



Segregation and discrimination among the Boy Scouts

[Like other youth?](#)

By [William J. Peace](#)

Until my son expressed an interest in Scouting, I knew nothing about the Boy Scouts of America. When Tom entered first grade and wanted to join a Cub Scout pack, though, I began learning fast.

I found myself excluded from virtually all Scout activities because I use a wheelchair. Many Scouting events in the Westchester-Putnam Boy Scout Council were simply not accessible to wheelchairs.

At first I thought the lack of wheelchair access was simply because a disabled parent or child had never participated in Scouting locally, and I assumed my mere presence would heighten awareness of disability-related issues. It did not take long for me to realize my presence was not nearly enough.

Then I thought it was because the Scouts needed a little education. To this end, I agreed to take an active role, becoming a den leader and member of the Pack Executive Committee. With a wheelchair-using father active in Scouting and in a leadership role, surely wheelchair access would become a consideration, I figured -- after all, the Scouts were desperate for volunteers, and I was now giving a significant amount of my time to the organization.

At meetings I pointed out events that would present access problems. Surely, I thought, my participation would have an impact, for how could one justify excluding a leader?

Yet my requests for equal access have been continually ignored by my pack and the local council. It seems to be simply an issue they do not want to address.

Founded in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America has played a role in the lives of 100 million American boys. BSA is a multi-million-dollar organization with corporate offices in Texas and an endowment in excess of \$2 billion.

The BSA has never been in sync with the times. In 2000, it won a Supreme Court victory banning gay members. It had fought for -- and has now won -- the right to classify itself as an exclusive club, one that actively discriminates against all those that are different. (Yet the BSA enjoys tax-exempt status, free use of county, state, and national parks and use of public school space. At the last Jamboree, the Federal government gave the Scouts over \$1 million.) My own experiences show me that BSA's attitude toward disability is both antiquated and discriminatory.

According to the BSA's fact sheet on "Scouts With Disabilities and Special Needs," there are approximately 100,000 Scouts identified as "disabled." "Dr. James E. West, the first Chief Scout Executive, was himself disabled," says the fact sheet, which emphasizes that people who are

disabled are to be treated with respect and stresses that BSA wants disabled boys to participate in its programs just as non-disabled boys do. It encourages including disabled Scouts in "mainstream" packs, troops, and venturers -- and clearly states this is the ideal.

However, inclusion of disabled Scouts is not always possible, it says, noting "there are many units composed of members with identical disabilities such as an all-blind Boy Scout Troop or an all-deaf Cub Scout pack. . . . Many of these special Scouting units are located in special schools or centers that make the Scouting program part of the curriculum." While the organization recognizes "the special needs of those with severe disabilities" and supposedly "encourages" disabled Scouts to participate in Scouting activities, in fact disabled Scouts and leaders seem frequently unwelcome, and often segregated into a "special unit."

In the handbook *Scouting for Youth with a Physical Disability*, the chapter on "The Youth in a Unit with Nondisabled Scouts" includes the topics "Judging the Youth's Limitations," "The Impossible Takes a Little Longer," "Helping Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Venturers with Physical Disabilities" and "Will He Hold Us Back?"

The opening sentences of the book are telling:

"The troop lines up for the opening ceremony, moving into place at its leader's silent signal. This scene is routine, repeated tonight in thousands of cities and towns across America. . . . But there is a difference here. Three Scouts are in wheelchairs, another has only one arm, another stands on uneven legs, one has withered arms with fragile fingers, one has pale skin, and one waves his arm involuntarily during the Pledge of Allegiance. Before them stands a Scoutmaster. A saint perhaps? Maybe a physician or a physical therapist? Who else but a saint or a medical professional would try to lead this unlikely group?"

Regardless of intent, passages like this are troubling and deeply offensive. They suggest BSA remains woefully unprepared to deal with disabled leaders and boys who expect to be treated as equals.

The first year I was a den leader, when Tom was in the second grade, I notified the Pack Committee that the location of the Pinewood Derby would need to be moved to an accessible location. (For those unfamiliar with Scouting, the Pinewood Derby is a car race. The boys are given a block of wood, four nails and wheels, and are required to shape the wood into a car.) The Pinewood Derby had been held at a local church that had no wheelchair access. I told the chairman of the pack executive committee that, given the tremendous importance of this event, the boys in my den needed me to be there.

My request was met with indifference. The pack had "always held the derby at the church, it was the tradition," I was told. It would be easier for everyone if "we just carried you in." Another location would be difficult to locate, and too costly to arrange.

It was not the Boy Scouts' responsibility to make events accessible, I was told.

I persisted, though. I lobbied other den leaders for their support and told the chairman that my den and others would refuse to participate if an accessible location were not secured. I also told him I would call every

local newspaper on the day of the derby and encourage them take pictures of me and our den in full uniform outside the church, unwilling to enter.

Within 48 hours, an alternate accessible location was found -- one that people have found to be superior to the old location, and one that cost nothing to use.

My experience regarding the Pinewood Derby was not unique, but indicative of a discriminatory attitude that considered wheelchair access an inconvenience.

I am told repeatedly that there is no need for wheelchair access because there are no disabled Scouts or Scout leaders. The fact that my "special needs" have been "overlooked" prompts an inevitable "sorry" -- my needs are perceived as being highly unusual, never to be duplicated, and thus able to justifiably be ignored. Wheelchair access seems to be considered intrusive, expensive, unnecessary, and geared to meet the needs of one person -- me.

