

Prologue

A man whose talents and efforts are perfectly suited to his mission can accomplish great things. My father, Paul Eason, was such a man.

Daddy worked hard to earn a living and provide for my mother, my sister, and me, but his mission in life had nothing to do with making money. His job was just a job. His mission, the calling to which he devoted thousands upon thousands of hours of his time, was to serve as the Scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 12 in Tupelo, Mississippi.

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The Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910 and has a long and glorious history. More than a hundred million Americans have been members of one or more Scouting organizations. Millions of them have gone on to serve as leaders in business and government and their churches and communities. Those who have attained the rank of Eagle, the highest in Scouting, include Gerald Ford, Neil Armstrong, Steven Spielberg, and Sam Walton.

For most of its existence, Scouting was universally regarded as an invaluable institution that taught time-honored values to America's youth. Boy Scouts, depicted in illustrations by Norman Rockwell, were viewed as model young men. They were as American as Mom and apple pie.

But in recent decades, changes in America have brought controversy and challenges to the Scouts. There have always been gay Scouts, but gay adolescents in past decades rarely announced their sexual preference. As more and more young people came

out as gay, the Boy Scouts grappled with the issue. Openly gay youths were traditionally barred from membership, but the Scouts reversed this position in 2014. Openly gay adults were authorized to become Scout leaders the following year.

Several years later, the Boy Scouts announced that girls would be allowed to join the Scouts and earn the same ranks and merit badges that boys earn. The organization changed its name to Scouts BSA. Same-sex troops are required, but “linked” troops of boys only and girls only can meet at the same time in the same location and camp together.

The changes have been welcomed by some parents but not by all. My daughter was not pleased when she learned that a girls’ troop was at summer camp for a week when her sons’ troop was there. She was understandably concerned that the boys would not devote their time and attention to earning merit badges and having fun with their male friends. Hormonal teenagers camping together—what could go wrong? Some organizations also opposed the changes. The Boy Scouts were sued by the Girl Scouts for poaching their members.

The Scouts have also suffered from dwindling participation. Enrollment peaked fifty years ago and has been shrinking since then. The causes are many. There is now far more competition for the time of young Americans than in decades past. Sports and other activities have proliferated, leaving little time for Scout meetings and campouts. Many young people, regrettably, would rather stare at their screens than camp in the woods. Many parents, regrettably, indulge them. Some parents believe Scouting is too old-fashioned, others that it’s not old-fashioned enough. While the Scouts walked a fine line in recent years between remaining true to their core mission and values and keeping up with the times, the pandemic exacerbated the enrollment crisis.

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Worst of all, the Scouts have been besieged by a scandal involving thousands of allegations of sexual abuse. In the 1980s, the Scouts began implementing a program designed to protect innocent Scouts from abuse and innocent leaders from false accusations. The rules have been strengthened and enforcement has become more rigorous in the years since then. The program is now set out in a detailed policy entitled Barriers to Abuse. Adult leaders must be registered and trained in youth protection. At least two leaders are required at all events, and one-on-one contact between a leader and a Scout is prohibited.

But in spite of the protections in the program, claims of sexual abuse increased dramatically. The sheer number led the Scouts to seek bankruptcy protection in 2020. A

total of 92,000 claims of sexual abuse were ultimately filed in the bankruptcy court. Many claimants came forward only after the opportunity was publicized by lawyers seeking to represent them. Some of the allegations were from the time before meaningful protections were in place, involved alleged abusers who were deceased, and thus could not be contested. In other cases, because records from long ago were not retained, it was impossible to determine if the claimants had even been Scouts. But many of the claims were undoubtedly valid. Until recent years, the Scouts admittedly did a poor job of identifying sexual predators and protecting young people from them. Some cases of abuse were covered up.

All this makes it appear that there is nothing but bad news these days for the Boy Scouts. But there is also good news, as there always has been. In March 2023, a federal judge in Delaware approved a settlement of the sexual abuse claims filed in the bankruptcy court. In addition to compensation, victims will receive counseling and support. A month after the settlement was approved, the Scouts emerged from bankruptcy. These developments bring with them the hope that the Scouts can put this dark chapter behind them and look to a brighter future.

