

Want to make a difference?

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Boys for Boy Scouts and leaders needed

By DAVE SCHULTZ

Steve Higgins knows that scouting can make a difference in a young person's life.

Shortly after he became a district executive for the Boy Scouts of America, facilitating scouting activities in Adams, Wells, Jay, and Huntington counties, he encountered a boy at a Cub Scout orientation session at Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School. The boy, named Spencer, was clinging to his mother's leg for emotional support and to hide from people he didn't know. He never said a word.

Years after that, Higgins went to a meeting of a Boy Scout troop. He was told that the senior patrol leader, Spencer, would lead the meeting and introduce Higgins as a guest.

Higgins remembers the thought he had: "Spencer? He doesn't say a word."

Things had obviously changed in Spencer's life, and Higgins wants to see that kind of change come to others as well. Higgins remembers him as a well-spoken young man.

However, like so many other people who have tried to work through matters in 2020, Higgins has been thrown a curve. The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted his access to schools and other programs where he could talk about scouting and recruit more members.

The effects can be seen in the numbers. In a typical year, there would be 150 young people recruited into scouting. This year, it's 50.

Higgins emphasizes that scouting will do what it always has done — hiking, camping, other outdoor activities — and as evident in Spencer's case — building leadership skills.

Higgins acknowledges that scouting has taken a black eye nationally as abuse cases work their way through the courts, but northeastern Indiana has avoided any problems and plans to keep it that way through training and background screenings. As far as Higgins knows — and he's been involved in the organization's local leadership for 30 years — there was one case of suspected abuse involving a Scout leader, and that was in 1978 in Fort Wayne.

Higgins believes the Scout Oath sells the organization: "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout law, to help other people at all times, and to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."

A scout is "trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent."

"What parent wouldn't want their child to grow up with these qualities?" Higgins asks.

With schools closed off as a recruitment venue, Higgins has found himself using social media, e-newsletters, and yard signs.

Nevertheless, he said, "Responses to electronic communications has not yielded the number of youth that face-to-face methods had."

He makes two other recruitment points. First, scouting is now open to girls, but they are in separate troops with separate leadership teams and girls can become Eagle Scouts.

He is also asking for adults who may want to help out as leaders in the program to contact him. When parents volunteer for leadership positions, he said, it enables families to spend quality time together and be an active part of his or her child's life.