

Wiccans, earth-lovers, do-gooders: There's a 'scouting' group for your kid

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September 10, 2013, 4:55 pm

NBCNews.com



Courtesy of Earth Champs Earth Champs learn about nature during a hike in Huntley Meadows Park in Alexandria, Va.

The Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts have earned their badges for controversy in recent years, and alternative groups are reaping the benefits.

Earlier this month, a faith-based organization upset that the Boy Scouts will now accept openly gay youth became the latest to form its own program for kids and teens, with a focus on sexual purity.

Other upstarts report their ranks are growing – whether they cater to God-fearing girls, old-school camping enthusiasts or even pint-sized pagans.



Courtesy of the Navigators The Navigators camp out July 13, in Mount Madonna State Park, Calif. The kids learned to start a fire with flint and steel. They also recited the Navigators Moral Compass with the help of Senior Navigators. After that, it was time for S'Mores. The program includes Senior Navigators and Junior Navigators, and one of the philosophies is to have mixed-age activities in which older kids lead and mentor younger ones.

“The last two to three years we’ve been doubling in size,” said Robin Bossert, the founder of Navigators USA, who has received 250 inquiries about starting chapters of the totally inclusive, coed, secular group since April.

American Heritage Girls, which launched a “Christ-centered program” in 1995 after the Girl Scouts dropped a mandatory oath to God, has surged to 30,000 members in the last five years.

“We’re growing radically,” said executive director Patti Garibay.

If the rising popularity of competitors has the Boy Scouts of America and Girl Scouts USA tied up in square knots, they’re not

letting on.

Even though membership has declined in recent years – amid uproar over their inclusion policies and curriculum -- both century-old groups still dwarf the newcomers: Boy Scouts has 2.6 million members and Girl Scouts has 2.3 million.

“While it would be inappropriate for us to discuss other organizations, we believe kids are better

off when they are involved in Scouting,” said Boy Scouts spokesman Deron Smith.

Girl Scouts spokeswoman Michelle Tompkins said the organization is “actively working to repair the problems” that have caused membership to slip but declined to talk about the impact of offshoots.

“We’re only concerned with Girl Scouting,” she said. “We don’t comment on other organizations. We try to make our program as appealing and inclusive as possible.”

Here are some of the groups that are making inroads:

SpiralScouts: Founded in 2001 by the head of the Aquarian Tabernacle Church, this 350-charter group was designed for wiccans and their ilk but is open to everyone. “It’s the basic scouting experience with a pagan twist on it,” said Michele Clausen, 40, one of the organizers.

For instance, to earn a birding badge, a kid might learn to recognize 10 birds in the wild but also study different cultures’ myths about birds. Dress uniforms include a “capuche,” a hooded capelet that would not look out of place at a Renaissance fair, and a braided, beaded macrame necklace.

Derrick Polen, 43, of Athens, Tenn., isn’t a pagan but he and his wife started a SpiralScouts “circle” with their two sons, ages 5 and 11, because they liked the all-comers vibe. “A lot of the Boy Scouts are in churches and if you’re not part of that atmosphere, there’s not an option,” he said.

The 15 families taking part did decide to skip the uniform, though. “The kids weren’t feeling the tunic,” Polen said.

Frontier Girls: Founder Kerry Cordy, 43, said she started her own program in 2007 because she felt the Girl Scouts was no longer skill- and badge-oriented. “It wasn’t the Girl Scouts that I remembered,” the Redding, Calif., resident said.

The group’s 1,500 members, who wear patriotic red, white and blue uniforms, have access to a thousand-plus badges for everything from kayaking to knowledge of worms. They also promise to “love God” and “be pure in all I do, think and say.”

“It was designed for heterosexual girls only,” said Cordy, who has also created a spinoff called Quest Clubs that restriction-free groups can use to form their own scouting program.

“Atheists don’t like my program,” she said of Frontier Girls. “The lesbian and gay community doesn’t like my program.”

But Abby Olson, 17, loves it. “No matter what you want to learn about, the leader will make a badge for it,” said the high-school senior, a member of the founding troop.

Baden-Powell Service Association: Since it reincorporated last summer, the U.S. branch of an international scouting association has added 35 charter groups with an average of 20 to 25 members apiece.

National commissioner David Atchley, 38, said the program emphasizes traditional scouting: outdoor skills like camping, pioneering, orienteering and public service. Helping little old ladies cross the street? Check. Badges for video-gaming? Not so much.

The group is coed, open to any child age 5 and up, and “completely agnostic” to religion and sexuality, said Atchley, an atheist father of five from Washington, Mo., who turned in his own Eagle Scout badge in 2008 in protest over the Boy Scouts’ restrictions on gays.

“A lot of our members come from no scouting background and haven’t been involved because of those policies,” he said.

Navigators USA: Three years after the Supreme Court upheld a Boy Scouts ban on gay members and leaders, New York City scoutmaster Bossert, 60, created Navigators, which now has 50 chapters nationwide.

It’s co-ed, fully inclusive and consensus-oriented. Instead of an oath, there’s a “moral compass.” There are no uniforms yet; that issue will be decided at a “continental congress” in the fall.

“Obedience is not a term we like,” Bossert said. “It’s more creative, independent.”

Homeschooling mom-of-two Amy Nichols, 39, signed her son up for the Cub Scouts but switched to Navigators two years ago over the gay ban. There are 25 kids in her Newport News, Va., chapter and a waiting list.

“My kids love it. I’ve been in the playground when some kid is being left out of a game and heard them say, ‘Navigators are inclusive!’”

Earth Champs: It was called Earth Scouts when it started in 2002 but underwent a name change a decade later after a trademark spat with the Boy Scouts. The mission remains the same: getting children ages 3 to 13 involved in activities that support human rights, economic justice, peace and the environment.

Melanie Froemke, 36, the leader of a 35-member chapter in Alexandria, Va., said that translates into passing out recycled pots at local festivals, putting on plays about conserving energy and doing river cleanups along the Potomac.

Instead of uniforms, there are T-shirts. “We went really homespun and made our own silk screen,” Froemke said.

Hopefully, the planet is big enough for two tree-hugging scout associations. In 2009, Hillsdale, N.J., marketer Aditi Sen, 49, watched the Al Gore documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” and started Kids for Earth.

There are four chapters up and running with another four due to come on line soon. “Nothing against the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts but I don’t think they are focused on living sustainably,” Sen said.

American Heritage Girls: Created in 1995 in response to what Garibay saw as the creeping

secularization of the Girl Scouts, the faith-based group now has chapters in 48 states and eight countries.

Like the Girl Scouts, it's single-sex and has a multi-level badge program and community service component. But it also emphasizes spiritual development and religious education. Tenderhearts, the youngest group, can earn a PRAY award if they learn about the Holy Trinity by making a pizza with crust, cheese and sauce.

"We do have girls of different faiths," said Garibay, 54. What they don't have is gay members.

"For us, the homosexual lifestyle is not compatible," she said.

That hasn't hurt membership, which has gone up by 48% annually for the last few years.

"We are growing exponentially," she said. "[New members] are really looking for something aligned with their family values."