

# *I am an atheist Eagle Scout and this is my story.*

by Neil Polzin

(Polzin is pictured below with his mother Denise. The photo was taken in 1996 when Polzin was 10 years old)

There were two events during my association with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) that changed my life: The first shows why I am proud to be an Eagle Scout. The second illustrates the blatant discrimination BSA has institutionalized and teaches to children.

I joined BSA as a Cub Scout when I was in the fifth grade. A recruiter came to my public school and during the presentation in class gave out pamphlets to bring home. I was captivated by the idea of scouting, so I gathered all the offered pamphlets, then took them home to pitch the idea to my parents.

I joined Pack 820 in Covina, California. It was sponsored by my elementary school and met in the cafeteria occasionally after class. I had fun, and my parents didn't seem to mind dropping me off for a few hours at what seemed like a school sponsored extracurricular activity.

I started at an older age compared to most Cub Scouts. After a year I 'bridged' to the Boy Scouts. I was active, but was by no means the model Scout. At the end of three years I was still "Tenderfoot" rank — a rank most boys surpassed only a couple months after becoming a Scout. I learned first aid, tying knots, and whatever else that was required to know in order to go camping. It was entertaining, and something to do that wasn't school related.

I can vividly remember the first moment scouting changed for me, going from being an after school activity into something life altering. The day was May 15, 1999.

I woke up early Saturday morning, eager to meet with the other Scouts for an overnight backpacking trip. I had diligently packed my gear the night before, including the "Ten Essentials" which were organized neatly on top of the pile. I was ready to roll out the front door once the alarm sounded. It took some coaxing to get my mother out of bed, but I was soon dropped off with a group of two dozen Scouts ready for the hour drive ahead of us.

This was not my first time camping or backpacking with the Scouts. By the time I was 13, I had been a member of BSA Troop # 448 for a several years and was considered one of the older Scouts. Most members of this troop were new Scouts, recently bridged from Cub Scouts a few months earlier. Most were anxious and scared about their first backpacking trip.

The Scoutmaster and assistants were going through packs and gear checklists with the new boys. After the food was split among the packs, the gear was loaded into trucks, and everyone took a seat for the drive out of the city.

The sun was slow to emerge during the drive and a thick cloud layer came in from the ocean. There was barely enough light to be called day by the time we pulled off the mountain road at the trail head. In the higher elevation above the city,



the clouds hung thick and clung to the canyon walls.

By midday, we had gained in elevation as we hiked along the trail. The clouds burned off transforming a cool morning into a warm and humid day. The energy everyone started with had long waned in the day's heat. Everyone was glad to reach the ridge of the mountain. At the ridge we realized that the trail would now be all downhill into the creek. The creek would be a great place to stop for lunch.

Of the Scouts, two boys were my age. I had known both Daniel and David from the last few years in the troop and David had been in my Cub

Pack. We were walking with an older boy named Jack. Jack was the older brother of another Scout who was not with us during the hike. The topics of conversation bounced around and being immature we laughed at the younger kids. We were all walking oddly trying to stave off rashes and blisters.

After lunch at the creek, the four of us decided to stick together on the trail. The back side of the mountain was rockier and the trail was situated close to the side. Winding around, the trail grew thin as the mountain slope expanded to form a cliff above and below. The rock became exposed and shifted to shale. Only a few bushes were rugged enough to root into the hillside. Progress was slow and we halted completely at times to help boys find footing across the trail.

I heard the sliding of rocks and a yell from behind me. Turning around, I could see a blur of color leaving the trail. I was frozen still, each heart beat stretching into what felt like minutes. Daniel was behind me, looking as lost as I. Peeking over the cliff edge I could see nothing but loose shale rock and the canopy of the trees far below. It was hundreds of feet down; there was no way Jack could have survived the fall.

It was at this moment the training I was forced to sit through became relevant. I began delegating tasks to younger boys, sending them to the front and the back of the group to alert the adults. Assuring the younger boys, and myself, that everything was going to be alright, I dropped my bag to retrieve my first aid kit and other essentials. Three sharp whistle blasts pierced the air below. Daniel and I grabbed our response supplies, leaving our packs, and darted down the trail.

By now, alerted to what happened, Mr. D. joined us in running down the trail from the front of the group, while Mr. R. stayed behind. The trail extended along the cliff side a half mile, bringing us further away from the fall, before reaching a series of switchbacks dropping to the creek.

