

Book turns spotlight on Eagle Scouts' lives

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If there were a merit badge for getting a book published about Scouting, Alvin Townley III would have earned one.

His first effort as an author, "Legacy of Honor: The Values and Influence of America's Eagle Scouts," debuted in bookstores across the country in January, and already it's in its sixth printing.

For Townley, a 31-year-old Atlantan and an Eagle Scout himself, the book is the culmination of a one-year, 40,000-mile journey he made across the United States, interviewing scores of Eagle Scouts ("I stopped counting after 200," he said) and learning how profoundly the Scouting experience and its ethic have affected their lives.

The profiles Townley sketches in his book include the famous — a Supreme Court justice, members of Congress, Cabinet members, famed entrepreneurs — and the not-so-celebrated. Each one is worthy of esteem, as one might expect of Eagle Scouts.

Incidentally, Townley eschews the term "former Eagle Scout." In the book's introduction, he tells of encountering an elderly man wearing an Eagle Scout lapel pin and remarking, "Oh, were you an Eagle Scout? So was I." The man replied, "Son, I still am an Eagle Scout," and with a grin, added, "and so are you."

Townley says he supposes he was foreordained to become an Eagle Scout. His father, Alvin Townley Jr. of Roswell, is also an Eagle Scout, and his late grandfather, Alvin Townley Sr., was a Scoutmaster. Both gave him a great deal of encouragement from his Cub Scout days forward, he said.

"As a Scout, I went on lots of great camping and high-adventure trips — sailing in the Florida Keys, backpacking in the Rockies, canoeing in Manitoba lake country and the Okefenokee Swamp, hiking parts of the Appalachian Trail, to name a few," Townley said.

Challenge of it all

Earning a merit badge can be challenging, he said. "You have to satisfy an adult, usually your mentor, who is a specialist in the field you're working in, that you've mastered the requirements for the honor. It could be an emergency medic for a badge in first aid or a public official for citizenship. To paraphrase Hillary Clinton, it takes a community to make an Eagle Scout."

Eagle Scouts also are required to do good in the community, he said. "In my case, I enlisted a group of 13 guys my age and two adults to build a church retreat center atop Sharp Top Mountain outside Jasper, Ga., and to make trail improvements there, too. In return, I helped other Eagle Scouts on their projects."

To become an Eagle Scout, a candidate must have acquired 21 merit badges before he turns 18. "I finished the requirements in February 1993, two months before my 18th birthday. I definitely had nervous parents and grandparents," Townley admitted.

A graduate of Lakeside High School, he went on to Washington & Lee University in Virginia and earned a degree in politics. After working as an intern in the Washington office of U.S. Rep. John Linder (R-Ga.), he got a job in the business consulting division of Arthur Andersen & Co., working several years in Atlanta on two major accounts — the American Cancer Society and BellSouth.

"The collapse of Arthur Andersen because of its involvement with the Enron scandal was a great reminder for me of the importance of Scouting values," Townley said. "The people responsible had lost sight of the spirit of the law."

Gamble worth taking

Townley returned to Washington & Lee, this time as a raiser of funds for scholarships and faculty chairs. After buying a house and spending two years there, he began to think seriously about Scouting and its effect on him and others, many of whom he knew had become leaders in America. "I just didn't know how many," he said.

"I thought I had an important story to tell. I had a dream. I didn't have the credentials, but I hoped I had the skill to carry it off," he said.

He took what he admitted was a gamble, selling his house in October 2004. With the proceeds as his grubstake, he set out on an odyssey to meet as many Eagle Scouts as he could and distill what he hoped would be their inspiring stories into a book.

"Originally, Alvin intended to devote three months to doing interviews for the book," his father said. "He had a job lined up that would have started in February 2005. But he passed on that when it became clear he needed to devote more time to the project. For instance, it took him nine months to arrange an interview with Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer.

"His mother and I realized he was burning through his savings, what with his travel expenses and all, but we certainly supported his desire to finish the project," his father said.

"It was harder than I thought it would be — 12 months without a paycheck," the younger Townley acknowledged.

Changing images

One image Townley intended to dispel was the perception of Eagle Scouts as what he called "pristine or squeaky clean."

"The skills you learn as an Eagle Scout — plus the challenges of leadership and getting along with all kinds of people — prepare you for the rough-and-tumble of real life," he said.

Rough-and-tumble such as maintaining America's security, as Eagle Scout Robert Gates did as CIA director and now does as defense secretary. Such as creating a business empire from scratch as Eagle Scouts H. Ross Perot and Michael Bloomberg have done. Such as surviving system breakdowns on a perilous lunar mission as Eagle Scout James Lovell did. Such as confronting hard-nosed opponents Saturday after Saturday as Eagle Scout Chan Gailey does as Georgia Tech's football coach.

Townley said he tried to interview as diverse a group of Eagle Scouts as he could: Democrats, Republicans and independents. Christians, Jews and Muslims. Whites, blacks and Asians.

Asked who among this estimable group impressed him the most, he named two New Yorkers — former Manhattan borough president Percy Sutton and police Officer Scott Strauss.

Sutton was a Tuskegee Airman during World War II, flying fighter-plane escort on U.S. bombing missions, and a Freedom Rider and civil rights attorney confronting hostile segregationists across the Deep South during the tumultuous 1960s. Strauss took a daring risk to rescue a fellow officer trapped under burning rubble in the World Trade Center complex on Sept. 11, 2001. Both of them displayed what Townley described as "unimaginable courage."

Picture-book ending

These days Townley is back at fund-raising, this time for the Marist School and for a program called Reach for Excellence, which works to expand educational opportunities for promising students with limited means. In addition, Townley, a former track and cross country athlete in high school and college, coaches Marist's track and field team.

Demand for the book has been greater than expected, said Peter Joseph, editor of Thomas Mann Books, a division of St. Martin's Press. "We've shipped out more than 20,000 copies to bookstores."

Townley made it plain he wrote the book totally independently of the Boys Scouts of America, but acknowledged he wouldn't be surprised if "Legacy of Honor" was getting word-of-mouth recommendations from individual Scouts.

One passage in the book stunned editor Joseph. "My jaw dropped when I first read his manuscript and saw he had taken time out of his odyssey to go to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina to do good deeds there," he said.

Townley joined a group of volunteers, many of them Eagle Scouts, salvaging what they could from ruined residences and disposing of what they couldn't save.

"Alvin is the most altruistic author I've got," Joseph said.

FROM THE BOOK

A couple of anecdotes from the book illustrate the deep attachment Eagle Scouts have to the organization years after they earned the honor.

> U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, representing Georgia's 2nd District, recalled the time his political advisers, editing what they thought was an overlong campaign biography, wanted him to delete the reference to his being an Eagle Scout. Bishop adamantly refused.

Months later, Sanford said, a Georgia peanut farmer approached him and remarked, "I didn't know you when you first ran for Congress. When I saw in your campaign biography that you were an Eagle Scout, I knew you were the kind of person who would represent us well."

> George Coker, a Vietnam War airman now living in Linden, N.J., told Townley his Scouting memories enabled him to hold on after he was captured by the North Vietnamese and imprisoned for six years.

Tortured continuously to induce him to make anti-American statements, Coker said he reached a point where he couldn't remember who he was and could barely recall his family. "The last thing I could hold on to," he said, "was the Scout Oath. By the end, all I could remember was: 'On my honor, I will do my best . . .'"

That forced my brain to function and say: "I WILL do this again. I will NOT do what they want me to do."

"When I say I owe Scouting my life," he concluded, "that's a true statement."