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Midlothian teen earns all 121 Boy Scout badges

By Bill Lohmann | TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

Kohler has a sash full of badges to show for his effort, and a sense of accomplishment that's a little hard to describe.

Paul Kohler II had a simple reply to friends who told him it was "stupid" to try to earn all 121 Boy Scout merit badges because a) he needed only 21 to become an Eagle Scout, and b) he'd never do it anyway.

"Just watch," he said.

Eagles are rare birds, with only about 5 percent of Scouts achieving the highest rank in Boy Scouting. Far rarer are those who earn every merit badge, a daunting challenge that might take a half-dozen years and extraordinary resourcefulness and commitment.

Kohler has a sash full of badges to show for his effort, and a sense of accomplishment that's a little hard to describe.

"It's a powerful feeling," he said the other day over lunch near his home in Midlothian.

It "speaks volumes for his desire to learn, set and attain goals and achieve," said Brad Nesheim, Scout executive for the Heart of Virginia Council. Boy Scouts of America doesn't keep track of Scouts who earn all available merit badges, but Nesheim said in his 34 years with Scouting he's seen it only four times.

By nature, teens often are an unfocused lot, and there's not a thing wrong with that. That's the point of being that age as they cast about and start finding their way in the world.

On the other hand, to find a boy so determined and dedicated to do something like this -- something that provides a broader view of himself and everything around him -- is commendable.

Kohler, 18, didn't set out to get all 121 merit badges, but he did seem inclined to it. As a Cub Scout, he earned every available belt loop and pin. As a Boy Scout, he sold so much popcorn for troop fundraisers that he earned fees to attend summer camps, where he started working on various badges in an expedited manner.

"I started getting tons of badges," Kohler said. "One day, I just thought, 'I want to get them all.'"

He became an Eagle Scout by age 15, having earned the necessary 21 badges and completed his Eagle project of constructing purple-martin houses for his Brandermill neighborhood.

His badge pursuit continued. Some he could complete in a day at a camp; others took months. Some weren't easy to find. Each badge requires a counselor, someone expert in the topic at hand, to oversee the process. Paul and his dad, Paul Kohler Sr., a Scout in his day, traveled to neighboring states on occasion to find counselors or camps where he could do what was necessary to earn certain badges.

He enjoyed working on many of the badges, including those for chemistry and water sports, emergency preparedness and entrepreneurship, which included blasting marshmallows through plastic piping. Even the pulp and paper badge, which has a rather mundane ring to it, proved to be fascinating, said Kohler, a graduate of Clover Hill High School who is taking a year off from school and will enter Virginia Tech next year with plans to study chemical engineering.

The toughest ones included bugling -- he spent months learning to play -- and insect study, which required he collect and identify 50 bugs, of which he is not a big fan.

The 121st -- and last badge -- was truck transportation. He earned that last fall just before the Scout-imposed deadline: his 18th birthday.

He still wasn't done.

"Paul earned his Eagle award and continued to stay active as a leader with our troop while he continued to earn merit badges," said Charles Pyle, Kohler's scoutmaster at Troop 498 at St. Benedict Catholic Church. "Even after he accomplished his goal and turned 18, he stuck around as an assistant scoutmaster and helped out with camping trips and summer camp."

In fact, Kohler spent this past weekend at Camp Brady Saunders in Goochland County at a Scout activity that included high-rope training.

"It's just fun," he said of his continued involvement. "I can still teach younger Scouts, and I'm fairly confident I'm going to wind up with a son who will be involved in Scouting, and I'll definitely be there for that, too."

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