In other good news, enrollment is now increasing for the first time in many years. The number of youth participants topped a million by the end of 2022. Thousands of outstanding men and women continue to give freely of their time as leaders. Through their efforts, millions of Scouts will receive the same benefits that millions of others received in the past. Scouting continues to provide America's youth with the opportunity to learn skills and habits that will make them the nation's future leaders.

This book tells the good news the Boy Scouts have to share through the story of one remarkable man. Paul Eason served as a Scoutmaster for more than six decades and led thousands of boys on their journeys from childhood to manhood. One of those boys, Charles Johnston, will celebrate his ninetieth birthday in November 2023. When I interviewed Charles for the book, he told me the story of Daddy's selfless commitment to the Scouts of Troop 12 should be documented and shared far and wide. I agree. The story of the lifelong benefits of Scouting and the devoted leaders who make it a success should be shouted from the mountaintop.

Daddy became the Scoutmaster of Troop 12 when he was only twenty-five, still single, and just home from the Navy after World War II. He served in the role for more than forty-five years, not stepping down until after he turned seventy. Most men would have concluded that forty-five years was enough, but not Daddy. He continued as an Assistant Scoutmaster for nearly sixteen more, working and camping with the boys in the troop until he turned eighty-six.

LESSONS IN SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP FROM AN AMERICAN HERO

For six decades, from 1947 to 2008, Daddy served as a beacon and role model for three generations of boys in Tupelo, giving generously of his time and talent as few men do. More than 350 Scouts attained the rank of Eagle during his tenure, and all of them learned lessons from him about honor, principle, leadership, and service. After he died, a friend declared that he was the best Scoutmaster in the world.

Leroy P. McCarty Jr., known to one and all as Buddy, was one of the boys who learned from Daddy and became an Eagle Scout in Troop 12. Buddy is nearly eighty years old, but he has not forgot-ten about his time as a Scout and his love and admiration for his Scoutmaster. After learning that I was writing this book, he sent me a long message that included a story I'd never heard:

My most powerful personal memory of Paul is from the summer of 1957. The only requirement I lacked to earn my Eagle Scout badge was the three-quarter-mile timed run for Personal Fitness merit badge. I had not yet begun my high school growth spurt, was a bit chubby for distance running, and could not run the distance in the required time of six minutes. So, for weeks on end, on Monday through Friday during that summer of 1957, Paul picked me up after he got off from work, took me to the Robins Field track, and trained me.

Weeks into the training I wanted to quit, but Paul would not allow it! He was encouraging, he was tough, he was kind, he was patient; he knew exactly what he was doing. He consistently let me know that I could succeed. He never once raised his voice and was always positive. The result? After weeks of training, I completed the run in the required time, with thirty seconds to spare!

The experience was a valuable lesson that has served me well throughout my life. I am forever grateful to Paul for teaching me much more than how to run. Thanks to Paul Eason, I am an Eagle Scout.

Paul Eason is an authentic American hero.

Thanks to the training he received in the summer of 1957, Buddy McCarty became the forty-fourth young man to attain the rank of Eagle in Troop 12 since its inception. He was the twenty-fourth under Daddy's leadership, which began a decade earlier. After completing the last remaining requirement with thirty seconds to spare,

Buddy was awarded his Eagle badge on September 23, 1957, at Troop 12's weekly Monday night meeting. Sixty-five years later, he sent me the story of how he conquered the three-quarter-mile run and became an Eagle Scout.

In July 1957, while Daddy was training Buddy at Robins Field in Tupelo, I was born at a home for unwed mothers in New Orleans. Two and a half months later, the staff at the home chose Paul and Margaret Eason to be my father and mother. When the call came, they dropped everything and drove south to get me. I was placed in Mama's arms

THE SCOUTMASTER

on September 19; Daddy drove us home to Tupelo the next day. Three days later, when Buddy McCarty was awarded his Eagle badge, Daddy presided at the ceremony.

Daddy is my hero. Many sons say that of their fathers, but many sons of other fathers, including Buddy McCarty, say that of mine. I rode on Daddy's shoulders as a child and stand on them as a man. Hundreds of other men stand alongside me.

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