The creek bed was too wide to see across and dense overgrowth made it impossible to see more than a few yards. Tall trees and fallen logs littered the area, covered with a thick layer of poison oak. The creek deeply eroded the floor,

leaving numerous tall islands between a maze of forks in the creek. We kept to the east side of the creek bed close to the mountain looking for Jack.

We separated to cover more ground, hoping our yells could be heard over rustling of the trees and running water. Half an hour had passed since Jack fell, and when we first heard the whistle blasts. What little hope I had for Jack being safe was fleeting fast.

Bushwhacking a trail, I was hoping to stumble across Jack, and not a corpse.

I could hear Daniel close by, also calling out. Something called back, it was neither loud nor strong. It came from in front of me, I rushed to the call. Daniel had heard the call as well, converging together in a eroded canyon between the mountain and one of the larger islands.

Jack rested against a log with the lower half of his body submerged in water, back against the mountain, still strapped into his pack. Daniel and I knew he was lucky to be alive. He was conscious, and grasping the whistle that hung from the top pole of his pack.

We started to work with what we brought, bandaging the head wound and checking for a spinal injury. We caught the attention of Mr. D., searching the underbrush with David. Daniel, Mr. D. and I began to build a stretcher from the logs and branches. David returned to camp to alert the group and retrieve additional supplies.

The remaining adults lead the Scouts to the camp site. Without any way of phoning or using a radio signal, Mr. R. and Mr. C. needed to hike out to seek medical help. The last adult stayed with the Scouts. David brought emergency supplies and updates from camp to the scene.

We placed Jack on a stretcher, suspended on a tarp from two logs strewn across the creek. Wedged against the steep banks on both sides, the stretcher kept Jack elevated and dry. We had treated the head wound, along with other scrapes. We also treated Jack for hypothermia and shock. Jack was experiencing a lot of abdominal pain, however. Without medical assistance there was no way to treat or help ease the pain.

The hours stretched on as we waited to hear from the party that hiked out. We knew that it was impossible to leave the site trying to manipulate a stretcher. The thick canopy on the cliff above us made it nearly impossible for anyone to see us from above. We waited, without knowing if the hikers made it out safely and we wondered if they had found help, and if they now were trying to look for us.

I scuttled up the rock side to place silver emergency blankets over the few cacti that grew in the shale rock. I hoped that the canopy would be visible from above. Daniel started a fire. We cleared small trees and bushes from the top of the small island the stretcher was propped against. We burned the fresh plants, creating a smoke trail into the sky.

Six hours passed, an incredibly long time for so serious a situation. Jack regained full consciousness soon after we found him. He continued to struggle to stay conscious, however. We rotated duties alternately feeding the fire and talking to Jack. He remained untreated for pain or internal

injuries. A sense of helplessness crept in.

In the distance, the sound of a helicopter came into focus. Quiet at first and no one said anything. We were unsure if it was a helicopter or if our minds were playing tricks with the sound of the creek. Suddenly, the sound was on top of us. Our signals had worked.

A rescuer was lowered down to the clearing. The line was retracted, and a metal basket was lowered. We transferred Jack from the make shift stretcher to the basket. It took everyone available to help lift the metal basket back up the hill. Before we knew it, the basket with Jack, the rescuer, and the helicopter were gone.

I later discovered that Jack had suffered multiple breaks to his pelvis. He walked with a cane for many years and a limp remains as a reminder of the experience.

This was the first time scouting changed me. The first time I utilized the skills Scouts taught me to save a person. I was thirteen years old, this event changed how I approached life, and how I saw scouting. I earned my First Aid merit badge by attending training that I actually hated sitting through. As a result, however, I was more prepared for this situation than anyone in the troop. Until that incident I was an unmotivated Tenderfoot, but now I was setting my goals on becoming an Eagle Scout.

The Boy Scout motto is "Be Prepared." Beginning on May 15, 1999, I took that motto to heart. I began to maximize every opportunity and training presented to me. In April of 2000, the San Gabriel Valley BSA Council hosted their annual lifeguard training. I met the minimum age requirement only by a few months, but I was excited for the opportunity to advance my skills.

I enjoy swimming, and I took naturally to rescue training. I pushed hard to learn all of the lessons, and my efforts were noticed. Susan (our lead trainer), invited me to be a lifeguard for Camp Cherry Valley on Santa Catalina island.

I had been to the island as a camper, but being on staff for BSA was a new experience. There were hundreds of kids in the ocean and I immediately put the skills I learned to good use. I not only resolved problems, I taught kids to swim and kayak. I also took some of them on their first snorkeling experience. I learned the waterfront was a great place to be, and began to understand the unique quality of camp.

