

Me and the Girls

I cherish that final evening. After our final dinner, they dimmed the lights. I stood with two women in the center of the circle. We were the new ones, ready for our initiation. Surrounding us was a circle of green: 50 or so, all but four women, holding candles and singing. The circle tightened. One from the circle, I remember it was Bonnie, stepped up to me. She pulled a small jewelry box from the right pocket of her green blazer and opened the box so that I could see its contents. Then she carefully attached the pin to my shirt pocket. I felt—I felt touched and honored. I had joined the cause. I was joining a long line of special people. That night I became a Girl Scout.

We were near the end of four days of training, learning the Girl Scout way. The Girl Scout law: *I will do my best to be*

Honest and fair

Friendly and helpful

Considerate and caring

Courageous and strong

And responsible for what I say and do

And to

Respect myself and others

Respect authority

Use resources wisely

Make the world a better place

And be a sister to every Girl Scout

That last line, well—perhaps I wouldn't be able to fulfill my Girl Scout potential. Nevertheless, I took it seriously. I was happy that everyone was taking me seriously.

We Girls Scouts are not so different from the rest of you. Perhaps you don't have a green blazer. But you probably want your sister—or daughter, niece, or mother—to be

confident. To be a good person. To want to face challenges with courage. To have the same opportunities as everyone.

This adventure started on a whim with an unexpected offer from Michael, an old college roommate—a fellow *he*—who was in charge of human resources for the Girl Scouts (doesn't it seem like the token managers always get HR?). The Girl Scouts were looking for a few good, ahem, people from the outside to ensure that the local councils across the country were providing good services to their girls and that the adults were following the Girl Scout rules.

I compare the situation to Dunkin' Donuts. Anyone can open up a joint and serve donuts and weak coffee. But if you want to have the big DD on the front of your store and be part of the baked goods empire, then you have to comply with the rules that come from world headquarters in Canton. In the same way, anyone can start a local group for girls to go camping, serve the community, and sell cookies. But if your girls want to be Girl Scouts, they and you have to uphold the Girl Scout way.

For these four days, I was among 100 long-time volunteers. I was not the only guy among our group—there were about 10 of us—nor the only new national volunteer—I was one of three who had never been a Girl Scout. Most had been members as girls, troop leaders, and local council leaders. Moving to the national volunteer level was the next step in their avocation. They impressed me with their earnestness, but also with their easy willingness to allow me to join them. I remember sitting at the lunch, each big round table with eight of us, hearing their tales of visiting girls from Buffalo to Birmingham to Annandale to Anchorage. They gossiped about the troop leaders that they met, the special programs that they witnessed: whether it was scouting for girls whose parents were in prison, camping for girls who lived in Chicago or Brooklyn, to new scouting badges for website design or locavore cuisine. They *knew* that Girl Scouts made girls better, smarter, healthier, stronger.

Cookies. You want to know about the cookies. If you know one thing about the Girl Scouts, it is those good-for-the-girls, less good for you, omnipresent cookies. Yes, at the training, every lunch, dinner, and break we could indulge. But let me put the role

of cookies in the Girl Scouts this way: 95 percent of us suddenly pay attention to college basketball for three weeks in March, even though they've been playing since November. Led Zeppelin has a whole bunch of songs besides Stairway to Heaven. And Girl Scouts has a range of programs unconnected to thin mints and s'mores, many serving their local communities, all of them seeking to help girls in a country—in a world—still focused on guys. In fact, part of my eventual role was to make sure that local councils were not becoming fronts for cookie-selling enterprises (it's a tax thing). And while I was at this training, I witnessed firsthand about a world built for guys. Remember, there were about 10 men among the 100 volunteers and trainers. At the training center, there was one men's room and one women's room—even at a Girl Scouts training.

I also learned a lot of bureaucracy over those four days. The Girl Scouts has rules and budgets and voicemail and forms to fill out, just like any group with several million members. But this organization, now 107 years old, often viewed as a quaint relic of last century, still offers much to many girls. I would have never known that.

But then I joined the cause.

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