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Teen earns 129 Scout badges in era when clubs attract fewer kids

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BY MEREDITH HEAGNEY

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The hardest one was bugling. Teddy Osborn spent two years learning to play 15 bugle calls. He isn't musically inclined, so it was really tough, he said. "I'm pretty good at it now."

Bugling is just one of 129 merit badges that Osborn, of Grove City, earned as a Boy Scout. That was the maximum number available during his 12 years in the organization.

Only about 200 Scouts a year have earned more than 100 badges, out of the 1 million eligible for them, according to the Boy Scouts of America.

Merit-badge programs, and Scouting in general, are all about instilling the values of hard work and perseverance in boys and girls.

Scouting and other youth-development organizations could use more kids like Os-born. Many programs report declining numbers of participants as they struggle to compete with the many extracurricular activities offered to a generation that sometimes prefers technology to the outdoors.

For example, 2.7 million kids participated in Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts or Venturing (a coed, teenage group for outdoor adventures) last year. That number was nearly 4.3 million in 1990.

However, the Simon Kenton Council, which includes 20,446 Scouts and Venturers in central and southern Ohio plus one county in northern Kentucky, has seen an increase of 5.2 percent from 2006 to 2010.

Jeff Schiavone, director of field service for the council, said this is a "Scout-friendly area" with good camps and volunteers who understand the importance of membership.



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Teddy Osborn of Grove City earned all 129 merit badges available to him in his 12 years of Scouting and says bugling was the hardest. He can play 15 calls.

Youth clubs do a great job of teaching children about civic responsibility and social justice, said Lawrence Allen, dean of the College of Health, Education and Human Development at Clemson University in South Carolina.

But attracting children to the programs is harder than it used to be. Kids have more choices than ever, and this generation spends much less time playing outside than their parents or grandparents did.

Video games and computers are part of the reason, Allen said, and today's parents are more fearful of letting their children play outside.

Osborn, who turned 18 on Wednesday, credits Scouting for several of his many accomplishments. In the fall, the Bishop Ready High School senior will attend Walsh University, a 3,000-student Catholic school in North Canton, on a full-tuition scholarship to study nursing. He was inspired by shadowing a doctor for his medicine merit badge, he said.

He learned time management by balancing Scouting and school, where he is a National Honor Society member and student-council president. He became an Eagle Scout at age 13.

Scouting also taught him about the importance of volunteering, he said. He spent most of the Friday nights of this school year volunteering at Doctors Hospital on the West Side.

Through the merit-badge program, "I have been exposed to so many new fields, especially career fields," he said.

His mother, Rita, gives Scouting much of the credit for making her son the young man he is.

"He is kind, he is gentle, he is trustworthy, he is dependable," she said.

Some of the badges Osborn earned show Scouting's attempts to modernize. For example, he earned a badge in geocaching, a hunt for a hidden item using a GPS device.

Boy Scouts will be able to earn a robotics badge starting next month. Girl Scouts can learn robotics, too, as well as computer and business skills, said Michelle Tompkins, a spokeswoman for the Girl Scouts of the USA headquarters in New York.

Tompkins' organization also has faced declining numbers, although it has seen growth in some populations, including among Latina girls and recent immigrants, she said.

In Ohio, 4-H programs are reaching more children than ever - 317,286 youths in 2010 - but fewer are joining the clubs that are typically associated with the organization, said Vicki Schwartz, associate state leader.

Instead, they participate through school-enrichment programs, programs for kids whose parents serve in the military, a peer-taught driver-safety course and a volunteer program that brings trained pets to senior-citizen homes.

Camp Fire USA, based in Kansas City, Mo., used to be made up exclusively of clubs, similar to Scout troops. Today, just 15 percent of the group's reach is to clubs, spokeswoman Catherine Lufkin

said. Most Camp Fire programs, on everything from bullying to the outdoors, are taught in before-and after-school programs, camps and service-learning and self-reliance classes.

Monsignor John K. Cody of St. Christopher Catholic Church in Grandview Heights said he thinks that about the same number of kids participate in church youth groups as did during his high-school years in the early '60s at Bishop Watterson High School.

"But there are a lot of distractions now, and a lot of kids work. In my day, nobody worked on Sunday night," when the youth groups typically meet, he said. "Life is much more complicated for them than it was for us." mheagney@dispatch.com

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