

APRIL – SCOUTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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GINA: Hey Scouters! I'm Gina Circelli, the Digital Producer for *Boys' Life* Magazine. Welcome to the April ScoutCast by *Scouting* Magazine. With me, as always, is *Scouting* Magazine blogger, Bryan Wendell.

BRYAN: Hey, Gina. OK, listeners, the topic for this month is Scouts with Special Needs, and even if you don't have any special needs youth in your troop or crew or pack, you're sure to find this episode both enlightening and inspiring.

GINA: So, last December, I wrote a post for *Bryan on Scouting's* blog about Benjamin Waggoner. He's a Scout who has spina bifida and he just became an Eagle Scout!

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GINA: So, we invited Benjamin and his dad, Chip Waggoner, to chat with us about Scouts with Special Needs from the Scout and a parent's perspective. If you're interested, our little sibling, CubCast, has this same topic from a leader's point of view. But right now, let's welcome Benjamin Waggoner, Eagle Scout 527 in Troop 890 in Dallas, Texas, and his dad, Chip, to ScoutCast. We are so happy you both could join us.

CHIP: Thank you so much

BEN: Thank you, yes. It's quite the honor.

GINA: It's an honor just to first say congratulations, Benjamin. You're an Eagle Scout. That's a huge deal. Only a small percentage of Scouts reach that level, so a big congrats from us.

BRYAN: Wait, so at 527, does that mean that you were the 527th Eagle Scout in your troop? That's so cool.

GINA: Yeah. I'm amongst two Eagle Scouts right now!

BEN: Oh, really?

GINA: OK, well, Benjamin, what were some of the biggest challenges you had with your project and what was your project?

BEN: My project was a nine-hole, Frisbee Golf course at Camp John Marc, which is a camp for kids with special needs like me. They go for a week and spend time with other kids with the same disabilities doing normal camp activities like zip-lining, going swimming in a swimming pool. They have a lake over there with canoeing and a fishing pier. They got like a

sports and games area. They got a bunch of stuff, and they all have these different themed nights to do something like a cookout or you will have a night where we sleep out under the stars, things like that. And I wanted to give back to the community in some way because as of this past summer, it has been 10 years since I've been going to that camp, and hopefully I'll come back this year to be a counselor.

BRYAN: That's so cool.

BEN: I'm really looking forward to that.

BRYAN: So, this is a non-Scout camp. It's not affiliated with Scouting, but a lot of Scouts and young people go there, is that right, Benjamin?

BEN: It's not related to Scouting at all. It's just for kids with special needs. So, the week I go is the week with kids with spina bifida. The next week it'll be kids with cancer. The next week it could be kids who are burn victims. And the list goes on and on throughout the whole summer.

BRYAN: So, with the Frisbee Golf course, which by the way is a super cool project, I love that, how do you make a Frisbee Golf course? I've done one but how do you make it where it's more accessible for everybody? Were there special changes you had to make to the course?

BEN: There was a lot of thinking about that - making it really accessible and easy, and ultimately what we tried to do was, to keep the course as close to the main pathway of the camp as possible so that kids who are in wheelchairs can get out to throw the Frisbee pretty easily. They can get out onto the grass and stuff. It's not like it's impossible, but it can get kind of deep sometimes, and so when it's close to the path it really helps them out a lot. And we had a couple other challenges where we needed to figure out how we were gonna place the baskets. Now, there is the permanent ones where you stick them into the ground, and they stay there, and then there's the portable ones which you can remove and take out. We ultimately decided to go with portables ones because the ground over there is bedrock and also, they mow the lawns out there and there needs to be a way to remove the baskets.

GINA: Bryan is smiling really big and really wants to be invited to play some Frisbee Golf.

BRYAN: Yeah, I'm into this.

BEN: Hey, yeah!

BRYAN: So, Chip, tell us why and when you chose Scouting as the right path for your son.

