

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Young citizens, getting prepared to take flight

No matter what your political philosophy, last week's mourning for our nation's 40th president should have made you feel small. The funeral ceremonies were accompanied by fitting eulogies of Ronald Reagan's accomplishments and by discussions of his strengths and weaknesses. Hearing serious debates about his impact on history, from Star Wars to the definition of ketchup, should cause us to wonder what impact we can have on the society we live in.



Part of the answer came swooping into the City of Aus-

tin's Emma Long Park on Friday, the last day of this year's week-long Cub Scout Day Camp centered on the theme "Taking Flight." Two hundred and forty Scouts, ages 5 to 11, 30 siblings and 80 parent and specialist volunteers watched Capt. Kevin McDonald bring the Travis County Star Flight 1 EMS helicopter to earth. His precision landing itself symbolized concern for the well-being of others. He nestled the helicopter in close to large trees so that the young scouts could stand in the shade while they learned how the Star Flight crews save lives. For an hour, Captain McDonald and EMS specialist J.R. Esquivel fielded questions with inspiring frankness and patient concern.

The words courageous and hero were never uttered, but the scouts came away with new images of what it means to be brave in the service of others. They grasped the long hours of training and commitment required for air medical rescue. They also learned that modesty comes naturally to truly big people, those big enough to realize how small we all are in the grand scheme of things.

Asked about his most memorable mission in 11 years with Star Flight, McDonald said, simply, you are only as good as your last flight. His dedication was revealed in the detailed explanations he gave about the crew's work and about the helicopter's design and handling capabilities. Esquivel was asked what accident had been the toughest to handle. He replied that every accident is the hardest one for the people who love the persons in danger.

What lessons did the scouts come

away with? Care deeply about others. Work as a team. "Always do your best." And the reward is in the doing. Not one scout asked any of the Star Flight crew how much money they made or what kind of SUV they drove. In talking about his military training, Esquivel said that he thought a period of mandatory public service would be a good thing for young Americans. No one could argue with the results represented in his person.

The Star Flight visit was just one of many educational events at the camp. John Karger of the Last Chance Forever Birds of Prey Conservancy in San Antonio brought along a falcon, owl, eagle and hawk to teach about predatory birds. He talked about how we, as thinking creatures, can use weapons as tools and tools as weapons. For birds, this comes naturally. Bird talons are great examples. And a lesson in brave teamwork was taught by the scissor-tail flycatchers who grouped together to chase away a barred falcon from their nestlings. The scouts also studied minerals, astronomy and meteorology, rocket launching, mathematics and owl vomit.

Picture 270 children learning life lessons together for seven to nine hours for five days. Adults volunteering over 800 hours of time each day. Months of pre-planning by volunteers such as director Jerri Saunders. Local businesses donating the water that kept the kids hydrated (Sun Ray Water); delivering free fresh fruit and vegetables daily (Five Star Produce); providing, at no charge, refrigeration trucks (Fleet Maintenance); and donating kayaks every year (Austin Outdoor Gear and Guide). The scouts themselves did service work, from post-Memorial Day trash pickup to building six sturdy picnic tables you can use when you next visit Emma Long.

All week, the camp flag stood at half-staff in honor of our 40th president. President Reagan would have been proud that so many young Americans took flight as citizens during the week he was flown to his eternal rest. And many adults at Emma Long on the national holiday felt that spending a day with these children was both a fitting patriotic tribute to President Reagan and his greatest farewell gift to them.

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