

Gay policy's fallout lingers in Boy Scouts

Ban mobilizes critics a year after ruling

By PATTY REINERT

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – As a shy, awkward kid growing up in Freeny, Miss., Bruce Reeves couldn't find his niche. His friends were all in baseball or other team sports he felt too clumsy to enjoy. He found a home, though, in the Boy Scouts of America.

At 15, he earned his Eagle Scout rank. In his early 20s, he served as a Scout leader in Houston and later in Louisiana.

"I felt like they were my kids," said Reeves, now a 42-year-old Houston computer programmer. "I treated them with a lot of respect, and they treated me with respect. I enjoyed working with them, watching them learn and grow."

That ended when Reeves wrote a letter to the editor of a Baton Rouge, La., newspaper, defending actress Elizabeth Taylor's work in raising money to combat AIDS. Confronted by his troop's scoutmaster, Reeves confirmed he was gay.

He would no longer be welcome in the Boy Scouts, he was told.

That was in 1985.

Last summer, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Boy Scouts' right to exclude homosexuals as members or leaders, Reeves found himself holding a protest sign in the sweltering August heat outside the Sam Houston Area Council office in Houston. Fewer than 10 people joined him.

But while the Boy Scouts won their Supreme Court fight 5-4, publicity surrounding the case over the past year has motivated more people to speak out against the youth group that has been an American institution practically since its founding in 1910.

Defiant Scout troops are fighting from within, refusing to honor the anti-gay policy. About a dozen United Way organizations have yanked funding. And schools and churches, saying they can no longer put up with intolerant groups, are sending the Boy Scouts packing, refusing them meeting space and class time for recruiting.

Reform Jews have asked parents to pull their children from the group, and Hollywood blockbuster filmmaker Steven Spielberg has stepped down from the Scouts' national advisory board.

The American Medical Association, spurred by doctors who are also Scout leaders, passed a resolution calling for youth groups to stop excluding gays, warning that they could worsen an already high suicide rate among gay teens. The resolution does not name the Boy Scouts, but the target is clear.

And last week, the District of Columbia Commission on Human Rights ruled that the Boy Scouts violated the city's anti-discrimination law. It ordered the Scouts to reinstate two ousted gay leaders and pay each \$50,000 in damages.

"The Supreme Court ruling didn't bring an end to this," Reeves said. "The world changes by people being willing to have a voice and speak out and be heard. One of the things Scouting taught me to do is when something is wrong, you stand up for what is right, and that's what's happening now. People are standing up."

Gregg Shields, spokesman for the Boy Scouts' national headquarters in Irving, Texas, acknowledged the fallout and said the national organization is studying proposals from a few Scout councils that want to change the policy. But Scouting is thriving, he said, with more than 3 million boys participating nationwide.

"We have received a tremendous amount of support (since the court ruling) -- cards, letters, donations, volunteers -- and that's very gratifying," Shields said. "The organization remains strong. We're reaching more young people than we did a year ago. We're financially healthy and we're looking forward to continuing our mission of helping build the character of America's young people."

Shields said any loss in donations through United Way in protest of the policy has been more than made up for in private donations from other groups and individuals. In South Florida, for example, where the United Way eliminated funding for the Boy Scouts, contributions to the region's Scouts for 2000 were up from the previous year, going from \$795,000 to \$1.1 million, he said.

When a United Way group in Seattle defunded the Scouts, a local radio station responded with a telethon, raising more money in 24 hours than the United Way had provided in the whole previous year, he said. Last year's private contributors included President Bush, who gave \$18,750, according to his 2000 tax return. Earlier this month, Congress passed an amendment that Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., tacked onto the education bill, threatening to cut federal funding to public schools if they refuse to let the Boy Scouts meet on school grounds.

The American Legion and conservative organizations such as the Traditional Values also have jumped to the Scouts' defense. Last week, they issued scathing news releases attacking the Public Broadcasting System for airing Scout's Honor, a documentary on Steven Cozza, a 16-year-old heterosexual Eagle Scout who has been protesting the anti-gay policy since he was 12.

"Men who wish to have sex with men should not have access to young boys," said the Rev. Louis Sheldon, the coalition's chairman.

Bill Lucas, an Eagle Scout who heads the Sam Houston Area Council, which serves 170,000 youths in Houston and 16 neighboring counties, said scouting is "booming" and fund-raising is up. The council just raised \$18 million for a new camp near Navasota, he said, and the council's annual budget is over \$11 million this year, well above last year's \$10.1 million budget.

Houston's business community and the local United Way remain strong supporters, as do area school superintendents, several of whom are Eagle Scouts and serve on the Scout board, he said.

"I haven't had a single parent of a boy or a single member approach me with problems with the policy. Not a single school has turned us away to my knowledge," Lucas said. "Our membership has grown every year for the past 17 years, and all our camps have waiting lists."

