

A Summary of the Problem with the Boy Scouts of America

The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) held their National Convention in Chicago May 19-21. While they got on with their order of business inside the Hyatt Hotel, many groups protested their anti-gay and anti-atheist policies outside.

The New England Coalition for Inclusive Scouting (NECIS), a group made up of former scouts, former scout leaders, and concerned scouts who are still in the movement, held a one-hour press conference in a hotel across the street. Then Scouting For All, a national organization advocating diversity in scouting, brought together a dozen speakers, including representatives of PFLAG, NOW, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, for a rally and day-long protest. All strongly denounced the BSA's rejection of gay members as well as its requirement that boys and their families believe in a god.

In 1916 the BSA were granted a Congressional Charter mandating them to be 'open to all boys.' Today they constitute the largest youth organization in the U.S. According to their own numbers, at the end of 2003 the BSA had a total of 4.5 million boys and adult leaders in their ranks.

Part of their mission is to teach boys and adolescents to 'make ethical and moral decisions' and to have respect for others. The BSA Handbook demands of scouts that they 'defend the rights of all people.' It even says, 'Your relationship with others should be honest and open.' This, the Handbook explains, is what it means to be 'morally straight.' But over the last decade or so such rhetoric has been increasingly misleading. BSA spokesmen have repeatedly addressed the gay issue in predatory terms and maintained that 'avowed' homosexuals cannot be 'clean' in speech and action. Every time a scout is either forced to lie about his sexuality or is expelled because of it the oath loses both authenticity and relevance.

The Boy Scouts are not a faith-based group. Yet in 1970, they passed a resolution stating that belief in God is 'necessary to the best type of citizenship.' They called this their 'Declaration of Religious Principles' and reaffirmed it in 1991, and again in 2002.

The BSA receive direct federal funding through the Combined Federal Campaign. They also use local, state, and federal facilities either free of charge or for a small token price. School boards and the United Way are among their major sponsors. This, one would think, would not qualify them as a private group that is exempt from the non-discrimination provisions of the Civil Rights Act. Unfortunately not so. As recently as 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court (in *BSA v. Dale*) ruled in favor of the Boy Scouts, accepting their claim that they are indeed a private organization and that as such they may keep their exclusionary membership policies. Several other lower court decisions have gone the same way in the past.

Mark Noel, Director of New England Coalition for Inclusive Scouting, and Scott Cozza, President of Scouting For All, each spoke of the sense of isolation gay scouts are forced into if they want to remain in the group. They introduced former BSA members of all

ages who have joined their respective organizations and are now actively working to get the BSA to reverse their hypocritical policies. Some have been kicked out for being gay or for refusing to become religious, and others are simply outraged that a fellow Boy Scout or an excellent scout leader in their local chapter has been ousted for the same reasons.

Gregory Lattera, a 19-year-old Life Scout, offered moving testimony. One year ago, Lattera decided to come out after the Philadelphia Council of the BSA announced a new non-discrimination policy. He was in charge of seven merit patches, had won the Camp Councilor of the Year Award, and volunteered on weekends. He was regarded by his peers as an inspiring role model. Lattera has two moms who were not allowed at Boy Scouts functions (gay parents are forbidden from participating). Within weeks of telling others of his sexual orientation Lattera received a letter from the National Council of the Boy Scouts informing him that he was no longer welcome. Accompanying the letter was a check refunding his membership fees. The national headquarters of the BSA (in Texas) even threatened to revoke the Philadelphia Council's charter if they did not rescind their inclusive policy.

'If you're different, the Boy Scouts will get rid of you,' Lattera said. He then added, 'My name now sits with a record at the National Council, along with murderers, arsonists, and child rapists. ... I was given the rank of lieutenant in the Explorers, I did four years with the Philadelphia police department [part of a joint program], I have numerous awards and patches, but I'm still a bad person to the Boy Scouts because I'm an open homosexual.' As he recounted his experience the young man remained bewildered at the fact that it was his very adherence to the scout's moral code of honesty that has been used against him. 'It's incomprehensible,' he finally whispered.

But in true leadership fashion, Lattera has since co-founded the Pennsylvania Coalition for Inclusive Scouting. There are now seven Coalitions representing states or regions from across the country. They are a loose federation united behind two goals: they want the BSA to live up to their charter obligations and reverse their discriminatory policies toward gays and atheists; and they are trying to foster a safer environment that will protect the thousands of scouts who are today at risk of being victimized by those policies.

As a step toward achieving a climate of trust and openness within the BSA, the Coalitions have established the Inclusive Scouting Award. It is a patch that looks much like any other one found on a scout uniform. But its motto is 'You Earn it by Wearing it' and it stands for diversity and tolerance. The two intertwined ropes of the design, one rainbow-colored and one silver and purple, are meant to represent sexual orientation and religion. Scouts and scout leaders can simply order it and sew it onto the left pocket of their uniform shirt to identify themselves as allies, individuals with whom it is safe to discuss personal issues of sexuality or religious beliefs.

As those displaying the small emblem are likely to encounter opposition, the patch comes with a leaflet offering tips on handling confrontation. There is also a reminder that the

price of wearing the patch is 'being prepared to defend both your moral position on the issues, and your specific decision to make your position known within scouting.' Noel said that the BSA are aware of the patches but have so far not asked any of their members who wear one to remove it. In the two years since the award was started, about 5,000 patches have been produced and shipped.

At the Scouting For All protest, the voices of the invited speakers echoed the same concerns only a few feet away from the Hyatt Hotel's doors. But the BSA pretended not to hear, just as they have done since 2001, the year Scouting For All attempted to present them with a proposal for a policy of inclusion. Their 'Resolution to the Boy Scouts of America to End Discrimination in Scouting' remains unanswered today.

The main points of the Resolution call on the BSA to drop their exclusionary policy; to reinstate members who have been expelled as a result of it; to add a workshop on the effects of homophobia, racism, and other types of discrimination to their adult leadership training; and to create a cultural diversity merit badge. Former Eagle Scouts testified that the proposed measures are urgently needed if the BSA are to regain their wholesome image and erase the stain of bigotry.

John Larson, the president of PFLAG Council of Northern Illinois, warned that the BSA's prejudice against gay youth is forcing them to stay silent about their identity and hence invites even more discrimination.

Meghan Streit, LGBT Task Force Leader at NOW said that the BSA are sending 'a dangerous message' to the gay and lesbian community. She urged them to look at their own core values and to put in place a policy of tolerance instead of pursuing the harmful course it has engaged on.

Annie Laurie Gaylor of the Freedom From Religion Foundation pointed to the Girl Scouts of America and applauded their 1993 adoption of a measure by which members can substitute another word for 'God' in the official pledge.

While reaction to the BSA's treatment of its gay and atheist scouts and leaders has not been unanimous, certain groups have managed to galvanize their membership. The Episcopal Church and the Unitarian Universalist Association have opposed the BSA's stance. Local churches from a variety of denominations have also decided to withdraw their support (financial or otherwise). Some school boards are now charging rent where they previously let the Boy Scouts hold meetings as a courtesy. In 1993 the San Francisco chapter of the United Way voted to stop its very generous funding of the BSA because of their anti-gay policies. Even the American Medical Association passed a resolution in 2001 that cited discriminatory practices such as the BSA's and declared that they increase the risk of suicide in gay adolescents.

See www.inclusivescouting.net and www.scoutingforall.org