

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Reflections on a Lifetime of Scouting by Joe Garrett

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I joined Explorer Post 50 on my 14th birthday, the earliest a young man could make the transition from Boy Scouts to Explorers. I had been a Boy Scout for a short period of time, but my career ended when our Troop folded while I was still a Tenderfoot. I had been a Cub Scout, and I was one of those kids who earns every badge and has arrow points down past his belt line, invisible on his tucked in shirt.

Exploring was very, very important to me at that age, and ultimately allowed me to win a full ROTC scholarship to university. My sister was one of the first girls allowed to participate in Exploring as the program took its first steps toward becoming fully coeducational. I came within one merit badge of earning Eagle through the old, separate, Exploring Method, which allowed boys in Exploring a way to pursue this honor through independent activity.

When I turned 21, the minimum age to become an adult leader, I started Explorer Post 519, and quickly recruited younger sisters and some of their friends into our high adventure Post. We hiked, climbed, scuba dove, snowshoed, and snowmobiled for four years until I returned to college to complete my bachelor's degree. At that time, Exploring was extremely well funded as a separate Division of BSA. While completing college, I served an internship in the local Council Exploring Division and helped start a number of new Explorer Posts.

After college, I attended graduate school in another state and almost immediately got hired as the Council's new Exploring Executive. My job was to start new general interest and career interest Explorer Posts. I was successful at increasing Council Explorer membership by over 500 members that first year. This was a major event in a Council that had total membership of only 10,000 youth.

In those early years, Exploring was the bright future of growth in Scouting. It was growing much, much faster than overall membership. Explorer Divisions were receiving grant money to add staff and start programs in their local communities and in their local school districts. Part of my job was to present career interest Exploring to every eighth grade career class in the local school districts. My presentation included a synopsis of career Posts in local hospitals, police agencies, fire departments, airports, and military installations. I showed every class a half hour film about Exploring called "Exploring Tomorrow Today", narrated by Charlton Heston.

My small local Council did not have an in-school Exploring program, but many larger Councils had full time professionals administering career clubs and seminars in their high schools. Membership in exploring burgeoned to around 1 million General and Career Interest Explorers in the early eighties. Sadly, when I finished my master's degree, I had to move away from my little college town and back home in order to find a job. Upon returning home, I immediately got re-involved in Exploring at the District and Council levels. I also started a mountaineering Explorer Post and watched as Exploring thrived for a couple more years. Exploring membership continued to grow and peaked in 1989 at over 1 million members. At that time, total youth membership also peaked at almost 4¼ million members, and Exploring was a full 25% of the total. In 1987 through 1989, there were more Explorers than there were registered Boy Scouts.



During the 1980's, there was an internal war in Scouting over whether Explorers were "real" Scouts, and whether the Exploring Program was actually promoting and following the Aims and Methods of Scouting. Many large metropolitan Councils dissolved their Explorer Divisions and laid off staff after they were accused of "cheating" by signing up teens who attended only in-school programs on careers. In 1998, the in-school programs and the Career Interest Posts were spun off into a separate corporation called Learning for Life. Exploring, which had been around in Scouting for about a half century, was renamed Venturing. A team of professionals was appointed at National Headquarters to roll out this "new" program and promote it to local Councils. After the spin-off, Venturing was left with only 188,000 youth members. The new program was dynamic, however, and the National Venturing Division was extremely successful at building this "new" Division.

Through the 2000's, Venturing grew to a peak of a quarter million youth. During this time, my local Venturing Crew grew and thrived. We adopted an innovative program of leadership skills training call Kodiak Treks. Crew members took whitewater guide training and we began hosting youth lead weeklong Kodiak Treks on whitewater rivers in Idaho, Oregon, California, Montana, and Utah. We hosted Venturers from all over the United States and taught leadership skills, Wilderness First Aid, whitewater rescue, and guide training. Often, alumni from these treks returned as instructors.



During this time, Venturing came under attack internally. It appears that there are people within the Scouting movement who will not tolerate large numbers of teens or girls within its membership. I can only speculate why this is, but for the second time in a decade, it was gutted. The National Venturing Division was dissolved and its staff members were either reassigned or forced out. Many of its most successful features like Kodiak Treks, were eliminated, gutted, or diluted beyond recognition. In 2008, membership peaked again at 261,122 youth and has been declining consistently ever since. It now stands at about 114,000 youth, the lowest point in the past 60 years. Membership continues to decline, and the only visible action to change this was the adoption of a rank based advancement system much like that of Boy Scouts. The last time the young adult program had ranks was 60 years ago, and that scheme was abandoned in the 60's when it was realized that teens were not generally interested in ranks or uniforms. This was even before the program was coed, and it is not a surprise that girls are less interested in these things than their male peers.

In 2010, my Crew hosted their last Kodiak Trek. We continued to go rafting for a while but as our kids aged out, and my own children went off to college or careers, we slowly lost our momentum. At that point, I had been a member of BSA for 50 years, a professional Scouter twice, once in grad school and once in retirement. I had earned many, many accolades, had been held up as a model of Scouting Leadership and held up as a dangerous renegade. I have had 21 young men earn the Rank of Eagle in my Crews and Troops (none that I know of through Explorers), and a dozen young men and women earn the Venturing Silver Award. Today, I am no longer involved at the local level in Scouting. My own kids are adults and I am afraid I just don't have the energy to "do" Scouting anymore.

My greatest regret, though, is not my personal situation, but the abject failure of Venturing. This great idea, along with its predecessor Exploring, had the potential to change young teen lives and assist young people through the toughest years of their lives by adding identity, achievement, and purpose to their high school and early college years. BSA has complete abdicated this responsibility to our teens by allowing this program to fall into neglect. This is no accident, and there is no outward sign that they are trying to correct the situation. While Cub Scouting and Boy Scouting membership losses have slowed to only 2% per year, Venturing is still losing members at a clip of almost 10% per year. Much of the

overall membership loss is the result of the policies of Scouting towards gay youth and gay leaders. The stance that BSA took starting in the 1990's has hurt the program deeply. It has fallen disproportionately on Venturing, however, because our teens are much more aware of the moral issues involved and have made their membership decisions themselves. While this phenomenon has certainly caused a great deal of damage, the neglect and hostility that exists within the professional quarters of Scouting has destroyed a once very successful program.

If I were a 14-year-old today, I almost certainly would not have the opportunity to join a Venturing Crew, and even if I did, I can't see how it would help me win a full ride scholarship to college. I would certainly not be offered a job in Venturing to help me pay for graduate school, and in today's world, the last thing I would want to do in retirement is work as a District Executive. More troubling is the question whether I would raise my own children in Scouting. I think that I would do it all over again, but I would be forced, again, to pretend to approve of social policies within the movement that my children knew I didn't believe in. My youngest son's best friend through high school was the son of a gay marriage. We engaged him in our Troop when he was younger, but he was never able to join Venturing when he became aware of the open hostility that Scouting had towards his family's values.