

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Unintended Consequences for Venturing by Joe Garrett

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Editor's note: We are two weeks late with the January issue of Venturing Magazine. We had hoped to publish a series of comments from Venturers and Venturing Adult Leaders concerning the effects of BSA's Policy on Homosexuals Membership on its Venturing program. Our concern, as voiced in the following essay, is that there are unintended consequences of the policy that fall especially hard on Venturing because its members are old enough, and mature enough to understand the policy and to make judgments about its appropriateness as applied to their peers.

A few weeks after we announced the subject of this issue, and asked for essay submissions, we received a written notice from BSA's Legal department instructing us to discontinue the use of BSA's trademarked logos and phrases on our website. This may be a coincidence, but Venturing Magazine has been on the web for over ten years without having drawn any attention whatever from BSA's National Office.

What is even more unfortunate is that we received almost no submissions from our readers. The one essay we received was submitted with the proviso that we not publish the writer's identity out of fear that he suffers repercussions from his local Council.

During my 38+ years serving as an Explorer Post Advisor, a Scoutmaster, and a Venturing Crew Advisor, my greatest joy has been watching young people discover themselves and realize their



potential. There can be something joyful about watching a 14 year old, uncertain and shy, grow into a self-assured young adult, headed off to college or to a rewarding career. Seeing a young person master a difficult skill such as mountaineering, guiding a whitewater raft, or executing a toe-grab on a snowboard for the first time is a gratifying experience. My primary "method" has been encouraging these young people to try things that they never believed they could do, things that they have only seen on television. For most (if not all) teens, the years from 14 to about 20 are a terrifying journey involving grades, dating, jobs, new social challenges, and re-inventing their

relationships with adults, including their parents.

Venturing is a veritable sandbox for self-discovery. It is also an excellent place to hone social skills, leadership strategies, and self-esteem. The young people who join Venturing today have grown up in a different world than the one I grew up in. They are the natives and I am the immigrant; I grew up in a world of Mayberry, Beverly Hillbillies, and rotary dial telephones that hasn't existed in 40 years. They take cell phones, automatic transmissions, color TV, the internet, and Facebook for granted. The television they watch is an alien universe from the one I grew up with. It has many, many people of color in it, multi-racial families and relationships, crude language and situations, unbelievable violence, and lots and lots of sexual situations. The biggest change may be in the way sex is portrayed and

discussed. When I was growing up, Rob and Laura Petrie (of the Dick Van Dyke Show) slept in separate, twin sized beds. Sex is no longer something to be whispered about, and the gay issue is front and center on many shows targeting the teen demographic. Gay people have "come out of the closet" on television and it turns out that they are just like the rest of us! Shows like Glee, a sort of variety show about a high school glee club, openly discuss sexuality of all kinds and have a large assortment of constantly evolving relationships. The show "Modern Family" portrays a very kind, gentle same sex couple (Mitchell and Cameron) raising a pre-school daughter they have adopted, and hoping to adopt a baby boy to finish out their family. You can't watch this show without liking this couple, and to a young person who grew up in a world where this kind of portrait is ubiquitous, it must be a matter of intense curiosity why adults would want to exclude them from an organization that has among its core values to be Courteous, Friendly, and Kind.

Having grown up in this world, many of our young people feel comfortable "coming out" while still in high school. This is something new that we never dealt with back "in the day", and we did a lot of unknowing damage to a lot of people with despicable language, humor, and bullying. Today's youth tend to be more accepting and supportive, and "the gay issue" is well on its way to becoming merely a footnote to the high school years, rather than a subject of controversy. Because of this, I fear that BSA's policy of excluding gay youth from membership is having an adverse effect on our ability to recruit young members. By excluding their friends from membership, we may be



unintentionally alienating a majority of teens. Many of today's young adults feel strongly that people of all walks should be free to join their clubs and cliques. Teens who are confused about their own sexuality are likely to be the ones who would most benefit from joining an organization that has as its purpose to help them sort out their social status and self-esteem.

