

Post-Eagle Excellence

Varsity, Venturing programs preparing LDS young men for future

By [Jason Swensen](#), Church News staff writer

Published: Saturday, Nov. 1, 2008

A few weeks ago, a half-dozen young men from the Fox Pointe Ward, West Jordan Utah Bingham Creek Stake, gathered for a special Court of Honor. Before receiving their Scouting organization's highest award, each of the boys was recognized for providing service to others, learning new skills, working together and demonstrating leadership.



Courtesy John Adams

A rope team from the Harbour Pointe Ward, Lynwood Washington Stake, traverses Washington's Mt. Rainier. Mountaineers include, from left, Eagle Scout Chris Carey, Eagle Scout Bryce Adams and youth leader Dave Goodwin.

But not one of the 16-year-olds was presented Scouting's Eagle Badge that evening. No need. Each of the young men had already earned their Eagles. Instead, the six priests were presented the Denali Award, the highest achievement in Varsity Scouting.

The Fox Pointe priests form an unusual group. Never before had six members of one Varsity unit from Utah's Great Salt Lake Council completed the Denali Award at the same time. For many LDS young men, claiming their Eagle Award marks the end of their Scouting experience. But others take full advantage of the opportunities offered by Scouting's Varsity program — typically designed for teacher-aged boys — and the Venturing program, designed for young men 16- to 18-years-old.

Fox Pointe Ward Bishop David R. Homer is not surprised so many of his young men have embraced Varsity Scouting. A well-run Varsity program offers a variety of high-adventure and leadership activities. The sorts of things, he said, "boys just buy in to."



Courtesy John Adams

Harbour Pointe Ward Scouts and parents enjoy whitewater rafting venture down Washington's Wenatchee River.

For years, the Church's Young Men general presidency has counseled wards and branches in the United States to offer and promote Varsity and Venturing Scouting. Such Scout-based offerings form the activity arm of the Aaronic Priesthood for all ages. But operating a successful Varsity team or Venturing crew can be tough. Often a young man steps away from Scouting once he's earned his Eagle. Other wards simply know little about how the advanced programs work.

Still, Varsity and Venturing Scouting can play key roles in "retaining, reclaiming and converting" young men to accomplish the purpose of the Aaronic Priesthood.

"These are dynamic Scouting programs that offer age-appropriate activities for each quorum," said David Pack, director of the Boy Scouts of America's LDS Relations Office.

Besides serving older LDS Scouts who are still working toward their Eagle Award, Varsity and Venturing teach life skills that will serve a young man well on a future mission, in marriage and as a future Melchizedek Priesthood holder. Like the Boy Scouts, Varsity and Venturing "is always about the priesthood — the function of the quorum is always primary," added Brother Pack.

By design, the young men are responsible for much of the planning and leadership in Varsity and Venturing activities. Still, it's vital that adult leaders fully understand the ins-and-outs of the two programs. Brother Pack recommends that bishops and ward Young Men leaders enlist in Scouting's Basic Training and, if possible, the advanced Woodbadge course to best understand the Varsity and Venturing programs.

"We can't teach boys about a tool we know nothing about," he said.

Additional resources on starting up and operating a Varsity or Venturing program can be found at the BSA-LDS Relations website, ldsbsa.org.



Courtesy Denise Richins

Eagle Scout Craig Richins completes project for the model design merit badge.

Bishop Homer said devoted Scout leaders have made the difference in his ward. His ward's Scout committee manages the administrative tasks (read: permits, equipment, scheduling, advancement) so that Scoutmaster and Varsity coaches can focus entirely on the boys. Bishop Homer describes his Varsity team coach, Jim Larsen, as "a quiet man who just loves boys."

Brother Larsen also loves the high-adventure activities that are synonymous with Varsity and Venturing Scouting. In recent years, the Fox Pointe teachers and priests have shimmied through Utah's Zion Narrows, white water rafted down Idaho's Snake River and hiked across the Uinta mountain range of northern Utah.

John Adams has been involved in Scouting in the Harbour Pointe Ward, Lynnwood Washington Stake, for several years. Many of the Harbour Pointe young men have earned their Eagle — and most have remained active in the Varsity teams and Venturing crews. Brother Adams said the advanced Scouting programs have allowed the older boys to learn vital leadership skills while experiencing high adventure.

Over the years, Brother Adams has participated in several outdoor events. Recently, he and three other adult leaders joined eight young men (including five Eagle Scouts) on a climb up Oregon's Mt. Hood. Days later, the well-trained group summited Washington's 14,400-foot-high Mt. Rainier.

"Our goal was not to make mountain climbers," said Brother Adams, "but to help the young men learn that they can do more than they thought possible." Perhaps, he added, when one of his young men is dealing with a tough moment in the mission field, he will recall those dual summits and think, "I climbed two big mountains — I can do this."

The veteran youth leader admits he sometimes enlists some Scouting sleight of hand with the older boys. After a young man completes a grueling hike or finishes building a snow cave, Brother Adams will pull out a blue merit badge card and inform his charge that he is just a requirement or two short of a particular merit badge.



Courtesy Denise Richins

Craig Richins directs a camp activity atop a tower. Eagle Scouts who stay active in Scouting often enjoy leadership opportunities.

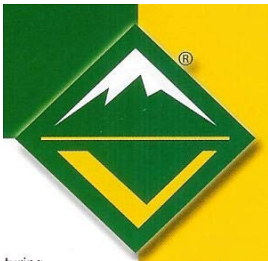
Brother Adams' advice to bishops and young men leaders anxious to succeed in Varsity or Venturing Scouting is simple: "Love the boys and get out into your ward and (discover) who are the outdoorsmen."

Eagle Scouts can also continue to earn merit badges as they progress into the Varsity and Venturing programs. Craig Richins, 17, recently completed a merit badge sweep — earning all 121 badges. A priest from Dexter, Ore., Craig earned his Eagle when he was 14. He then set a goal to earn as many Eagle palms as possible. In the end, he simply earned them all.

Such discipline has helped prepare Craig for the mission field and his future studies. Through his post-Eagle Scouting, the young priest was exposed to potential career fields he enjoyed (architecture and anything to do with animals) and those to avoid (finance and anything involving figures and numbers).

Craig's Scouting achievement was recently highlighted in Oregon's Register-Guard newspaper. He spoke of the confidence he has found through extended years of Scouting.

"If I could do this, then maybe I can do other hard things, too."



© 2009 Deseret News Publishing Company