CHIP: It actually started with Benjamin, who had expressed an interest in exploring what the Boy Scouts is all about. My initial reaction was, well, your condition might make it hard, but my wife and I learned to not put him in a box, so to speak. And so we just started the exploratory process, and we specifically picked the troop that he was in strictly because of asking a lot of different parents and getting a good feel for that troop, and apparently they have had several kids come through this system with different types of challenges, and in each and every case their mantra was the same. If the child has the will, then he would find a way to make sure that their Scouting experience would be one that would be able to be enjoyed to the fullest.

GINA: Benjamin, did you personally have any hesitations when you first joined?

BEN: We went to the first meeting and it was basically this event where you kind of met with the Scoutmaster that you were gonna be with for the whole year if you wanted to join the Scouts, just to kind of get an idea as to what it was gonna be like. I met my First Year Scoutmaster, Mr. Arends, and it was me and then a couple of other to-be Scouts, or First Years is what they call them and I was a little nervous, I didn't really know what to expect, but it was actually really inviting is what I remember. Mr. Arends even told me if there's anything that I need help with, he or the other

Scouts, anyone, they'll help me be successful and get to where I want to be, and that really drove me a lot.

BRYAN: Did that hold true? Have your fellow Scouts been supportive throughout your journey and become more than just troop-mates but friends?

BEN: Absolutely! They've been super helpful. There was one Scout in particular that has stuck with me all the way to the end, and we're still great friends now named Michael Peyton. Even all the busyness that he had, he's in theater so he was busy with that, but we quickly became best friends in Scouting and he helped me out a lot. At summer camp, Camp Constantin there's a lot of walking, and it's really difficult for me, especially in those wide-open spaces to get to where I need to be. And it was really cool how one of the families, the Bryant's, they brought a golf cart their own that they have at their own ranch, they brought it out to the camp so that I could use it to get around place to place a lot easier, and it really, really helped out a lot for summer camps, and it also made things a lot more fun, too. You could drive around and kind of just go, "Ah-haaa!" (*Laughter*)

GINA: You're a good friend, giving your buddy Michael a ScoutCast shout-out.

BEN: Yeah, he's amazing. He's an awesome dude.

GINA: So, Chip, did Scouting end up meeting your expectations in terms of working with Benjamin, both with leaders and amongst his peers?

CHIP: I would say that not only did the Scouting experience overall meet our expectations, but it also exceeded it exponentially. We had limited Scouting experience in our family. Going into it was a kind of a blank slate, a little bit of trepidation as far as not knowing how he would be received, and to see him from day one just blossom in confidence, to watch the kids accept him despite some of his challenges and encourage him in the ways that they did was awe-inspiring. And with every day, just to see him accomplish more and more was incredible. The most specific example of that was when he did his swimming badge. Benjamin doesn't have a very good use of his lower body, but he figured out a way to do absolutely everything that was required for the Swimming Merit Badge which is Eagle required, including the ability to take a piece of clothing, trap air, and then use it as a floatation device. Think to yourself as to how hard it would be for any able-bodied person to try to suddenly, without the use of their legs, pull that off, and yet they kept encouraging him. He had the will; figured out the way.

BRYAN: So, Chip, do you think there's a value in the way that Scouting sort of unites everybody in a single troop?

CHIP: I most certainly do, and the reason is simply because it's not now a competition as to who could become number one. It's about a competition with yourself. Can I continue to plug away and can I encourage my fellow campers, and can I encourage my fellow my Scout to make that commitment that I'm making.

BRYAN: Benjamin - What's next for you? And do you feel like Scouting has helped prepare you for college and, and the beyond?

BEN: Yeah. So, I will be attending Baylor University starting in the fall, which I am super excited for, and I'm actually generation five in my family.

BRYAN: Wow.

BEN: I'm planning on doing something in business ultimately. What I really like about the place is that it's very high in academics, but it's also rooted in Christianity and I hold my beliefs very high, and so to go to a place that holds the same standards that I do will really help me out a lot.

BRYAN: That's awesome. Congrats. That's such a great school too.

GINA: We're very excited for you. You're gonna have a lot of fun. So, we hear a lot about the challenges Scouts have sticking to Scouting. What kept you in Scouting?

