

With this inaugural NESAs newsletter column, I thought I'd write about YOU. Some of you know little more about the Scouting program than what you experienced as a teenager; others of you have been involved in the program for decades – and I expect all of you have had your opinions changed in the last few years with the battles over membership qualifications, the class action lawsuit, bankruptcy and the arrivals of girls in the program. That's a lot of changes – and you must be wondering, is this Scouting I remember?

The answer is: Yeah, it's pretty much is the same. Scouting may have computer programming merit badges, and incorporated smartphones and GPS into its activities, but the fundamental verities: the Scout Oath and Law, the Motto and Slogan, the commitment to the outdoors and public service and its unmatched leadership training, are as central as ever.

The program is smaller, after COVID and no live meetings or campouts, membership got down to a few hundred thousand – but it's coming back in a big way. It's currently over a million youths – and once again growing.

One bit of change: you're going to see a lot more girls – but the arrival of girls, and there's about 200,000 of them now in the program, has been less of dislocation than most people predicted. Girls arrived, formed their own troops – often in partnership with existing boy troops. They meet separately, camp separately, and sometimes hold

joint Courts of Honor. Girls have seamlessly moved up through the ranks and leadership – and already created several hundred Eagles – hopefully, we will see a few here at future gatherings. One young lady has even won the Adams Prize for Eagle Service Project of the Year. They’ve proven to be a major asset to the program – and even driven it to change its name: no more Boy Scouts of America, not even the short-lived Scouting BSA, but, as of a few weeks ago, Scouting America.

Now, let’s talk about us Eagle Scouts. I suspect most of you sensed, even as Scouts, that Eagles were something rare and special, even in Scouting. All of those years of membership, all the troop jobs, the endless numbers of merit badges, and for the last fifty years, the Eagle Service Project, arguably Scouting’s greatest contribution to American Life. Over one hundred million man-hours have been spent on those projects – which have changed almost every park, trail, school, and non-profit in the United States. Together, it is the greatest youth volunteer service initiative in history.

That is an extraordinary achievement, but it actually pales in front of the life achievements of America’s Eagles: Governors, Congressmen, Senators, a President of the United States, Hall of Fame athletes, Nobel Prize laureates, astronauts, the first man on the moon, Tuskegee Airmen, Medal of Honor Recipients, University presidents, and most of America’s Fortune 500 CEOs. America’s Eagles, as a group with a common history, is the most successful and influential in this nation’s life – and has been for more than a century. It’s why the phrase, “He’s a real Eagle Scout” has long been shorthand – in movies, television, and other media – for competence, achievement and leadership. It’s why it

is the only item from childhood found in an obituary – even for someone 100 years old. And it is why, as I’m sure you all have experienced – when something goes wrong: an injury, a natural disaster, a complex task, a situation that needs a leader to step up . . . everyone looks to *you*. That’s the reason, though it may have seemed a cliché when you were young, being an Eagle really is for life.

In the last 115 years there have been about 150 million Scouts, both boys and now girls as well. Of this multitude, just about 6 million Scouts have earned the Eagle rank. Just 4 percent, the number a little lower before 1960, a little more now with all the technological support that Scouts get these days – but a percentage that’s still low, mainly because of the challenge of the Eagle Service project.

*Four percent.* If you consider Scouts to be the elite of American youth – and surveys suggest they are – then America’s Eagles are the elite of the elite. Is it any wonder then, that they are so successful, why they hold leadership roles throughout our society, why they are looked upon as shiny examples of American success?

I think we’ve all sort of known this. But a few years ago, Baylor University, working with Gallup Organization, conducted a poll of thousands of Eagle Scouts, former Boy Scouts and men who had never been Scouts. The result were astonishing: just having been briefly a Scout improved the subjects along multiple parameters of citizenship markedly over non-Scouts. But the results for Eagles were astounding.

In terms of lifelong connections to family, friends and neighbors, the ratings for Eagle were off the charts. Same for volunteering and charitable giving. Same for community involvement. And for setting and achieving goals and self-expectations. For Environmentalism. Respect for diversity. And a commitment to lifelong learning. The Eagle Scout rank is sometimes called “the PhD of childhood.” But it turns out to be even more than that. It is the forge of this nation’s greatest citizens.

That’s why we’re in NESAs: to re-connect with each other as fellow Eagles, and to reconnect with Scouting America – because it needs us more than ever. Remember how great Scouting was when we were young? How about helping create the same experience for this new generation of boys and girls – helping them along their own trails to Eagle?

*A Distinguished Eagle Scout, Mike Malone is the author of 4 Percent, the history of Eagle Scouting. This adapted from a speech given at a NESAs gathering in February in the Silicon Valley Monterey Council*