Later on, I was invited to help train lifeguards and eventually returned to the same camp the next year. Every year, I trained lifeguards in the Spring and returned to the island to lifeguard every August.

After a very successful lifeguard training in 2001, the BSA Council asked me to start working at local camps. I began to work weekends at Trask, which is nestled in the Los Angeles National Forest. For me, scouting grew from one weekend a month to every weekend. I acquired certifications in CPR, advanced First Aid, and wilderness First Aid training.

The summer of 2002 brought more opportunities with BSA. On a scholarship, the council sent me to the National Junior Leadership Instructor Training at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. I was also chosen as a member of the

Western Region Staff for the 2002 National Scout Jamboree at Fort AP Hill, Virginia. At age sixteen, BSA had provided me with independence and travel that I never thought possible.

In addition to being paid to work at camps, San Gabriel Valley Council hired me to work at the local Scout shop, a position I held for years while attending school. I was able to utilize my extensive knowledge of the council's programs in the area, and could easily arrange my schedule to work at camp.

As part of the requirements necessary to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout, applicants are required to organize and execute a service project. For my project, I gathered a hundred volunteers to serve nearly one thousand hours at the Los Angeles Arboretum. We completely restored the upper water gardens that were suffering from years of neglect. By the time I was sixteen years old, the Scouts had already given me the skills needed to lead people and achieve results. I can not think of another youth program or sport that prepares the participants in the manner scouting does.

Fast forward several years. I finished college and had all the while remained a council employee. I no longer worked at the Scout shop, but I returned each year to Camp Cherry Valley (CCV). I had remained active with my home troop, holding the position of Assistant Scoutmaster.

Susan, the lifeguard instructor who trained me, had stepped down as Waterfront Director years before. After she left, CCV had a string of new directors each year. The year round job of organizing and recruiting staff proved difficult. I had years of experience guarding at CCV and each year my experience and talents were used to offset the lack of experience of my supervisors. I am pictured below teaching two young Scouts to swim at CCV.



I was asked to step up to the position of Waterfront Director for the 2007 season, but I had reservations about taking the position. The job requires finding and training

staff. I would also be in charge of organizing meetings, budgeting and acquisitions. The job also required that I take an additional 7 day training course. Along with the title came added responsibility and a salary that reflected the position. Even with so much responsibility, I decided this is what I wanted.

Early in college, I came to the realization that I had always been an atheist. Working my way through college, I worked for the Scouts at camp during the summer, and for the Secular Student Alliance (SSA) during the school year. I helped to organize and support freethought groups on college campuses. I was also becoming active within the freethought community.

I had heard about BSA's discrimination against homosexuals and atheists, but thought it was an antiquated practice similar to laws currently on the books prohibiting cursing in front of a woman, or spitting in public. While these laws have never been repealed, no one has been charged with or arrested for those "crimes" in decades. Yet the laws remain on the books. The ban on homosexuals and atheists in BSA felt to me much like those other silly laws.

It was no secret that I did not believe in a god. The topic came up from time to time while sitting around the campfire between sessions. My philosophy never conflicted with my work. I never felt the need to proselytize my atheism at camp. Any grace or prayer that took place at camp was non-denominational, and didn't even mention a god. A simple Google search in 2007 would clearly link me to a number of atheist groups, but I did not see a conflict between the two. I did not feel like I was making a compromise by working for BSA. I hid nothing.

I was honored by the promotion to Waterfront Director, but I was required to attend National Camp School — an extensive and expensive program. Even though attending the National Camp School was a prerequisite to hold the job of Waterfront Director, CCV hired me.

My Aquatics Instructor certification enabled me to certify lifeguard instructors and to also "run" a waterfront. While I was at National Camp School, I also earned an Aquatics Director certification, the highest level of aquatics certification possible. This enabled me to certify Aquatics Instructors, a certification that was achieved by less than a dozen people in 2007.

2007 was completely different on the waterfront as compared to previous years. The program offered more activities, the staff worked together and there were no injuries. A new bar was set, so the council renewed my contract.

2008 was a great year for the waterfront. After the initial run in 2007, the entire process came together even more seamlessly than the year before. The Program Director, Camp Director, and BSA Council were all very pleased with my work. With two successful years under my belt as Waterfront Director in addition to the seven years at CCV as a lifeguard, the BSA Council asked me to return for my tenth season.