BEN: The biggest deal was once you get Life, so many Scouts have made it to Life, but very few have actually made it to Eagle, and I think that's because usually by the time you get Life Scout you're about to hit high school, and a whole lot more things are added. For me it was a huge balancing act between Scouting and band, because I play the saxophone in the marching band, which is a lot of fun but it's very time consuming, and so it took a lot out of my life and I wasn't sure if I was gonna be able to finish my career in Scouting with Eagle. However, what kept me going was the people I was surrounded by. One of the adults in Troop 980 Mr. O'Brien. Every Wednesday night, we go to the same church, and whenever I go to bible study, I see him and he's always asking me, "So when are you gonna get that Eagle Scout? How far along are ya?" And we would talk for a little bit about my progress, and he kept on pushing me to make sure that I was on the right track and finishing up the merit badges, and especially after I completed the Eagle Scout Project there was a lot that I still had to do, like different merit badges like physical fitness and family life I still had to do; the 90-day 12, 13-week plans. But because I was surrounded by people who kept keeping me accountable for those

things, it really helped me keep going and ultimately obtain the rank of Eagle.

GINA: After this quick commercial break, we'll be back with personal stories.

(COMMERCIAL- Cyber Chip)

BRYAN: So, Chip, in addition to that awesome story about Swimming Merit Badge, what are some other highlights watching Benjamin's Scouting career and, and his growth in Scouting?

CHIP: One of the things that he is really good at is the gift of encouragement and that makes sense. He gets good encouragement from others at an early age, he wants to give it to others, and so in his time in a leadership position in the troop, the one that he loved the most was being chaplain. He would start preparing what he would say on a Sunday morning a good two weeks ahead of time, he would ask questions as to what the general topic might be. He would also really give careful consideration to whatever the main event was to try to find some story biblically that would fit that the Scouts were doing that time. And every time he would speak in a realm where, let's face it, I would be kind of zoning out to some degree, he had all those kids completely riveted on his every word, and it's just amazing.

BRYAN: That's awesome. So, Benjamin, do you have a favorite moment in Scouting that really stands out as a highlight for you - one you'll always cherish?

BEN: I'll always cherish for sure the Eagle Scout Project. Now, if you want a story - there's this one time at Camp Constantin where I was in the rifle shooting tent and there are three different pavilions in that general area, basically making a triangle. And what happened was, some rain clouds started coming in and then they turned to thunder clouds and they started getting louder, and every flash of lightning between the lightning and the sound of thunder became shorter and shorter. And then it started pouring rain. The water level got so high that it almost flooded the rifle shooting pavilion, so everyone was ducking for cover. We couldn't go anywhere because there was lightning happening all around. And I hate loud noises, and because of that I was death grips on my ears, just pressing as hard as I could.

BRYAN: Wow.

BEN: Remember the triangle I mentioned that the pavilions make? Lightning struck dead center of that triangle and just made this big BBBOOOOMMM, and it freaked me out! And I was praying to God. "Oh, my gosh, this is it right here! But, please, just give me the courage to just get through this

because it's hard." But I guess it's kind of a lesson of perseverance a little bit, and also conquering your fears even though I didn't conquer them too well. *(Laughs)* But hey, when lightning strikes ten feet away from ya, it's kind of scary.

BRYAN: That's memorable.

GINA: You don't forget it. It's interesting how those scary moments or the trying moments can end up being your favorite moments weirdly somehow?

BRYAN: Chip. If someone were to be a Scout leader and a family like the Waggoners' comes to them and says, "Is there a place in your troop for my son or daughter who has this special need that he or she is living with," what would be your advice to them on how they can be most welcoming?

CHIP: I think that there is an element though where you yourself might very well have to go out of your comfort zone. I will use myself as a personal example. Growing up, I cannot recall anyone that I ever ran into in the circles that I was running in that dealt with any kind of challenges that were similar to Benjamin's, and as a result, it took me a little bit of getting used to as far as preparing my heart for that. So that would be the main thing I would want to get across. Be ready to get out of your comfort zone. Understand this, the way that the child is born is his quote/unquote

“normal,” and as a result of this being his normal they don’t know any difference, so treat them normally and then let them just go about doing what it is that they are able to do.

