

COMMENTARY

Believe in the magic of youth

If you want to make a difference in young lives, I have two recommendations. Our young men and women are going to need strong civic and personal virtues, ingenuity and self-confidence to straighten out the mess we have made of their futures. They will have to work together respectfully far better than we have for the last thirty years.

My first recommendation is to support the Boy Scouts of America when you see scouts out selling popcorn products. For eight years, as a den leader, assistant scout master and troop secretary, I have seen in our son and his peers the character traits, interpersonal skills and good social values the BSA instills.

The BSA is part of the international scouting movement founded by Robert Baden-Powell in 1908. It functions like the “ephebeia” created by the ancient Athenians in the 330s BCE in response to the same big problems American society now faces. The military and economic power and cultural prestige of Athens were in decline. Athens had no system of public education, so, according to classics Ph.D. candidate John Friend, young Athenians had a “pronounced disposition towards physical violence, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, gambling, sexual excess and thoughtlessness.” In modern terms, there wasn’t a virtue in the Boy Scout law they didn’t like to violate.

The two-year ephebeia program for late teens (“ephebes”) aimed to change that. Like the Boy Scouts, it had a single scout master, known as a “kosmetes,” or organizer. The ephebes were supervised by ten assistant scout masters called “sophronistai,” literally “agents of self-discipline.” The sophronistai were chosen from 30 men nominated by the ephebes’ fathers, who gave them full authority to act “in loco parentium.” The ephebes learned obedience, civic respect and cooperation through public competitions. They also roughed it outdoors while manning rural forts.

The BSA moves young men towards purposeful adult lives in a structured framework. Its one drawback is that it is not for everyone. The BSA excludes gay and lesbian parents and thereby their children. By contrast, scout organizations in the United Kingdom and Sweden have had successful inclusive policies for years. British and Swedish scouts, during rank advancement, address, with adult help, sensitive issues surrounding their own developing gender and sexual identities and those of others.

My second recommendation works magic in



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the lives of Austin children of any race, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, or special needs. The nonprofit Kent Cummins Magic Camp runs 16 weeks of summer camp at different Austin locations. Since they started in 1993, the camps have evolved so that they are now run by 13- to 15-year-olds known as counselors in training. CITs are former Magic Camp participants who loved the experience so much they have taken on teaching and management roles. Our son learned magic for six years. Last year, he went through CIT training and made camp possible for younger boys and girls.

Speak with professional magician Kent Cummins and you will catch his contagious confidence that kids will respond to “real trust, not pretend trust”; that “good people will do good things”; that kids of middle-school age need to assert their own identities and will respect others if they themselves are respected for who they are; that many kinds of physical and intellectual talents are needed for an all-inclusive camp to work well; that CITs will readily work long hours at all the tasks that make the magic camps run smoothly. They gladly do for others.

The training weeks for the CITs focus on goal setting, time management, leadership, teaching, customer service, respect and self-confidence. The basic rule is simple. Everyone at Magic Camp has to have fun. Everyone. Cummins explains that when counselors and campers grasp that rule, they make sure their having fun does not deprive others of fun.

Counselors view Magic Camp as “family.” For some, it is a second family; for others, it is the family they wish they had.

If you believe in magic and in the youth of Austin, I hope to see you eating BSA popcorn at the Magic of Austin Youth fundraising gala at One World Theatre on Oct. 26. For information, visit www.MagicCamp.com.

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