

My Scouting Journey
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United Church of Broomfield
Scout Sunday - February 19, 2023

Today we celebrate Scout Sunday, during Black History Month. Let's start by remembering Black American leaders who were scouts.

Martin Luther King, Jr, was a scout from age 11-13, in a unit chartered out of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where his father was its pastor.

Ernest Green achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, and was among the first black students to graduate from Little Rock's Central high school in 1958. He attended Central high school, despite Governor Faubus activating the National Guard to prevent the integration of Central high school.

Guion Bluford also achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, and went on to become the first Black American astronaut to travel to space, logging 668 hours over 4 space missions.

In 1948, Harry Truman issued the executive order to integrate all US armed forces. BSA followed suit, but it wasn't until 1974 that the last boy scouts of America council, Old Hickory Council in North Carolina ended its segregation of black and white youth. I joined scouts, in southern California, just 5 years later.

I am thankful that the institutionalized treatment of some youth as "OTHER" and not worthy of membership in BSA has ended. Until 1974, BSA allowed youth to be segregated because dark pigmented skin made you "OTHER". Until 2013, same gender attracted youth were "OTHER" and denied membership in BSA programs. And until 2017, trans boys were "OTHER" and denied membership. Until 2019, females were denied membership.

I am thankful that the institutionalized policy to treat some youth and adults as "OTHER" has ended in BSA program, BUT...But I can't imagine the

injury BSA's policies caused to these youth and adults over the decades from 1910 to 2019.

Understanding the history of discrimination in BSA is important for me - so that I can be intentional with my continued membership in the organization. I'd also like to be clear that I firmly believe in the positive outcomes I have seen with many youth due to engaging in the program. This will be my one sales pitch to the families with scouting aged youth: scouting is a great program for youth development, where parents are intentional about their child's development in the program.

Scouting was a great program for me as a youth. I think back now to experiences I had as a young adult, and see how scouting gave me the strength to meet challenges. My wife told me she wanted to climb the tallest mountain in the Western Hemisphere - I thought "sure, why not. I went backpacking a boy scout." Friends at work want to teach me to kayak in whitewater. "I though, sure, why not. I canoed a bunch when I was in boy scouts. How different could the rapids in Grand Canyon be than the flatwater below lake Havasu?" Scouting also gave me the self-confidence to get through an Engineering degree. Scouting is a great program for youth development.

Our troop unfortunately will not be rechartered this year. After 3 years of COVID-19 and declining membership locally and nationwide, we have been unable to recruit a sustainable level of new members. But if we have a need for a cub scout program or a scouts BSA (all gender) program, we can restart the troop. We just need some youth and intentional parents.

When my son turned 12, Keri and I recognized that school, music lessons, and sports were not giving Kevin the broader experiences he needed to grow and develop into a good young adult. He needed to engage in community service; he needed to engage in team activities and have leadership experiences beyond the sports field. And so Kevin joined Troop 767, and I rejoined the fold, this time as an Assistant Scoutmaster.

In the 1990s, James Dale was removed from adult membership in BSA programs for leading a university Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Alliance group. James fought his expulsion and ultimately won in state courts under public accommodation laws, but BSA took the decision to the US supreme court and argued that members of the LGBTQIA community are “OTHER”, and that BSA should have the right to exclude them.

I rejoined BSA intentionally, understanding that my membership provided me the opportunity to support LGBTQIA youth and adults in the program. I understood that treating some youth as “OTHER” was wrong. But through supporting youth, I now understand better the trauma they endure.

As much as 30-40% of LGBTQIA youth will experience homelessness, often being rejected by their own parents. My own daughter experienced first hand this sort of rejection from her friend’s family before Christmas - my daughter was “shushed” at a Christmas eve dinner by her friend’s mother, and was told that she was being disrespectful just by being at the house, because my daughter and her friend are gay. My wife and I both encouraged our daughter not to visit that family again, but instead to bring her friend - now romantic partner - to our house for the holidays instead.

So why do we treat LGBTQIA youth or adults “OTHER”? As Hayden told us a few weeks - the Bible makes us do it. Certainly a narrow reading of the clobber passages can make you do it. But interpreting the Bible this way is a choice we make.

Let’s consider, instead, Jesus’ life and actions. Jesus broke bread with society’s “OTHERS”. When challenged by the Pharisees about the company he keeps, Jesus tells the Pharisees that he has come to minister to their society’s “OTHERS” and then Jesus goes straight to Hosea, Chapter 6. “Go and learn the meaning of these words: I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and love of God, not burnt offerings.” This is the choice I make - I see Jesus’ life and example as ministering to those society segregates as “OTHER”.

