and ranks, do 100 extra hours of community service, and invite 100 boys who aren't in Scouting to join their troop.

Imagine if every pack, troop, and crew in America set similar goals. Imagine if each of us in this room shared the story of Scouting with 100 people who haven't yet caught the vision. The impact would be enormous—and not just on those we touch directly but on our nation and our world for generations to come.

And the need is enormous. Perhaps never before in our history has Scouting been more desperately needed.

There was a time in our society when children were better protected than the President of the United States. But no more. Today, kids are an audience for broadcasters, a market for retailers, and a target for pedophiles. They are valued for their ability to spend money, to win at games, and to perform well on standardized tests. They become adults too soon without quite growing up, absorbing words and images they're not at all ready to comprehend. They're always connected—yet strangely disconnected—receiving from movies and music, from television and the internet, a million different messages about how to live their lives.

Scouting can't solve all the problems facing kids today, but we can partner with parents, schools, and churches to tackle some of these issues. After all, that's just what we've been doing for a hundred years. Since 1910, we've been turning out kids who are physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight. Those values are in our DNA.

Let me offer three examples of how Scouting is tackling contemporary problems.

A few years ago, then-Surgeon General Richard Carmona said something that still keeps me awake at night: "Because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents."

Imagine that. For the first time in history, we're raising a generation of kids who may lead shorter, less healthy lives than we've led.

Well, let me tell you something. The 28,000 Scouts and leaders who complete Philmont treks each year don't have a problem with physical inactivity! But you don't have to go to Philmont to get fit. A couple of years ago, one of our Wisconsin councils

created a patch for packs, troops, and crews that complete one outdoor physical activity each month for a year. Scouts love patches, of course, and they'll do what it takes to earn one. So one day last winter Troop 439 from Weston, Wisconsin, ventured outside to play broomball on frozen, snow-covered Crystal Lake. The temperature was 25 degrees below zero. As one of the Scouts later said, "You get to run around, slip and fall, and score. It's sub-zero, and we're still having fun." While those kids were having fun, they were becoming physically strong in the bargain.

Becoming physically strong isn't limited to kids either. Right here in the Crossroads of America Council, Scout Executive Scott Clabaugh has challenged Scout leaders—and himself—to get in better shape this year. Those volunteers who lose the most weight in 2009 will join Scott and his wife, Bev, on a free trip to the Florida Sea Base next winter. Scott's weight-loss challenge is a great example of how Scouting benefits adults just as surely as it benefits kids.

So what about being mentally awake, Scouting's second aim? Although many people don't realize it, we teach kids a lot more than how to pitch tents and tie knots. To become an Eagle Scout, as you know, a Scout must complete 21 merit badges, including Personal Management. And to earn that badge, he must—among many other requirements—explain the following: what a loan is, how the annual percentage rate measures a loan's true cost, why it's unwise to make only minimum credit-card payments, and how personal responsibility can affect your credit score.

Recently we've all read far too much about America's abysmal savings rate, the subprime mortgage debacle, and the meltdown in the credit markets. I wonder whether we'd be in this mess if more people had earned the Personal Management merit badge as kids and if more people had been mentally awake when they were making critical financial decisions.

And, finally, morally straight. Nothing, of course, defines us as Scouts more than those 12 familiar words: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

Now, I don't think anybody sets out *not* to embody those values. Who would want to be untrustworthy or disobedient or cowardly? Probably no one.

But there aren't many places left in America where kids can learn what those values mean and, just as importantly, put them into practice. Oh sure, some schools now offer values education, but that seems a lot like learning to fly an airplane by reading the manual. You may think you know all there is to know, but don't ask me to join you on your maiden flight!

In Scouting, we put values into action. When Scouts complete service projects, they learn what it means to be helpful. When they elect leaders from among their peers, they get to practice loyalty and obedience. When they share in an interfaith worship service at a camporee, their sense of reverence toward God deepens, as does their respect for the beliefs of others. When they live out the values embodied in the Scout Oath and Law, those values sink into the very marrow of their bones.

In his book *Legacy of Honor*, Alvin Townley tells the remarkable story of Eagle Scout George Coker, who was taken prisoner during the Vietnam War. After two months of torture at the hands of the Viet Cong, Coker could barely remember his own name,

but he remembered the Scout Oath. As he explained to Townley, “The very last thing I could consciously hold onto was the Scout Oath. By the end, I could only get out the first words: ‘On my honor I will do my best.’ That forced my brain to function and say ‘I *will* do this again. I will *not* do what they want me to do.’”

George Coker held onto his sanity by holding onto the Scout Oath. He survived 2,382 days as a POW before returning to America. Today, he is a Scouting volunteer in Virginia, and you can bet his Scouts know the true meaning of the phrase “On my honor.”

Kids today need words like that to hold onto. In a world where the only constant is change, where all values are shifting and all ethics are situational, they need a firm foundation on which to build lives of character, service, leadership, and achievement—lives like each of you has built.

As one Eagle Scout to another, I salute you for who you are and what you have done, and I challenge you to join us in our centennial year as we celebrate the adventure and continue the journey of Scouting.

If you’re currently involved in Scouting, great! I hope you’ll kick up your involvement a notch this year. If you’re not involved right now, there are plenty of ways to get plugged in. You can give of your time by filling a frontline job in a local Scout unit or by playing a behind-the-scenes role at the district or board level. You can give of your financial resources through the local Friends of Scouting campaign or our planned-giving program. You can reengage with Scouting by joining the National Eagle Scout Association, or you can reconnect others through our alumni website at [bsaalumni.org](http://bsaalumni.org).

I know Scott Clabaugh and his staff would love to sit down with you and discuss your options, but the important thing is not *how* you get involved. It’s *whether* you get involved, whether you commit to help a new generation of young people strive for that simple red, white, and blue medal—the Eagle Scout badge—and for the critical values it represents.

Thank you.