There are strong feelings about BSA's policy concerning gay membership on both sides. One of the favorite red herrings is that gay men "might" be pedophiles. My intention here is to avoid this discussion altogether by focusing on the unintended consequences of this policy on youth membership and to stay away from the controversy surrounding adult leader qualifications. I do not wish to debate the morality of homosexuality. Instead, I want to talk about the damage this policy is doing to our image among young people. Some will say that if our young gay members will just remain discrete about their orientation, they can remain as Venturers, sort of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Denial and subversion are not values I intend to teach or model to my own children or to anyone else's. This concept also misses the point, which is that young people may be avoiding joining Venturing specifically because we have this policy, not because they are actually gay. Another claim is that homosexuality is immoral and violates the Scout Oath and Law. I would respond by saying that, yes, if youth members are engaging in sexual behavior, whether homosexual or heterosexual during a Venturing activity, we may be justified in revoking their membership. In the meantime, though, I can think of no moral justification for excluding self-declared homosexual children based on their "potential" for committing an immoral act while allowing heterosexual children, who are likely to violate those same norms in a more acceptable way to remain. In other words, I cannot defend excluding one group of children based on what they "might" do while allowing another group, with an inclination to a similar but more common behavior to stay. If we intend to exclude homosexual youth

because of what they might be doing, we need to exclude heterosexual youth because of what they are certainly doing. Then who is left?

BSA's policy of excluding self-identified gay youth from membership has a disproportionate impact on Venturing for the simple reason that children joining Cub Scouts and graduating to Boy Scouts have not yet reached puberty, and so have not yet dealt with this issue. The youth we are trying to recruit, on the other hand, are right at the age where this issue is front and center in their lives. One of the Aims of Scouting is to teach our young members Values and Moral Decision Making. For our young adult members, we are asking them to participate in a program that excludes people whom they know and like on the basis of who they are. For our young people who have grown up in a society where homosexuality is viewed as a condition of birth rather than a lifestyle choice, this is no different than excluding racial groups. It is important to keep in mind that we are discussing homosexuality, not homosexual behavior. To some this may be splitting hairs, but in the American tradition, people are judged on what they do and the quality of their character, not on who they are born to be. This is an important distinction and in combination with BSA's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, it puts many of our young people in a moral quandary.



The societal attitudes I am describing are not limited to Venturing. As a Den Leader and as a Scoutmaster, I have had the unpleasant experience of being told by young parents that they don't want their children to join the Boy Scouts because of the values we promote. Sometimes this was because of our policy promoting firearms safety training; occasionally it was

because we are perceived as a paramilitary organization, but most often it was because of our policy concerning gay membership. This is a real shame.

The Boy Scouts did not pick this battle over homosexuality. The whole controversy, in my judgment, was thrust upon us by activists hoping to score political and cultural points for their argument. Instead, though, they managed to do great harm to an organization that has been a major contributor to our culture for over a century. This issue is not going away, and as our culture becomes more and more accepting of alternative lifestyles and family composition, the Boy Scouts are going to become increasingly marginalized. Many years ago, our Chief Scout Executive pledged to Congress that by the year of the Bicentennial, 1976, we would be serving 5 million youth. That goal proved unattainable, but since then, the population of the US has grown by almost 50% while we have shrunk the number of youth in our organization by a third (had we continued on the growth path of those days, we would now be serving twice as many youth). We have delayed dealing with this problem for a generation, and now the kids who never joined Scouting because of it are parents. Any marketing professional will tell you that it takes a very long time to change attitudes. The sooner we start working on this, the better.

Postscript: I am well aware of the controversies and dangers concerning adult leadership in Scouting and pedophilia. In a recent court case in Oregon, a judge ordered BSA to release many years of what have become known as the "perversion files". The Scoutmaster of my Troop (back in the sixties) is listed in those files. I was aware at the time that our Scoutmaster had abused some of my fellow Scouts. Our Troop folded, and that would have been the end of my Scouting career had I not later joined an Explorer Post. Now that I have read the file, I know more details and I know that this man whom we all loved was a pedophile. The subject of this essay, however, is not adult leadership, but the effect of our policies on recruitment of teens.

An interesting thing has happened to Venturing Magazine since we published our essay concerning youth membership policies. We received a heart breaking letter from a young man who is an Eagle Scout and who is also gay. He says that he can't decide whether to quit Scouting or to continue pretending he is something that he is not.

We also received a short essay from a Venturing leader who has obviously given some thought to this subject. Both of these contributors requested that we protect their privacy out and we are happy to do that. Anyone who has been around Scouting for very long knows that the hammer can come down swiftly.

The best way to handle these submissions is to post them on our Blog. If you would like to join the discussion, and you have something constructive to say, email your thoughts to snojoseph@gmail.com and we will post them on the Blog. You can read these essays at blog.venturingmag.org