

Be Prepared

In 1997, my life changed forever. That was the year I joined the Boy Scouts as a member of Scout Troop 375. My Scoutmaster was Mr. Larry Cox, the most influential man in my life. He was tall, strong, incredibly intelligent, and a keen woodsman. He and I hit it off immediately. We shared a fascination with trivia, a dry sense of humor, and a deeply rooted sense of right and wrong. One thing we did not share was outdoor expertise. I had always been the indoor, nerdy, "bookish" type, so there was never a campout where he didn't teach me something. I approached Scouting the same way I approached school: read the book and take the test. That was the way I worked for everything, whether I was learning how to tie a knot, how to build a fire, how to select a campsite and pitch a tent, or anything else. I worked furiously to advance, wanting to get as far as I could as young as I could. Merit badges and badges of rank flew past – rifle shooting, orienteering, camping, first aid, and everything in between. I had gone from "Brandon the Geek" to "Brandon the Woodsmen" in only two years. After starting in Scouts a few months before I turned 12, I was mere months away from achieving Scouting's highest rank, Eagle Scout.

But not everything was as perfect as it seemed. My Troop had once been the best one in town, but a few years before I joined things started going downhill. By the time I joined, new enrollment was down and current enrollment was dropping. The Troop had two older Scouts: Mr. Cox's son Cameron and Ben Smith. They were both well on the way to becoming Eagle Scouts, and by the time I turned 13 they were little more than memories. That was when things really began to change for Mr. Cox. Most of the other kids in the Troop had been stuck at the same rank for years, and he was finally getting older and discouraged. He was still concerned about me, though. On more than one occasion he told me that he was going to get me to Eagle Scout

no matter what. Of course, the harsher truth was still behind that, since he also told my mom that he was going to retire after I made Eagle Scout. I tried to encourage him, to show that he was still making a difference in my life. So when plans for a weekend day trip came up, I was all for it.

The trip was a standard one. Lots of hiking and lots of complaining. Mr. Cox made sure to remind us (several times) that his grandmother, who had one hip and arthritis, walked faster than we did. We chuckled and groaned and pushed on. After a few hours of this pattern, the sun started going down and we decided to head home. Once we got back into town Mr. Cox said he would give Thomas and me a ride home. We went to Thomas's house, but his parents weren't home yet. I told Mr. Cox that Thomas could stay with me until his parents got home, so he drove us to my house and dropped us off. He said he would back in a little while. Thomas and I hung out and played video games, and after about an hour I heard a horn blow. It was Mr. Cox coming to pick up Thomas. I told Thomas bye and waved to Mr. Cox, saying I'd see him on Tuesday at our weekly meeting. I was wrong.

At about 5 o'clock the next morning, Mr. Cox's son Cameron called my house to ask what we had eaten on the trip. Cameron said his dad was throwing up and he thought it might have been food poisoning. I told him Mr. Cox had eaten some chicken and he said OK. I turned over and went back to sleep. At about 7 o'clock, the phone rang again. This time I heard it, so I jumped out of bed and ran to my mom's room. As I leaned against her doorway, I heard her say Mr. Cox had died. She hung up and told me he had had a heart attack. I was in shock. A few days passed that are still a bit of a blur to me.

He never liked funerals, so there was a ceremony in celebration of his life. After the ceremony, one of his former Scouts tried to take over the Troop. I was the only one to show up

to any of the meetings, and after a few months I stopped hearing from the interim Scoutmaster. He just disappeared. I talked about joining one of the other Troops in town, but I didn't. Two years passed.

Then one day, I was cleaning off my dresser, and I came across a folded up piece of paper. I opened it up and it was the program from Mr. Cox's Celebration of Life Ceremony. My mind flashed back. I remembered the story I had told at his ceremony.

"Mr. Cox always liked to tell us stories. He told us once about a week he spent at Camp Hood for some training. It was winter, and it actually snowed. So he and some other guys huddled on a table under a tarp to keep warm and spent the night there. When they woke up the next morning and tried to move, their behinds were frozen to the table. 'Don't sit on your butts, boys,' he told us."

I felt a chill run down my spine. I realized that I was letting down the one man who meant the most in my life. I remembered what he used to tell my mom: getting me to Eagle Scout was the only thing keeping him in the Troop. I remembered the Scout Law that I had sworn to uphold and its commandment that a Scout is trustworthy. I knew I had to do something. The next day I asked my friend Jason when his Troop met. I told him to pick me up on his way Tuesday.

That was a year ago. Today I am an Eagle Scout and the Senior Patrol Leader of my new Troop. Most importantly, I am what Mr. Cox gave everything to try to make me. I know that he is looking down on me today, proud of me. I also know that I didn't find that paper by accident. Sometimes, God gives us little reminders of our commitments. As an Eagle Scout, my advice is: be prepared for them.