Going into the 2009, the reputation of the waterfront at CCV had drastically improved. An isolated camp with fewer

perks, CCV struggled to find qualified guards. In previous years, directors managed to fill their staff with promises of an island vacation. This is an inappropriate expectation to set when looking for an employee. Unfortunately, many of these employees remained longer than the director that had hired them. The pool of available guards had increased, and I had the opportunity to gather a hand picked team. I dropped those who were looking for an all expenses paid vacation, and found a dedicated team of guards.

All was going well with BSA. I was doing the job that I wanted to do, and was getting a great sense of reward from passing my love for the outdoors and the ocean to young Scouts. I returned to school to earn my Masters Degree in Philosophy with an emphasis on Ethics and Religion, and the waterfront position fit my schedule perfectly. I held planning meetings and staff trainings during the year in the evenings around classes, and worked at the camp when the summer returned.

All this would soon morph into the second time BSA changed my life. One of the guards seeking a Club Med vacation, only coming to camp for the food and lodging, was asked not to return. He held an Aquatics Instructor certification, not as high as my credentials. He thought that he was the obvious successor to my position, in spite of his poor performance. He became disgruntled about not returning to CCV, and began a personal attack, assuming that it was I standing in his way.

It was June and everything was looking good for the season in spite of the conflict with the disgruntled employee. He begun using Facebook to send messages to other members of the CCV staff. He made sure others knew that I listed myself as an “atheist” on my Facebook profile. He called for my removal because he thought I could not be a “real Scouter.”

The Facebook attacks seemed almost comical until I was contacted by a few concerned staff members. Any uncertainty about an employee is not acceptable with BSA and camp was due to start within weeks. I realized the situation needed to be addressed head on.

With all the attention the issue was receiving, there was no question these accusations would soon reach the BSA Council. I wanted to explain the situation in my own words, instead of trying to address a rumor mill of fractured accusations. I wrote a letter to the Council Executive, **Marcus Mack**. The letter explained the situation and confirmed that I am indeed an atheist. I asked him to clarify my qualifications for the job, and dismiss any absurd talk about my being unqualified to run a waterfront because I did not share a belief in a deity. After the previous two years there was no question I was the most qualified person for the position. The archaic discriminatory policy that was being cited had no bearing on my abilities as a person.

Instead, I received a letter that completely changed my relationship with BSA. It stated:

*We have received information that has compelled us to revoke your registration. You must*

*immediately sever any relationship you have with the Boy Scouts of America.*

The letter made me sound like a felon and BSA did not include a thank you for years of service. I was completely flabbergasted.

I contacted my Camp Director and Program Director to alert them of what had happened. I did so in part to see what could be done, but I was also concerned about camp. Hundreds of kids were expected to attend an island adventure in just a few weeks, but now there was no director to open the waterfront. The Camp Director and Program Director were shocked to see the letter from Marcus. They immediately got involved and wrote letters to the BSA Council and national offices on my behalf. They vouched to the fact that I was the only truly qualified person for the job, and a replacement at such short notice would be problematic. Both men knew of my lack of beliefs, and felt personally insulted that I was told I was not qualified.

The letter did not give any reason for my dismissal so I hoped that it was still all just a mistake. The letter from Marcus, after all, did not mention what effect my lack of a belief in a god had to do with my work. I had dedicated the last ten years to CCV as a guard. I worked for BSA off season and I had earned the Arrow of Light, Eagle Rank. I had even traveled across the country as a scouting representative. After a long relationship, Marcus would not return my emails or take my phone calls.

Since I was now a non-working student, I had some time on my hands. I took it upon myself to visit Marcus in person. I had questions that needed to be answered. I finally had my opportunity to ask Marcus questions one day after waiting for him to be available at the Council headquarters. I was very familiar with the building, having worked for the council for many years and waited two hours before I finally saw Marcus emerging from a meeting.

Without hesitation, I showed him the letter he has sent to me and asked him, “Can you explain this?”

Marcus responded, cold and flat “I got a letter from you, this is my response.”

The conversation continued, and spilled into the parking lot. I found it odd that he struggled and stumbled in his words to avoid saying the word “atheist” during the entire encounter.

When pushed further, Marcus said that “The scouts have a moral standard — one that you do not meet.”

I was no longer employed because of my lack of beliefs in a god! No performance issues had been reported. Marcus informed me that a volunteer registration is a requirement for BSA’s employment. I could no longer be a volunteer, so I could no longer be an employee. He felt this was not discrimination, because religion and sexuality were moral choices and not inherent to the person. Marcus also refused to pay me for the months of planning, preparation and meeting work that had already been completed. Saying the salary paid was for being the director at camp itself, not for all the months of required work leading to camp.

