

Local Soldier Works to Restore Scouting in Iraq

By Jennifer Wake



Lt. Michael Gerson is part of the Green Zone Boy Scout Council in Iraq

Photo provided

For many in Lamorinda, Scouting is a part of growing up, teaching values that last a lifetime. When Michael Gerson (known to childhood friends as Andrew) was part of Boy Scout Troop 212 in Moraga, he learned courage, respect and responsibility. Those values have served him well as he headed from Campolindo High School to Jacksonville University in Florida on a naval ROTC scholarship, and then to Okinawa, Japan.

But five months ago these values came to the forefront when, after seeing friends returning to Iraq for second tours of duty, Gerson, age 24, volunteered to go to Bagdad. "I'm single, have no dependents, and haven't been – it's my turn," he told his mother, Jamie. He now serves as a Marine Corps lieutenant in Iraq's Green Zone.

Upon his arrival in Iraq, Gerson learned that scouting is not just an American concept.

"Scouting has always been a part of Iraqi culture," explained Gerson on the phone from Iraq. "When Saddam was in power, he turned

scouting into a military source and changed a lot of the fundamental views of scouting, but scouting for Iraqis is not a new concept. There are about six scouting leaders involved inside the Green Zone, but 150,000 kids are involved throughout Iraq's 18 provinces."

In fact, the long tradition of scouting in Iraq dates back to the 1920s, but was briefly halted during World War II and then later, when Saddam Hussein turned scouting into a paramilitary training course, Iraq was kicked out of the international scouting organization.

As part of the Green Zone Boy Scout Council, which has nearly 100 members, Gerson and 10 other council members volunteer their time to meet weekly with local Iraqi Boy Scout leaders to retrain them on the skills and concepts of scouting. The Council is also working with the president of the Iraqi scouting movement, Abdul Salaam, who works with the minister of education, to help re-induct the Iraqi scouts into the World Scouting Organization.

"The way scouting works here is that it's tied in with the school program. Teachers are scout masters," Gerson said. The Council meetings focus on training these teacher-leaders on how to run a soccer camp, a campout, or conduct merit badge training.

"We teach the leaders how to tie knots and other basics, and the Iraqi leaders teach the kids. We're in the shadows," he said. "The Iraqis really want to get this started. The hardest thing is getting support. They just don't know what to do next."

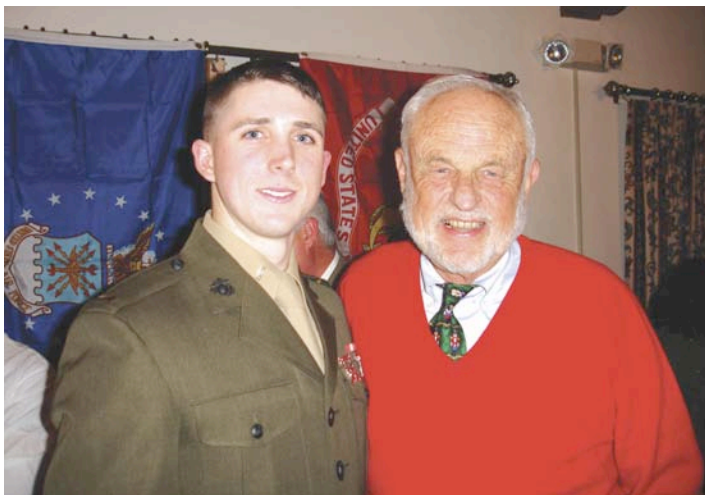
After getting involved in the Council, Gerson enlisted the help of his former Scout leader Tom (Mac) Macintosh and another parent he knew from Troop 212, Ken Towers, to get copies of Boy Scout handbooks and merit badge books to the Green Zone.

"The books can be used for those who speak English and they can translate them into Arabic," said Gerson. Macintosh and Towers sent a shipment of books last week. The Iraqis also need camping supplies, utensils, and tents for campouts, but more importantly there needs to be a shift in thinking.

"We need to create new leaders who think about the country first. Scouting creates pride in your nation and promotes town citizenship," Gerson said. "You can think of yourself as an Iraqi who is ALSO from this town or that religious sect. The future of Iraq will be governed by the skills we are teaching the kids today."

Moraga Mayor Michael Metcalf has known the Gersons for 20 years (his son was a scout mate of Gerson's in Troop 212). He is extremely proud of Gerson's efforts. "Here is a terrific example of a young Moraga lad doing something for Iraqi youth that potentially is more enduring than anything else our country could do," he said. "If what he is doing actually takes hold, it will go to further America's good reasons for being there."

You can mail camping supplies directly to Gerson at: Lt. Michael Gerson, MNF-I CSO, APOAE 09316.

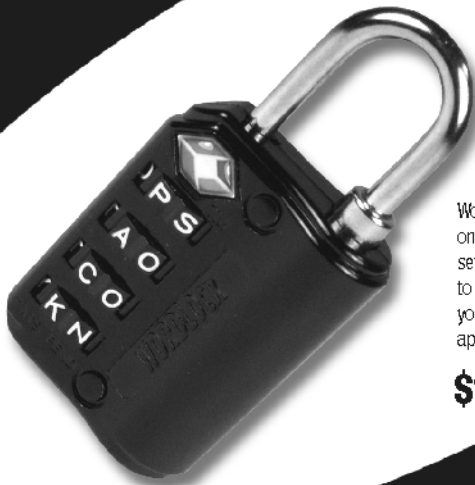


Lt. Michael Gerson stands with his former Scout master Tom "Mac" Macintosh at a Moraga event in 2005 to honor local men serving in the military

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