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Eagle Scouts soar at Pinecrest troop, Cutler Bay family - Troop 457 in Pinecrest has a long history of developing Eagle Scouts while the Senzig family guided all five of their sons to the highest scouting accolade.

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Only 4 percent of Boy Scouts receive the ranking of Eagle Scout, but at Troop 457 in Pinecrest, more than 250 Eagle Scouts have earned that accolade under the 26-year leadership of Julie and David Ziska, or about 80 percent of the scouts over that time.

David, the scoutmaster, credits the scouts and their families as a key to the troop's success.

"We always encourage the parents to participate and to be at the meetings and even go on the campouts," he said. "We also just try to have fun, as long as we're having fun everyone enjoys it."

Julie Ziska, the committee chairwoman and counselor to the Eagle Scout candidates, said most troops have only one to two Eagle Scouts a year; Troop 457 honored 13 Eagle Scouts Saturday at Kendall United Methodist Church. An Eagle Scout is the highest ranking a scout can attain and requires earning at least 21 merit badges. The scout must also plan, organize and complete a community service project by his 18th birthday.

Among the projects of Troop 457's Eagle Scouts:

- Eric Hanson, 16, a junior at Miami Palmetto High, helped build kayak trailers for Christ the King Lutheran Church. He also landscaped the gazebo area and built light boxes. "It really taught me leadership and public speaking, and how to get everyone excited about a project," said Hanson, who plans to major in biology in college in hopes of becoming a doctor.

- Paul Nunez, 17, a junior at Miami Palmetto High, removed several invasive species from Coral Pine Park in Pinecrest and organized the building of benches by the soccer field.

"I hope to become successful and now I have leadership skills," said Nunez, who plans on becoming an orthodontist.

- Kevin Ellenburg, 17, a junior at Miami Palmetto High, built enclosures for special-needs owl monkeys at DuMond Conservancy at Monkey Jungle in South Miami-Dade. He also mulched more than 800 feet of trails and installed solar lights for researchers to work with the nocturnal monkeys.

Other projects included rebuilding wheelchair accessible horse-mounting ramps at the Good Hope Equestrian Center in Redland and building a greenhouse at Zoo Miami.

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"These men are really becoming the shapers of our country and communities and it's a privilege to be a part of it," Julie Ziska said.

The Ziskas became involved with Troop 457 in 1986 when their twin sons were young. There were no Eagle Scouts at first.

"We came in with a big group of boys and just kept building," she said. "We just remained close with all of the families and that's what kept our troop alive."

Troop 457 now has about 100 scouts and 50 parent volunteers, making it the largest troop in the South Florida Boy Scout Council. A recent study about Eagle Scouts conducted by Baylor University in Texas notes the process of becoming an Eagle Scout leads to a lifetime of leadership.

"We found that the effort and commitment required to earn this rank produces positive attributes that benefit not only these men in their personal and professional lives, but also benefits their communities and the country through the service and leadership they provide," said Dr. Byron Johnson, lead researcher.

The Senzig family in Cutler Bay knows that.

All five sons in the family have risen to the rank of Eagle Scout. Steve Senzig, a former Boy Scout, believes in scouting to keep kids on track. The youngest son, Kyle, 18, became an Eagle Scout in 2010.

Getting the top award hasn't always been easy. After his family moved from Sweetwater to the Cutler Ridge area when he was about 13, Kyle started getting into trouble and stopped going to Scout meetings.

"My parents made me get back in it and it really changed my life around," he said. "You see a lot of people doing good things. Seeing all those examples made me see what a bad person I was and made me want to turn my life around."

Kyle organized a haunted hayride for the Town of Cutler Bay. He is now studying secondary math education at Miami-Dade College.

Two of the Senzig sons focused their projects on the Miami VA Medical Center in honor of their father, a disabled veteran. Giovanni organized a group of artist students to paint murals on the patients' doors. To get the patients out of their rooms to avoid the paint fumes, he held bingo nights and pizza parties. Jean-Nicholas organized a party for the nursing home residents.

Today, Giovanni is studying history at FIU.

"Having your family there always helps, but the push comes from within. This is why I believe so few make it to this rank," he said.

Steve Senzig said he told his sons they couldn't get their driver's licenses until they became Eagle Scouts.

"All of my sons are in college and I firmly believe that the scouting program gives a stronger foundation in life," he said. "Even when I think my sons are behaving badly, I get compliments on how well they are behaved. I must be doing something right."

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