



Elves, Heroes, and Eagle Scouts

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Derek Slinger's eighteenth birthday was fast approaching last fall, and the Raymore, Mo., Scout still hadn't finished his Eagle Scout service project. He'd completed all his merit badges (and then some—he earned 51 in all), he'd done a stint as Troop 32's senior patrol leader, but his project remained unfinished. "I was getting really nervous," he said. "You've worked really hard for X number of years to achieve this, and you're about to throw it away."

Troop 32's Scoutmaster, Dan Barnes, didn't want to see that happen. As one of the troop's original Eagle Scouts, he didn't want any Scout—perhaps especially Derek—to fall short of Scouting's highest rank when he was oh so close.

Derek had been a gung-ho Scout ever since joining the troop at age 10. He'd been to summer camp every year, had participated in the troop's high-adventure program, and had worked with special-needs kids over four summers at Rotary Youth Camp. "He's always done everything 100 percent. He's the kind of Scout you dream of having," Barnes said.

Derek had been just as active at Raymore-Peculiar High School, especially in student government and the theater program. He'd lettered in theater three years and was the only student in his freshman class to both letter in theater and be inducted into the International Thespian Society. In his senior year, Derek was serving as student body president.

Clearly, this was one Eagle Scout his Scoutmaster didn't want to let slip away. As the days sped past, he helped Derek come up with a plan to finish his Eagle project with two weeks to spare. "We had it timed so he would get everything done and turned in before his eighteenth birthday," Barnes said.

Then Derek's cancer returned.

Diagnosed with osteosarcoma in August 2003, Derek had spent more time in hospitals than he cared to remember, including most of his eleventh-grade year—the only year he didn’t letter in theater. He’d spent the bulk of that time in Kansas City’s Children’s Mercy Hospital, but this latest recurrence meant he’d have to travel to M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. It also meant he’d have to put his plans to become an Eagle Scout on hold.

Fortunately, neither Derek’s Scoutmaster nor his Aunt Tammy—who’d adopted Derek and his little sister Leslee after their parents’ deaths from cancer in the 1990s—was willing to give up. They applied for an extension with the Boy Scouts of America, which was quickly granted.

Unbeknownst to Derek, the extra time wouldn’t be necessary.

Having spent so much time in the hospital, Derek knew just how boring hospitals can be for young people, especially those who must remain in isolation. With his Eagle project—creating a coloring book for children in isolation at Children’s Mercy Hospital—Derek hoped to ease some of that boredom. Fellow Scouts from Troop 32 would create the drawings, one of Tammy Slinger’s co-workers would print 250 copies, and then Derek and his volunteers would package the coloring books with crayons and deliver them to Children’s Mercy.

As often happens with Eagle projects, however, things didn’t go exactly as planned. Derek hadn’t given his Scout artists very specific guidelines, for example, so he ended up with “all sorts of random drawings,” as he described them. The looming trip to Houston didn’t help matters either. With Christmas fast approaching and an extension in hand, he resolved to wait until January and make a fresh start.

Just before the trip to Houston, his aunt’s co-worker who’d agreed to print the coloring books called Derek. He suggested that they create a special version of the book for 12-year-old Leslee, who was understandably worried about her beloved older brother’s health. Derek agreed and quickly wrote a 16-stanza poem entitled “My Best Friend” for Leslee’s one-of-a-kind coloring book. This special gift would arrive on Christmas Eve.

What Derek didn’t know was that the caller was an imposter. He was also an elf. Not just any elf, mind you, but the Chief Elf of a Kansas City organization called the Elves of Christmas Present. Founded in 1990, this unique group is dedicated to fulfilling the wishes of people facing difficult circumstances at Christmastime. The Elves do their work in secret, never revealing their identities to the people they serve (or to anyone else, including nosy reporters). Like Santa’s little helpers, they always deliver their gifts on Christmas Eve.

So Derek wasn’t surprised when the doorbell rang at about 6:30 p.m. on December 24; after all, he’d been expecting Leslee’s coloring book to arrive for some time. But two things surprised him about the people at the door. First, they were young boys wearing elf caps with “Rookie Elf” emblazoned across the fronts. Second, they handed gifts to both Leslee *and* Derek before scurrying off into the darkness. Something unexpected was clearly going on.

While a holiday crowd of aunts, uncles, and grandparents looked on, Leslee opened her gift, a slim blue coloring book entitled “My Best Friend.” Inside the cover

was a printed explanation of how the book had come to be. Various family members started to read the explanation, but, as Derek said, “they started bawling and I had to finish it.”

By the time he was done, he’d begun to realize what was in the other box. It was an Eagle Scout badge.

You see, the Chief Elf had done more than just put together a simple gift for Leslee. He’d also assembled a team of elves and heroes to help Derek turn his Eagle Scout dream into a reality.

When he’d first learned about Derek’s situation from an elf at Children’s Mercy Hospital, the Chief Elf had been inspired. The Elves, he decided should print thousands, not hundreds, of Derek’s coloring books. And they should make sure every children’s hospital in America received copies, not just Children’s Mercy. And they should recruit professional cartoonists from across the country—people like Eagle Scout Mark Amend, the creator of “FoxTrot”—to provide the drawings. “I can only say that was an inspiration from someone greater than myself,” the Chief Elf said.

