

Eagle River teen earns prestigious scout honor



Colette Ohotnicky dons her heavily decorated sash as a Patriot in American Heritage Girls at St. Andrew Catholic Church in Eagle River on May 15. — Photo by Mindy Goorchenko

American Heritage Girl mixes faith & outdoor adventure

By **MINDY GOORCHENKO**

CatholicAnchor.org

Colette Ohotnicky, 17, recently became the first American Heritage Girl in Alaska to earn the organization's highest badge — the Stars and Stripes Award.

The coveted honor, equivalent to the Eagle Award in Boy Scouts, requires hundreds of hours of work, self-reflection and the completion of a project to better the community.

The journey to achieving this award has left a lasting imprint on the home schooling teen and parishioner of Holy Family Cathedral in Anchorage.

DRAWN TO SCOUTING

Colette and her twin sister Ann were 11 years old when they entered American Heritage Girls (AHG). At that time the family lived in Colorado where Colette's father Lt. Col. Peter Ohotnicky served in the U.S. Air Force.

"My brother was in Cub Scouts, and I thought it would be really fun to do scouting," Colette said. "And so AHG was really that for us. We were able to go camping, be with other girls, work on badges, do service and stuff like that."

Their younger sister Therese joined at the same time.

CHRIST-CENTERED SCOUTING

An intentionally Christ-centered scouting alternative for girls ages 5-18, AHG began in 1995 in Ohio and has since spread nationwide. Colette's mother Sherry Ohotnicky serves as troop coordinator of the newest Alaska troop, which started meeting in February at St. Andrew Catholic Church in Eagle River and already has 40 girls. The original troop in Eagle River was so popular that it had a waiting list.

Similar to other scouting organizations, AHG troops are arranged according to age groups — each with distinct uniforms and awards. Older scouts are encouraged to mentor younger members, and the AHG creed emphasizes virtues such as compassion, honesty, reverence and responsibility. But unlike other scouting organizations that may or may not emphasize Christian discipleship, all AHG troops explicitly profess to be Christ-centered. Meetings always incorporate prayer and discussions about faith, Scripture and how to live a godly life.

INSPIRED CAMPING

Colette and her family eventually moved from Colorado to Texas where the girls joined a troop that camped on a monthly basis.

"Annie and I were probably the girls who went camping the most," Colette remembers. "We really just started to fall in love with camping. We earned all the outdoor badges we could."

By the time Colette earned her Dolly Madison Award, a precursor to the Stars and Stripes, she began pondering ideas for a final project.



“We knew we were moving to Alaska, and my dream project was to build a trail,” Colette recalled. “I thought, ‘Alaska! There’s got to be some place in Alaska that needs a trail. This would be a great place to go.’”

Colette connected with the Natural Resources Conservation Center on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, a military base near Anchorage, and discovered that Otter Lake had a campground with a swan-viewing deck nearby, but no trail to easily connect the two.

“So I built a trail from the campground to a second trail to provide easier access to the swan viewing area,” Colette explained. “The trail is about a half mile long. I built kiosks on either end with a map and information about bears, Leave No Trace, and other resources. I also made small signs identifying plants and trees.”

Colette met with a local biologist, took wood-working classes and raised funds by selling cookies and hosting a movie night with a bake sale. She planned and flagged the trail, summoned volunteers from her troop and her brother’s Boy Scout troop, and together they cleared the path. Colette hopes it will benefit campers for years.



Volunteers assist Colette Ohotnicky in building a hiking trail. — Submitted photo

Holy Family Cathedral parishioner Mary Beth Bragiel serves on the Catholic Committee on Scouting and was a member of the review board that evaluated Colette’s project.

“I was just amazed at the project she did,” Bragiel said. “She was met with some resistance that it could even be accomplished. Then, a storm came and damaged much of the work she had done, so she had to go back and do it again. She is very determined.”

Colette said the project gave her inspiration for her future.

“It was really exciting to me to actually learn how to identify plants and just be outdoors and work out there,” Colette recalled. “This project really solidified for me that this is something I would love to do.”

A LEGACY OF FAITH

A junior in high school, Colette serves alongside her siblings and parents at Holy Family Cathedral where they contribute time and talent to the parish. Colette, along with her sisters and father, chant in the choir. Her brothers serve at the altar, while Sherry tends to the youngest children and coordinates altar servers. Her eventual goal is to major in biology in college and work as a botanist or biologist.

Colette wholeheartedly endorses AHG and encourages younger scouts to aim high and to devote the time and energy needed to achieve the Stars and Stripes Award.

“It’s not the end that is really the achievement,” she said. “I learned so much from the process of doing it. It makes you less afraid to do things. You know that you have completed this, and so you know you can take on something else.”

Colette’s mother Sherry has witnessed the enormous value of the project, both in terms of leadership development and spiritual growth.

“The process is designed to help them get out of themselves and challenge themselves,” she said. “To see that they really are capable of more than they thought they were. Spiritually, that helps them get through the difficult times. God isn’t going to throw anything at you that he doesn’t give you the help and means to achieve.”

[To learn more about the American Heritage Girls go online to ahgonline.org.](http://ahgonline.org)

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