



ANNANDALE Advocate

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Debunking disabilities

Hands-on merit badge

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Annandale Boy Scouts Chris Talbot and Mack Carter had their eyes opened a little further when they ventured to Camp Friendship in pursuit of their Disability Awareness badge.

For seven days the boys, along with five other scouts from various Central Minnesota troops, ate, laughed and just hung out with campers with various levels of disabilities.

Although nervous at first, they said, the scouts, who ranged in age from 14 to 16-years-old, quickly learned that disabilities don't define a person.

"You learn to see past the disabilities," Maple Lake scout Charlie Stejskal said.

"They are regular people and shouldn't be called anything other than regular people," Annandale Scout Mack Carter said.

Jerry Carter, Scoutmaster of Annandale Boy Scout Troop 3354, and Mack Carter's dad, is the instigator behind the boys presence at the camp.

A former employee of the Annandale camp, he had the idea to create a program that would help Scouts attain their Disabilities Awareness Badge.

"He e-mailed that he had worked here a while ago and remembered we had this leadership program," Samantha Funk, program manager of volunteers at Camp Friendship said.



Charlie Stejskal, a boy scout from Maple Lake, leads a blindfolded Annandale scout, Chris Talbot, through an obstacle course during a leadership activity at Camp Friendship, Wednesday, Aug. 10. The scouts spent the week at camp in pursuit of the Disabilities Awareness badge.



Annandale scout Mack Carter tries to guide his blindfolded partner safely under a picnic table.

"He submitted the requirements for the badge and I realized our week-long program would fit perfectly."

Through the leadership program the scouts learned about people with disabilities, but they also learned about themselves and team building, Funk said.

Another requirement of the disability awareness badge is to interact and get to know a person with disabilities, and when they were not in leadership training Wednesday, Aug. 10, that is exactly what the scouts were doing.

Their days at camp all started the same with breakfast at 7:45 a.m.

The Scouts, along with other volunteers, assisted campers by dishing up plates, serving beverages and tending to those with special diets.

Afterward they helped campers prepare for the day by putting on socks and shoes, bug spray and sun block, Funk said.

After breakfast the Scouts were split into two groups. One went to leadership training, and the other went swimming, fishing, boating and did crafts with the campers.

"You figure out that campers have their own personalities and some are really funny," Mack Carter said.

He described how he and a visitor from California were discussing the benefits of living in California vs. Minnesota.

He playfully asked "What's wrong with Minnesota?" and a camper promptly responded "You."

"I learned that (people with disabilities) take your word very seriously," Talbot added.

"If you say you are going to do something, they expect you to do it."

More than words

Peter Book of St. Paul learned how to speak through facial expressions rather than words.

"I've been primarily working with people with autism," he said.

"While they may have trouble speaking, you can tell a lot about their mood by the way they are acting. Society puts a lot of importance on what a person says . . . but in a way, they say more because they can't talk."

For scoutmaster Carter, the disability awareness badge program at Camp Friendship has a dual purpose.

It also fulfills part of his requirement for leadership advancement.

He will be officially acknowledged for his completion of the most advanced scout leader training course, Wood Badge, at a ceremony this summer.

He hopes scouting and Camp Friendship can offer the program every year to scouts

throughout the Northern Star Council which is the largest scouting district in Central Minnesota.

It includes most of Central Minnesota, the Twin Cities and parts of Wisconsin.

Before this program, scoutmaster Carter had never heard of the disability awareness badge, and certainly he knew of no area Scout pursuing it.

Last week the seven boy scouts experienced exactly what he had hoped: to learn about people who are different from themselves, to strengthen their compassion for others and to grow as a person.

"A lot of times when we see someone who is different than us, we don't see what's the same," he said.

"Breaking down that fear factor makes you see the similarities and that we're not all that different."