Just before Thanksgiving, two different elves put the Chief Elf in touch with Kathie Kerr, communications director for Kansas City-based Universal Press Syndicate, the largest independent newspaper syndicate in the world. Kathie was excited about the project—her husband is a Scouter and both her son and stepson have been involved in the program—but the deadline worried her. Even with elfin magic, the cartoons would have to be in hand by Dec. 17, only a few weeks away.

Nevertheless, she started emailing cartoonists before starting a week’s vacation, hoping for positive responses when she returned. “To my surprise, before I left the office for vacation, several emailed me back and said they would be happy to participate,” she said.

In all, 14 cartoonists agreed to participate, tight deadline and all. “Everything in this business has a tight deadline,” said “Heart of the City” creator Mark Tatulli. “But rarely can we be involved in a project so uplifting and gratifying.” Carlos Castellanos of “Baldo” agreed: “I think everyone lives for that moment when you’re called upon to contribute your skills for something worthwhile. Not working on it wasn’t an option for me.”

Each cartoonist was given a stanza of the poem Derek wrote for Leslee and asked to illustrate it using his or her own characters. Two had existing art that was perfect for the project; others created new illustrations.

While the cartoonists went to work, the elves kept busy as well. One elf began assembling a list of children’s hospitals around the country; another got paper donated from a supplier in Chicago and found a company that would print 20,000 coloring books at no cost. Their efforts culminated on Christmas Eve, when those two rookie elves rang the Slingers’ doorbell.

Derek had hardly finished opening his gift when three more visitors appeared at his front door. They too were dressed in green—Boy Scout green this time. The men were Derek’s Scoutmaster, Dan Barnes, Thunderbird District Advancement Chairman Mark Grant, and Jerry Usry, a Scouter whom Derek had often worked with at Rotary Youth Camp. They had come to conduct Derek’s Eagle Scout board of review.

After explaining to the family what was happening—and that everything was happening backwards—the men ushered Derek into the kitchen for his Scoutmaster conference and board

of review. They tried to keep the meeting private, but “my family kept casually walking in to grab a bite to eat and see what was going on,” Derek said.

If Derek’s family members were worried, they weren’t alone. Like most Scouts, Derek had always been a little nervous about going before an Eagle board of review—even one held at his own kitchen table. “I’ve been scared ever since I knew what a board of review was that they’d pull out a rope and make me tie some knots,” he said. “I was glad they didn’t because I’m not very good at knots.”

Derek is good at other things, however, perhaps most notably embodying the Scouting tradition of the daily good turn. As a senior patrol leader, as a member of the Order of the Arrow, and as a counselor at Rotary Youth Camp, he’d always put other people before himself. As Carlos Castellanos said, “He’s a brave warrior who thinks not of himself, but of the battle to be won.”

Even now, as the recipient of such a special good turn from so many complete strangers, he was still thinking of other people. “One of the most meaningful things for me was having two of my favorite people, Jerry Usry and Mark Grant, there. I knew they both could have been at home with their families; instead, they decided to come to my house and experience with me one of the best moments of my life,” he said.

What Derek didn’t realize was how special this moment was for everyone who’d helped him—and how many of them had been involved in Scouting or touched by cancer. Tartulli, who lost a brother to cancer at age 22, said he felt “a personal connection to Derek’s story.” Castellanos, who’s an assistant den leader for his nine-year-old son, said, “I’m hopeful his project will offer, if even in a small way, enough of an escape from the daily rigors these children will surely have to endure, allowing them the focus, strength, and hope to overcome.”

But perhaps Kathie Kerr spoke for all involved when she said, “When I retire and look back on my career, this will be the project I’m most proud of.”

To Help Other People at all Times

Since 1990, the Elves of Christmas Present have been fulfilling the wishes of people in dire need of a little Christmas cheer. Few people know who the Elves are. Fewer still know how they got their start.

The time was December 1990, and a Cub Scout pack in Olathe, Kansas, had decided to adopt a family named Scoma for Christmas. The family’s seven children had lost their father, Anthony, just before Thanksgiving and were facing an especially bleak Christmas.

The Cub Scouts did a good job of collecting toys, clothing, and other items for the family, but the parents of one Cub Scout thought they could do a little more. When the dad (himself a former Boy Scout) learned that Anthony Scoma had promised his children a basketball goal, he decided to make sure that promise was fulfilled.

And so, late on a frigid Christmas Eve, that Cub Scout dad and a group of volunteers installed a basketball goal in the Scoma family’s yard. They worked under cover of darkness so they could remain anonymous and so they wouldn’t upstage the Cub Scouts’ efforts.

The volunteers enjoyed the experience so much—despite the freezing temperatures—that they decided to stick together and fulfill other people’s wishes in the years to come. The group has since grown to some 600 elves, but the mission has remained the same.

And the Cub Scout dad who started it all? He’s the Chief Elf.