



A Shining Star

Eagle Scout Neil Davis makes the best of his teenage years

By Cecil Hastings
Publisher

In the last few years, I've read and heard a considerable amount of social commentary expressing concern about the future of America's young people. On one hand, we have a tremendous number of teenagers, especially in our big cities, who are undereducated, underemployed and ill-prepared to lead productive lives. The other extreme (but in miniscule numbers) are the highest achievers who, assisted by their eager parents, identify early in their lives a high-powered career and the prestigious college diplomas necessary to get there. I've heard kids and their parents worrying about admission to Stanford or Ivy League colleges while they are still in fourth grade! These are extremes, no doubt, and the rest of us probably fit in somewhere in between.

As the mother of an only child, I've paid particular attention over the years to families similar to my own. Years ago, when my son Alex was

still in preschool, I had the pleasure of meeting Neil Davis, the 8-year-old only child of Larry and Syd Davis. He was probably the youngest Neighborhood Watch block captain in the country, so we did a story about him in our publication.

While our neighborhood association had found it difficult to get adults to take on this volunteer job, on his own Neil had neatly assembled the necessary list of names, addresses and phone numbers of those on his East Sacramento block. In the process, he met all his neighbors, and I'm sure his youthful charm helped him get their full cooperation. A year later, our association honored him with a "Make a Difference" award.

He was precocious as could be, and adults always marveled at his always-present briefcase and his very mature communication skills. I secretly hoped my son would do something as meaningful by that age!

Over the years, I've kept an eye on Neil, and our paths crossed many times as he frequently volunteered for neighborhood and community events and projects. He was always polite,

positive and ready to help. My son always looked up to him. Last year, Alex transferred to Boy Scout Troop 1 in Midtown, and we were delighted to find Neil as one of its senior leaders.

At the time, Neil was working toward his Eagle Scout rank, and Alex eagerly awaited the chance to help Neil on his final community service project. Traditionally, the Eagle Scout candidate designs and organizes a project and recruits younger Scouts to help perform the work. Neil, a recent Christian Brothers High School graduate, selected his own school for his project. He and his team of Scouts installed first aid kits in all the classrooms and designed and built a wall of cubby boxes that hold students' backpacks while they eat lunch in the cafeteria.

Some may not be familiar with the standards and requirements of the Eagle Scout rank. Eagle is the highest rank attainable by the Boy Scouts and describes "the all-around perfect scout." It requires a Scout's best efforts to master the skills of leadership, service and outdoor know-how, and the practice of good citizenship

and ethical behavior of the highest order. Fewer than 4 percent of all scouts attain Eagle status—a testament to its high standards. Among those who have worn the Eagle Scout badge are some of America's finest physicians, business leaders, athletes, politicians, scientists and even a president of the United States.

At his Eagle Scout award ceremony in July, we discovered an entirely new aspect of Neil—his strong faith. A counselor from Christian Brothers explained that Neil lobbied the school to create the position of student liturgy coordinator when he found out other local Catholic schools had them. After the school agreed, they asked Neil to fill the position for his senior year. One of his jobs was to lead the prayers on the loudspeaker each day for the students.

During the lead-up to the Iraq War, there was an anti-war rally on campus. Fearing a flare-up, the school denied the opposing view the ability to stage a pro-war rally. As the contentions grew, Neil developed a

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win-win idea, ensuring all voices could be heard. He suggested special prayer cards for each student to write their thoughts upon. The prayers were tied with ribbon to the chain-link fence, becoming in effect the school's "prayer wall." In a short time, the wall had hundreds of ribbons. Our family was really touched upon hearing of his beautiful solution.

Neil has also developed many other passions during his teenage years. He leads and sings in the choir at the Newman Center, a Catholic center for the students, faculty and staff of CSUS. During high school, he was a member of the vocal jazz ensemble and played the trumpet and French horn in the school's honors wind ensemble. "I am so lucky to have come from a musical family," Neil says. "My dad plays guitar, my grandmother plays the organ and my grandfather played the piano. I am so grateful that music was always around me as a child."

He will soon finish years of train-

ing for his private pilot's license, after first earning a Scout Aviation merit badge at age 12. He currently works part time at Executive Airport to help pay for his flying lessons.

Neil feels especially blessed to have participated in two student programs that enabled him to travel to Mexico. Last summer, he spent two weeks living with a Mexican family in a language immersion program, and last winter he went with a service group from school to work on building projects for the poor. "That trip was a life-changing experience for me," he says. "I just fell in love with the culture and people of Mexico and felt so blessed that I could help in even a small way. I also realized how blessed we are to have so easy a life compared to others in the world."

While you might expect someone as passionate and productive as Neil might be headed off to one of our county's most prestigious institutions this fall, he has quite different plans. "I plan to spend a year or two taking classes at City College and then transferring in my junior year to a university. I'm in no rush, and you just can't

beat \$11 a credit hour," Neil explains. He has three schools in mind right now: Loyola Marymount, University of Rome and La Universidad Iberio Americana, a Jesuit university in Mexico.

Neil is quick to credit his scouting experience for his maturity and development. "Hands down, the Boy Scouts of America is the finest organization in America for young men," says Neil. "I was a timid and shy boy when I started scouting, and their programs literally made me what I am, especially their terrific social and leadership development programs. I hope as I grow up to be able to return my appreciation to them by staying involved with the Scouts in some way."

With so much growth in his last decade, it will be fun to see what Neil does in his next 10 years. My wish is that every neighborhood and community be blessed with young people of the caliber of Neil Davis.

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