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Bittersweet Victory for Moraga Family as Ban on Gay Scouts Ends

By Sophie Braccini



Eric Andresen after BSA's decision was made public.
Photo Sophie Braccini

On May 23, 61 percent of the 1,400-member Boy Scouts of America (BSA) National Council approved a resolution that ended the decades old restriction denying membership to children on the basis of their sexual orientation. The decision came only eight months after BSA refused a Moraga teen his Eagle Scout status because of his sexual orientation, and after the popular campaign his family participated in to effect change.

But for the Moraga family the results are bittersweet.

In the wake of the uproar that BSA's decision spurred, Eric and Karen Andresen's son Ryan got massive media attention and a sudden celebrity he never looked for, and while there was some support at the local level, it was scarce.

"My wife Karen and I encouraged our son to join the Boy Scouts because we believe it is one of the best ways to round out an education," commented Andresen after BSA's decision was made public. "It has taught him many important values such as respect, responsibility, organization, bravery, and honesty." It is that honesty that eventually jeopardized his getting his Eagle award.

According to the family, Ryan's sexual orientation was disclosed to his scoutmaster two years ago, and the scoutmaster did not express any reservations at the time. He was encouraged to continue his scouting career, and when he proposed the 'tolerance wall' in his former middle school as his Eagle project, he was encouraged by his scoutmaster to pursue the coveted distinction. "Then someone contacted BSA, and the scoutmaster said he was asked to refuse to sign his application to become an Eagle," says Andresen. BSA's policy was to deny participation for youth and leaders who admit to being gay.

"My wife Karen immediately researched the organizations that could help us, found Scouts for Equality and sent an email to co-founders Brad Hankins and Zach Wahls who immediately responded," remembers Andresen. "They suggested we use Change.org and Karen launched the online petition that started to attract a lot of media attention." Scouts for Equality was created in June of 2012 and had been leading the fight on ending BSA's ban on gays. GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) supported Scouts for Equality from the start.

The fight has had a profound impact on both parents. "I was very involved in professional groups," says Andresen, who owns a residential property management firm based in San Francisco. "With what happened to my son I have discovered that effecting social change is possible, and what social media can do."

Andresen believes that in the old days, such a campaign as the one he participated in with Scouts for Equality could not have been put together so quickly. "We ran the campaign almost entirely on social media," he says. "We were able to put out questions and get feedback in record time. What would have taken weeks, consultants and a big budget was done through emails and social media. A lot of discussions and decisions were made in Facebook private groups, all over the country." He believes that the instant responses and reactions took BSA's leadership by surprise. Andresen is also grateful to MSN's reporters who picked up the story and gave it national coverage. "From there, it became viral," he said.

Andresen also enlisted the support of local politicians he already knew such as Senator Leland Yee, Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom, whom he knew through his business, and California Senate President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, who Andresen went to school with and who still remembers Andresen's mother as a compassionate yard duty parent at their elementary school. But there was very little direct contact with BSA. "We had no access to the delegates to the national BSA convention," said Andresen. "All we could do was run a grass-roots campaign with positive messages of inclusion and ignore the hate messages that some bigoted groups put out."

Scouts for Equality also lobbied BSA's corporate sponsors, and, coincidentally or not, some large sponsors, such as Intel, Merck and UPS, suspended their support.

"BSA troops have to be sponsored by a non-profit group," explains Andresen. "Some are sponsored by churches or religious organizations that have said they would disband if the rules were changed. So far, we have heard of about a half dozen troops that have lost their sponsors, and with it all the material they bought over the years. We will now work on helping them reorganize."

Gay scout leaders are still prohibited and that is something Andresen will continue to fight for. "Ending the ban on gay youth is a step in the right direction," he says, adding that he will continue to fight for what he believes in. Andresen and his wife have also joined the battle for marriage equality. He hopes that his town, his church, and his community will support him and his family in the fight that's still ahead.

Limited but Welcome Support for Policy Change

While some distanced themselves from the Andresen family, or voted not to support the push to change BSA's policy about denying membership to individuals based on their sexual orientation, others came forward in support. In January the board at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette supported the clergy's current policy of not writing Eagle Scout recommendations or signing off on religious awards for the Boy Scouts until the BSA membership policy was changed, and in February, members of the Lafayette Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) board of directors unanimously passed a resolution urging the Boy Scouts of America "to recognize the achievements of all Boy Scouts, including those who identify themselves as homosexuals." Others were very involved, such as Wendell Baker, the Scoutmaster for Troop 234 in Moraga, and Steve Tennant, the Committee Chairman of Troop 57 in Orinda, Eric Andresen said. "Both of these gentlemen have been involved with me every step of the way - Wendell's Troop actually 'adopted' me and Ryan after we were kicked out of Troop 212," wrote Andresen in an email. "Both Wendell and Steve have been instrumental in getting our local Council to be the first to take a support position on the current policy being considered by BSA, too."

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