When I bring up the lack of access at proposed activities, there is an awkward silence followed by a mumbled apology, yet the plans for the inaccessible activity continue to be made. If I protest further, my complaints are met with disdain, the implication being that I alone am preventing the boys from enjoying a rich and rewarding experience.

"I don't know how you can get around. Why don't you sit in the parking lot and help register people?" This was what I was told when I inquired about wheelchair access at the Klondike Derby. The Klondike Derby is designed for Webelos (fourth and fifth grades). It's held in February. The boys must build a sled which they are required to push and pull to different locations, where they are tested on basic Scout knowledge.

When I contacted the event's organizer to ask about wheelchair access, he seemed taken aback that a wheelchair user was a den leader. He said he could not imagine how a disabled person could participate, because he thought it would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to get around. Using a comment I was hearing all too often, he said he could never recall seeing a disabled leader or Scout at the event. As it turned out, though, the event was reasonably accessible.

The Thunderbird Games event is the only campout in our district that's exclusively for Cub Scouts. The year Tom was in the third grade, I was assured that our camping location for the Thunderbird Games would be accessible, and that accessible bathrooms would be nearby.

The campsite was indeed accessible, in terms of being on a level surface (my only request). But the nearest accessible toilet was a mile away. There were only two accessible toilets in the entire 100-acre county park. Aside from the fact this was against the law, it was even more galling that not one of the hundreds of portable toilets brought in for the event was accessible.

When I complained to the Chairman of the Pack Committee, the man who had made the camping arrangements, he simply shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing he could do, he said; did I want to leave? When I asked at the information booth about the presence of accessible toilets, all I got was a "sorry I can't help you." Could anyone else tell me about the location of accessible

toilets, I asked. No, I was told. I pressed the issue with the people in charge of registering the Scout packs at the campout. It was the Parks Department's responsibility, I was told; there was nothing anyone could do.

That night at the leaders' meeting, as we sat assessing how the day had gone, I complained again. I got some mumbled apologies and many rolled eyes. It was not the BSA's responsibility to make events accessible, I was told. One person wondered why I was there in the first place. A few more diplomatic souls said simply that there was nothing that they could do.

When I made further complaints at the Council several days later, I was told no one had thought about accessible bathrooms because "wheelchair access issues were too problematic."

And I was told this story: One year a question had been placed on the registration form regarding disability, but that "too many people tried to use disability to their advantage." What seemed to most annoy those who told the story was an individual who "claimed his weight as a disability."

"Can you imagine the nerve?" I was asked in conspiratorial whispers. "It is this type that hurt people like you who are obviously really handicapped."

There are significant differences between local councils. Perhaps the discrimination I have encountered in Scouting is indicative only of prejudice in the area in which I live -- the affluent northern suburbs of New York City. Yet the majority of people I deal with are not only wealthy but well educated -- hardly the sort of people one would associate with baseless prejudicial attitudes and beliefs. Yet this is exactly what I have faced since I became active in Scouting on behalf of my son.

As I have done more with the Scouts, and as I have continued to endure access indignities, I've found that my group of advocates has grown. Those who thought I had a chip on my shoulder now seem to agree that I have been treated poorly. So in a way things have improved. Last fall's Thunderbird Games were more accessible, and there were four accessible toilets in strategic locations. But the pack will still go to go to Jones Beach this summer -- the pack goes every August -- and this event is totally inaccessible. And two inaccessible events have already been planned for next year.

So are things really any better? I am not so sure.

The Westchester-Putnam Council has just completed a multi-million-dollar building project at its Camp Clear Lake in Putnam County. Kids from all over use it for sleepovers, for camping, hiking, orienteering, and as a day camp. Most of the newly constructed cabins are completely inaccessible.

When I questioned why so many new cabins were inaccessible, I was told that the location was "complex," meaning, I was told, that some ramps would have to be over 100 feet long, and that "it just wouldn't look right." There was really was no need to ramp the cabins, it was said, because no one could recall a disabled person, aside from me, ever visiting the area.

Once again, as I had when they had used that excuse with me in the past, I pointed out that the lack of access precluded equal or even partial involvement. My remark was met with an uncomfortable silence.

Getting an accessible cabin at Clear Lake is almost impossible without booking many months in advance. This is far longer than anyone else has to book a cabin.

I was sitting in my car talking about this construction travesty one day last winter with another leader, one of the few who shares my views, when my son piped up. "Dad, don't just complain about access, do something about it!"

"What you need," Tom went on, "is a Martin Luther King for disabled people."

Like other youth?

The basic premise of Scouting for youth with disabilities is that they want most to participate like other youth -- and Scouting gives them that opportunity. Thus, much of the program for Scouts with disabilities is directed at (1) helping unit leaders develop an awareness of disabled people among youth without disabilities, and (2) encouraging the inclusion of Scouts with disabilities in Cub Scout packs, Boy Scout troops, Varsity Scout teams, Venturing crews, and Sea Scout ships.

There are many units, however, composed of members with identical disabilities -- such as an all-blind Boy Scout troop or an all-deaf Cub Scout pack -- but these disabled members are encouraged to participate in Scouting activities at the district, council, area, regional, and national levels along with other Scouts. Many of these special Scouting units are located in special schools or centers that make the Scouting program part of their curriculum.

From the "Recognition of Needs" section of the BSA Fact Sheet on "Scouts With Disabilities and Special Needs," online at <http://www.bsa.Scouting.org/factsheets/02-508.html>

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