Gathering society's "OTHERS" didn't end with Jesus' death by crucifixion. The author of Luke-Acts tells us in Acts, Chapter 8, that the first person baptized is an Ethiopian Eunuch. The Holy Spirit comes to Philip and tells him to lace up his racing sandals and put on his sprinting tunic, because he is going to run along side a moving chariot and ask for a seat. The only thing missing in this scene is a long stick Philip can use to pole-vault into the chariot.

Philip goes to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, as directed by the Holy Spirit, and sure enough, here comes a chariot, carrying the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, who is reading Isaiah. Philip runs alongside the chariot, and asks what the Ethiopian thinks of the scripture. The Ethiopian invites Philip to sit with him and explain the scripture. Philip relates the passage in Isaiah to Jesus then baptizes the Ethiopian in the name of Jesus.

The Ethiopian was "OTHER": he was either born a Eunuch or made that way by people (and those are Jesus' words, not mine). He was African - not Roman or Greek or Middle Eastern. And he was the first person identified as being baptized in Acts of the Apostles. The early church gathered in and ministered to those who were seen as "OTHER".

I will retell the story of the UCC - UUA booth at the 2017 national Jamboree, which I told last year.

The UCC working group, in collaboration with our UUA colleagues, decided to make the UCC - UUA booth a place where the scouts and adults could stop in, have a snack, pick up a pair of sunglasses if needed, and hang out. To stimulate discussion, we put up posters asking the visitors to write what diversity and inclusion meant to them. The colorful sunglasses were arranged in the order of colors in a rainbow on the table. Attendees thanked the staff in the booth for creating a safe and welcoming space. Some attendees commented that there were times they did not feel safe or welcome at the Jamboree, due to their sexual orientation or identity. Again, the national jamboree was held a full four years after BSA ended

discrimination against gay and lesbian youth and a full two years after BSA ended discrimination against gay adults.

Within a few days, the BSA national office's general counsel demanded that we take the posters down, and not display the sunglasses like a rainbow. Rev Schunemeyer and the other staff refused, and the general counsel informed us that we would be expelled from the jamboree. Rev Schunemeyer began arranging a press conference should the UCC and UUA staff get expelled as promised by the general counsel.

And then a miracle occurred. The President of the United States gave his speech at the national Jamboree, and treated the event like a campaign rally. He told an inappropriate story about being on a yacht. He recycled campaign material about the size of crowds and the size of his victory. He denigrated his predecessor. The BSA national staff shifted to damage control and the rainbow of sunglasses in the UCC - UUA booth was forgotten.

Being accosted by the General Council of BSA due to handing out multi-colored sunglasses was not the worst thing that happened to the UCC scouting working group related to this booth. What was even worse was how we were treated by the national religious relationships committee members. In 2018, during the national annual meeting, Rev Schuenemeyer requested a few moments to summarize how we were treated by the BSA National Staff. The religious relationships chair refused to recognize Rev Schuenemeyer and allow him a few minutes to speak. Worse yet, none of the committee members supported us during the meeting. We left the meeting when Rev Schuenemeyer's request to speak was rejected, and a few committee members chased us down the hallway to tell us how important our work is. But none had the courage to stand up in the moment and support us.

That kind of hurt - rejection from the power structure as an ally - pales in comparison to the kind of injury that LGBTQIA youth and adults experience. Really, what that experience taught me is that there is more

work to be done to bring inclusion and equity to scouting and to the religious relationships committee. And I need to continue to build relationships in the committee. This year, the UCC scouting working group will be sharing space at the national jamboree with the Unitarian Universalists and the Disciples of Christ. I remain hopeful that our small UCC working group can continue to build relationships among faith traditions that support inclusion and affirmation of all youth and adults in BSA programs, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, gender, gender orientation, gender identity.

There are signs that BSA is beginning to understand the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in its programs. BSA now has employee resource groups to support DEI among its employees. BSA has a Chief Officer of DEI. At the local level, councils have begun adding diversity officers to their staff, and diversity statements to their membership policies.

The work is not done, and will not be done until all youth can feel safe and included in scouting and all adults can participate and have a voice at the table. So let's lace up our racing sandals, put on our sprinting tunic and minister everyone, especially those whom society treats as "OTHER".