GINA: You have given us some really good information, good tips, for parents and Scouts and volunteers, just hearing your very interesting story. Is there anything else about Scouts with differing abilities and special needs that you think should be shared with our listeners?

CHIP: If someone out there that’s listening to this has a young one who has some type of challenge, I encourage you to please consider Scouting as a place for your child to plug in. I cannot imagine what Benjamin’s life would be like without the experiences that he has been able to have with his troop and through, in our case, the Circle Ten Council. He has become so unbelievably comfortable in his own skin and so confident because of what he has learned through Scouting. I cannot put a price as to how much we truly appreciate everyone who donates their time and efforts into making Scouting what it is.

GINA: Benjamin?

BEN: I will say one thing because we’re talking about kids with special needs and adding that with Scouting. Treat everyone that you see in Scouting,

and in life in general but especially in Scouting, treat them all the same. That was a big, key thing for me when I was a First Year, that even though I had all these special needs, I looked a little different in terms of the lower extremities of my body, and not being able to do as many of the tasks that were given to me - just treat them the same way. They are the same kids with the same desires to do the things in Scouting that happen in it. It will go a long way, because that's how I was treated with Michael and other Scouts and the dads. They all were very supportive of me despite my disabilities, and it really took me all the way to Eagle. That's the biggest advice I would give is just treat them just like any other kid in Scouting.

GINA: That's something we all need to hear, so thanks for saying it. Well, thank you so much, Chip and Benjamin. Benjamin, your trail to Eagle is certainly an inspirational story, and everyone here at ScoutCast congratulates you on becoming an Eagle Scout. We want to thank you and your dad, Chip, for coming on ScoutCast and showing how Scouting seeks to be all inclusive and provide opportunities for everyone. It's truly been a pleasure.

CHIP: Thank you.

BEN: Thank you for giving us this opportunity to speak with you about this.

BRYAN: We'll be right back with Reminders and Tips after a brief Safety Moment.

(Safety Moment - Stroke)

BRYAN: And now, Reminders and Tips. April is Youth Protection Month, and the Boy Scouts of America takes that very seriously. Now would be a good time to review all the materials and resources on the BSA's Youth Protection website. You go to scouting.org/training/youthprotection. You should also go to my.scouting.org and be sure your youth protection training is up-to-date.

GINA: Also, by now you should have received your March-April issue of *Scouting* magazine, where CubCast host Aaron Derr writes about an innovative way to serve young people with special needs. The Palmetto Council successfully brought the principles of Scouting to a group of children who otherwise never would have had the chance to experience our life-changing program.

BRYAN: Yeah. It's a really cool story about a school for deaf and blind students and they've benefited from Scouting.

GINA: And you're gonna want their shirts.

BRYAN: Yes. And as we just heard from Benjamin and Chip, there's a place in Scouting for everyone, including young people who have physical and mental challenges and special needs. And you can also read in the

March-April issue some other great stories. There's a story about the best new tents, you can learn some delicious Dutch oven recipes and get advice on Order of the Arrow elections, especially now that those are open to Venturers' and Sea Scouts, meaning that young women can be in the OA for the first time.

GINA: In the April issue of *Boys' Life*, you can read about Troop 125 from West Jordan, Utah. They backpacked 50 miles through Ashley National Forest, including a hike up Kings Peak, the highest mountain in Utah.

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GINA: And that's it for April ScoutCast. Special thanks to our guests, Benjamin and Chip Waggoner.

BRYAN: And thanks to you for listening. Tune in next month for a really interesting and important discussion about bullying. And with that, I'm Bryan Wendell.

GINA: And I'm Gina Circelli. So, was our discussion useful? Let us know by sending an email to ScoutCast@scouting.org, or tweet [@bsascoutcast](https://twitter.com/bsascoutcast). We look forward to hearing from you.

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