"Some people don't agree with the decision, I'm sure, and all we ask is that they appreciate our position," he said. "We're not anti-them at all. We're just saying we have the right to select leaders we feel that most parents would want involved with their children."

Scouting officials said they don't try to discover the sexual orientation of members or leaders, instead engaging in a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The national headquarters doesn't keep a tally on how many gay leaders or members are asked to leave the Boy Scouts based on their sexual orientation.

And Lucas and Shields said that if boys struggling with their sexual identity approach Scout leaders for guidance, they will be treated with compassion and encouraged to discuss the matter with their parents or religious leaders.

So far, Lucas said, no Houston-area Scouts or leaders have been kicked out for being gay. "I've never had that experience," he said. "Scouting is for all boys, and we really don't get into sexual orientation."

But the Boy Scouts' membership policy makes clear that the group is not for all boys, but for heterosexual boys who believe in God. Atheists also have been asked to leave the group, as have heterosexual Scout leaders who have spoken out against the gay ban.

James Dale, a former assistant scoutmaster in Matawan, N.J., who was the subject of the Supreme Court case, was ousted after a 1990 newspaper article identified him as being gay. Dale sued and won in the lower courts, but the Supreme Court reversed on June 28, 2000.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist, writing for the majority, said that while the court does not endorse the Boy Scouts' anti-gay views, making the group accept gays would unfairly force it to send a message about homosexuality that it does not wish to convey.

Rehnquist said the fact that gays have gained more acceptance in the United States in recent years makes it even more important to protect the free speech and free association rights of private groups like the Boy Scouts, who hold beliefs that are becoming increasingly unpopular.

Even before the high court ruling, Scouts and others who opposed the anti-gay policy had been organizing. In California, Steven Cozza, the subject of the PBS documentary, had started Scouting for All with the help of his father, Scott, and his Scout leader, Dave Rice.

The national nonprofit group provides information for those protesting the policy, both within the Boy Scouts and on the outside. Through its Web site, it organizes demonstrations and speeches at gay rights events and offers advice to parents struggling with the decision of whether to allow their boys to become Scouts.

Both Rice, who had spent most of his life in Scouting, and Scott Cozza, who was recruited as a leader when Steven joined, have since been kicked out, although Scout officials have so far left Steven Cozza's membership intact.

"I would never have signed up if I had known that the Boy Scouts discriminated against anyone, period," Scott Cozza added. "The program itself is a wonderful program, but it has been corrupted by religious fundamentalists who are using the Boy Scouts for their own political agenda, which is to hurt people who are gay. If you remain silent, you collude with the bigotry."

Dr. Allen Dennison, one of several physicians from Providence, R.I., who urged the AMA to adopt the teen-suicide resolution, agrees. He has four sons in the Boy Scouts, and as a scoutmaster he discussed the Supreme Court ruling with his troop.

"The boys agreed that it's wrong to pick on people," he said, "but we decided that the Boy Scouts is a wonderful, wonderful organization and it would be wrong to just drop out. They wanted to stay and fight."

Last fall, Dennison's Scout troop drafted a nondiscrimination statement, telling its regional council and the national headquarters it would not honor the gay ban.

When the *Providence Journal* published a story on the troop's defiance, one reader wrote a letter to the editor, saying the troop had been infested with homosexuals, without whom the Boy Scouts, and America, would be better off.

"One of the boys at our next meeting raised his hand and suggested, 'Why don't we write him a letter and ask him if he'd like to go camping with us?' " Dennison said. "The boys perceive how ridiculous this is. They know it's grown-ups who fear the boogeyman."

Several other troops have adopted similar nondiscrimination statements, and three resolutions to rewrite the national membership policy are pending.

"We're a democratic organization," said Shields, the national Scouts spokesman. "We are studying the issue."

He added that he objects to critics' suggestions that the Boy Scouts' stance means the organization might condone violence against gays or that it is insensitive to the horror of teen suicide. Quoting the *Boy Scout Handbook*, he said, "A Scout respects those with ideas and customs that are different from his own. He is polite to everyone. He understands there is strength in being gentle. A Scout treats others as he wants to be treated."

"I think they're going to come around," Dennison said of the ban's supporters last week as he and his sons headed to New Mexico to attend a national Scout camp. "I think they will come around because people like me will give them no choice. They will get no peace."

Reeves agreed, saying Boy Scout alumni and young Scouts growing up in a more accepting world will eventually throw out the gay ban, just as they opened the group's doors to African-Americans decades ago.

"This is what I learned as a 7-year-old Cub Scout," he said. "We're all supposed to get along with each other and work together to make the world a better place. They can kick me out, but I still remember what they taught me, and I still believe it."

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