

Rocky Mount TELEGRAM

Alternative scouts focus on faith

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American Heritage Girls and Trail Life USA, two faith-based alternative scout programs for girls and boys respectively, held their first planning meeting for the coming year.

Founded on Biblical values and reflecting a Christian worldview, American Heritage Girls (AHG) and Trail Life USA (TLUSA) are premier Christ-centered outdoor adventure, character and leadership programs for boys and girls in grades K-12.

Sponsored by First Baptist Church, AHG Troop NC0834 and TLUSA Troop NC0834 are organized under a national leadership, but are owned, operated and held responsible by the church or local organization that charters them.

Born out of controversial policy changes in other scout programs, AHG and TLUSA aim to mentor kids in a Christ-centered environment through outdoor skill-based outings and badges earned through learning things such as how to do taxes and what jury duty is. Each troop is organized into units by age and has different lessons and activities as per ability and maturity.

"We learned so much from being in Trail Life," said First Officer Parker VanStaalduinen, 17. "It's taught me how to keep track of all my stuff, because you have to present it and keep it all organized. You have to deal with responsibility and learn to do it on your own."

He said that as first officer, the highest-ranking youth leadership position for the troop, he and his second-in-command Joshua Revoir, 14, are responsible for everything from planning activities for the older boys to looking over the younger boys and making sure they're doing what they're supposed to as well as meeting with different units to teach them skills such as how to tie a knot and set up a tent.

"All of the skills we learn and when we help out go to our Freedom Award, which is the highest award we can get," Revoir said. "It shows that we've learned how to be responsible and about freedom and other skills and stuff. Like for Parker, anytime one of the guys has a question, they just go straight to him, cause except for the adults he's most likely to know as our first officer."

Anyone looking to join the troop must agree to follow the Statement of Faith, which says that members believe there is one Triune God: the Father, Jesus Christ His one and only son and the Holy Spirit. They believe in the Bible as the inspired and authoritative Word of God, and what it says, including that God calls people to live lives of holiness, being pure of heart, mind, word and deed, and that sexual activity is to be reserved for the sanctity of marriage, a lifelong commitment before God between a man and a woman. They also believe that members are called by God to be stewards in their community and do what they can to help others.

"We hold Christ as the center of everything we do," said Duane Tolan, the troop ministry liaison appointed by First Baptist Church. "We're not a Sunday school or church service, but everything we do is faith-based and reflects a Christian worldview."

He said that as an example, when the troops go on camping trips they always make sure to leave the campsite better than they found it, not just as doing their part to keep the earth clean, but because God calls them to take care of His planet.

The troops meet once per week on Tuesday evenings during the school year. The meeting starts with an opening assembly, where someone says the announcements for the next one to two weeks, money for

trips is collected and the troop chaplain, Scott Wood, does the devotion. After the assembly, the boys and girls break off into their age-graded patrols for their meeting activities.

Once a month, the troops do a service project to both fill required service hours and to serve their community. Wood selects the projects each month, which have included cleaning the walking trail at Battle Park, building bunk beds for the charity Sleep in Heavenly Peace and cleaning up the grounds of the Nash Arts Center.

While the boys in TLUSA work to attain the Freedom Award, the highest award for the girls in AHG is the Stars and Stripes Award. To achieve this award, the girls have to be a Patriot for two years, the unit for ages 14 to 18.

After that, they have to write an essay about why they want to earn this award. Then they have to earn one badge in each category of a handbook by completing three activities, and work their way through seven phases of conducting a service project.

Even though it's a lot of work, I really just wanted to be a part of something, said Mandy Coley, one of the older girls in the troop. I wanted to help the community and help teach the younger kids, and it's important to me to be able to do it while strengthening my faith.

Coley added that since being part of AHG, her mother, Becky Coley, a nurse and one of the troop leaders, had been baptized while wearing the AHG T-shirt, wanting to lead by example.

I've learned about leadership skills, about leading the younger girls and leading among my friends, said Allison Strufe, another member. It was also really important to me to be a part of a community, and American Heritage Girls has been really great for that.

Lisa Dees has one more year before she can qualify to earn her Stars and Stripes award.

I've seen how much work my friends are putting in, so I'm kind of nervous when it's my turn, she said with a laugh. Hopefully I can get one of them to help me with some advice or something. I'm looking forward to it though, I'm sure it'll be exciting.

Currently, there are 36 girls in AHG and 50 boys in TLUSA, and there is a total of 71 registered adults and leaders. As part of their safety policy, all members have to be in the presence of at least two registered adults, whether at an event or a meeting or just driving to an event. As a registered adult, they are able to be part of that two-deep policy or may become a full leader with increased responsibilities.

To become a registered adult in the troop, parents have to register with the troop, complete an application and agree with the Statement of Faith, the application must be reviewed and the person interviewed by Tolan. After that, the application will be sent to the national organization and a thorough criminal background check will be conducted. Once that process is finished, the adult completes a thorough online Child Safety Youth Protection Training course.

This is my ministry where God has called me to serve, said Tolan, chartered organizational representative for the troops. I believe that God has called me to these organizations as a way to help lead young women and men to Christ and to teach them how to become Godly leaders among their families and friends, and in their schools and communities.

American Heritage Girls and Trail Life USA Troops NC0834 will hold their Join the Trail open house at 6 p.m. Sept. 6 at First Baptist Church at 200 South Church St. Anyone interested in joining the troop will be able to receive information about the troops, as well as meet members and see demonstrations of skills learned and projects completed, such as sewing projects from AHG and pitched campsites from TLUSA.

At that time, visitors will also be able to learn more about the year's upcoming activities. Field trips are held several times a year for all age units, and some trips are held as a group with boys and girls while others are just for specific units. Some examples include sleeping with sharks at Ripley's aquarium, visiting a high ropes course, and going on a hike ending with a white water rafting adventure.

When I see my boys come home from these trips, I know it sounds cliché but they walk through the door taller and more confident, said Jennifer Hess, publicity coordinator and mother of four boys involved in TLUSA. On these trips, they're given opportunities to lead and be successful, and that really does make an impact on their confidence.

For more information, visit www.trailifeusarockymount.org.