Other than having a void in my schedule Wednesday nights when I normally held meetings, I felt a strong conflict. Hating the organization that just deemed me useless and immoral, but loving the people and lessons I gained over the last decade. One staff meeting remained before the start of camp, and I felt deep conflict over helping find the camp a new qualified director, yet the BSA Council had just informed me that I was expendable.

I received many calls in the week that followed, mostly from staff expressing their shock. The Camp Director called me, explaining that he had written on my behalf to everyone he could think of. He then invited me to the last staff meeting, a barbeque to boost the moral of the staff before they went to CCV. He knew my orders were to sever any relationship with BSA, but he wanted to ignore them.

I decided to attend the barbeque, but I had a very odd feeling. I was received well, with open arms and thanks for the lessons and memories I had given the staff, yet a sense of helplessness was apparent. It felt like my fellow staff was at a burial service — mine.

I suddenly found myself out of a job. I had new doubts that I had not had before. Doubts that I knew had no place being there. I had been exiled from a community that was a focal point of my life experiences. I had spent years building professionally specialized qualifications from BSA that only their camps accepted. If I were to start over at a non-Scout camp I would be without the certifications I had worked so hard to achieve. This should have been a call to action against BSA — instead there I was at a barbeque trying to be friendly and kind.

What happened to me has happened to many volunteers and professionals. BSA places the blame for the discrimination directly on the victim and many people silently step away. Young Scouts are unaware of the loss of these fine people that BSA claims are not “morally straight.”

The Scouts give an incredible service and unique experiences to the children in the program. I know without Scouts, I would not be the person I am today. My Cub pack

was sponsored by a public elementary school, and given free meeting space. My BSA troop met at a local “Scout House,” which was a large meeting and storage area used only by a half dozen troops on different nights of the week.

The facility was provided to BSA by the City of Covina and BSA never paid rent or utility charges. The Jamboree I staffed in 2001 was made possible by subsidized rent of \$1 at Fort AP Hill, further enabled by thousands of free hours of labor and site improvements given by the military.

The Scouts introduced me to science and technology through merit badges like astronomy, chemistry, atomic energy, and electronics and I decided to attend Cal Poly Pomona for a undergraduate degree after attending science merit badge days at the public university hosted for BSA every year. I have learned and used the skills from the Scouts to save lives, and I have been able to reciprocate similar life changing experiences to other Scouts. It was the multi-denominational programs of the Scouts that interested me in world religions, beginning the path to find atheism and later studying religion in my graduate program. I would hate to think who I would be, and the experiences I would be lacking, without BSA — an organization that seems to now refuse to acknowledge even my existence.

I once made the mistake of thinking the problem of discrimination was a fight that was over, but it is not. Discrimination is institutionalized on a national scale by organizations like BSA. The bigotry is being assisted by subsidies from tax payer dollars.

I did not want to be another victim of the Scouts so I will not remain silent. I will not be shamed into the shadows for being an atheist. I have no reason to be ashamed. Moving forward, the supporters of BSA, including lawmakers and taxpayers, need to be made aware of the discriminatory practices BSA systematizes. We must all put every bit of pressure possible to ensure the benefits of BSA can be enjoyed by ALL. We need to assure that another generation does not learn that “morally straight” is **not** at odds with being atheist and/or homosexual. ◆

---

## ***Former President James E. Carter, Jr. Letter Writing Campaign Continues***

By Margaret Downey

A call to write letters asking former President **James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, Jr.** to disaffiliate from the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) was published in the March/April 2010 newsletter. Carter currently serves on BSA's Advisory Council. The article “I am an Eagle Scout and this is my story” written by **Neil Polizin** and printed in this issue of *The Free-thought Society News* highlights BSA's unfair prejudice of the nontheist community. ADSN is hopeful that the article has inspired readers to take action and participate in the letter writing campaign. Surely, Mr. Carter does not want his reputation for being tolerant and kind to be tarnished by his affiliation with BSA. Letters may educate him about the seriousness of this matter. Mr. Carter can be contacted at:

Former President James Earl Carter, Jr.  
c/o Carter Center 453 Freedom Parkway NE  
Atlanta, GA 30307

Please send a copy of your letter to:  
Anti-Discrimination Support Network, P. O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366  
Email: [Margaret@FtSociety.org](mailto:Margaret@FtSociety.org)

