

The Lost Boys

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

When I was about ten years old, the Boy Scouts tried to recruit me. A persistent troop leader refused to accept my polite rebuttals, cornering me at church every Sunday and kneading his fingers harshly into my shoulders in a way that seemed simultaneously a threat and a sign of camaraderie. Eventually my brother succumbed to his insistent advances and became a Cub Scout. I, on the other hand, held my ground and consistently refused. The organization held no allure for me.

Why on earth would I want to become a Boy Scout? What use had I for knot-tying and ugly uniforms cluttered with cheap badges? I may not have known I was gay then, but I sure as hell knew I didn't want to be associated with any group that allowed its members to go around wearing red socks with shorts. Still, it was nice to be wanted, and it felt good to know that there was a place where I would always be welcomed.

While it may not have been something I personally wanted to do, many boys do have a need for such a social structure. Some come from broken families, some want to learn basic survival techniques, and some simply need to be kept occupied (unlike I, who could amuse myself for hours on end, happily independent ~ a not-so-lonesome loner). That was fine for me, but what about the boys who did not have such a good relationship with solitude? What of those without siblings or playmates, who feel a need to be a part of something like the Boy Scouts? For gay kids especially, it is important to be accepted as one of the gang, and the Boy Scouts is a group that has the image of being open to everyone who wants to join. At least, it seemed to be until last summer, when the Supreme Court voted that the Boy Scouts did not need to be open to everyone, banning all gay boys from becoming members and preventing gay men from becoming leaders. The Scouts were deemed a private religious foundation, thus allowing them to practice discrimination against anyone based on their sexuality.

Today I look back at the Boy Scouts' courtship of me and I laugh. If they'd only known I was gay... if *I'd* only known I was gay, I could have escaped that bothersome troop leader with a simple referral to the Scouts' own recent ruling.

The ban is ridiculous for a number of reasons. First of all, to my knowledge, there is not a long line of homosexuals clamoring to get into the Boy Scouts ~ as members or leaders. I certainly wanted no part of it, and I have a feeling the same goes for the majority of gay men and boys. However, if a gay boy wanted to be a member, why should he be denied that right? Who even deals with sexual matters when they are nine or ten years old?

My homosexuality was not an issue in my life until I was well into my teenage years, which brings me to the second point: sexuality plays absolutely no part in the Boy Scouts. Adult leaders are not even allowed to talk about sex, and that includes answering any questions that Scouts may ask. If this is the case, how does being gay ever come into play?

There are those who will say they are uncomfortable allowing their sons to be taught by or led on scouting expeditions with a gay man, bringing up the absurd, stereotypical anxiety over sexual abuse being committed by gay men. As statistics overwhelmingly concur, the majority of sexual abuse against boys is committed by heterosexual men ~ such as the very leaders of the Boy Scouts today. It's a simple fact.

Third, the ban on gays is most foolish in that it is a puzzling example of extreme self-sabotage. According to Newsweek, statistics from the Boy Scouts themselves show that membership was down 4.5 % last year, and in the Northeast it went down by 7.8%. For an organization whose membership is dropping off, why ban anyone? Furthermore, why alienate all the straight people who don't want to teach their sons about hate and discrimination?

This must be the most alarming fact for the Scouts: it's no longer just gay Americans who find the ban offensive ~ straight people with straight children are speaking out against it. Steven Spielberg, himself a former Eagle Scout, recently resigned from his post on the advisory board of the Scouts after ten years, claiming that he was not going to be part of a group that condones "intolerance and discrimination". It is a sentiment shared by many who are withdrawing their support and, most importantly, their funding.

The Boy Scouts are only hurting themselves with this ban. It will soon be an antiquated institution unless it learns to adapt and evolve with an ever-changing social world. It cannot sustain itself while promoting subtle forms of hate and ignorance, and blatant discrimination. Sadly, in the end it is the boys themselves who are being injured the most by this, and that says something very disturbing about the Scout leaders and where their priorities lie. Isn't the goal of Scouting to insure that boys have the wherewithal to successfully forge a path in the world? We cannot properly prepare our children for entering an ever-expanding global community by teaching them discrimination and hatred toward certain groups. Those who follow such out-dated doctrines will have a tough time of it in the future, and I believe our boys deserve better than that.