

Reflections on a Tragedy

Bob Mazzuca

Remarkable Day

June 13, 10:54 p.m.

I came to Omaha today. I had to. I had to be with my Scouting family, here where it is hurting the most. And, what I've experienced is, truly, remarkable.

Yes, there is a sense of sadness and mourning. Many, many people are asking how something this devastating could come to good people, from good families. The loss is real and deep and shared by the entire community.

But, at the same time, there is a sense of celebration and purpose. Pride over the way in which these Scouts have lived their lives. And, a driven, dedicated focus on meeting the needs of those who have been impacted by this terrible tragedy.

My day began with a visit to the Mid-America Local Council office. Space overflowing with volunteers and staff - everyone working in tandem, like a well-oiled machine to do everything possible to take care of the many families who have suffered. Magic was happening there. In addition to the solemn reality of the difficult situation, you couldn't help but feel the sense of excitement and enthusiasm and camaraderie permeating the air. I was overwhelmed.

Then, I had the honor of attending a memorial service for Sam Thomsen, a Scout who lost his life in the storm. More than 650 people packed the church. Friends, family, coaches, ministers, schoolmates, community leaders, strangers. Scouts and Scouters. People who wanted to come together to mourn and reflect. But, most incredibly, to celebrate the remarkable life of this young man and the way in which he had touched so many other lives, in so many positive ways. Thirteen years old. A prankster, a jokester, a beloved soul who blew others away with his sense of duty, honor, and loyalty. He came from a terrific family and a strong, supportive church. Scouting was a big part of Sam's life. His parents were building something pretty wonderful in Sam and, tonight, hundreds of us joined together to celebrate that gift.

I came to Omaha today not really knowing what to expect. What I found - on the one hand - was a high-energy, multi-faceted focus on taking care of the living and - on the other - a singular focus on remembering one life we had lost. I am moved. I am uplifted. And, most of all I am so very proud.

The world has come to the Mid-America Local Council. And, they have risen to the occasion.

God bless our Scouts.

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“My Boys”

June 14, 9:55 a.m.

It was 7:00 a.m. I was at breakfast in a little Marriott hotel in Omaha, Neb. And, I had one of the most poignant moments of my life.

My day is going to involve private visits with the families of our victims, memorial services, and other interactions that require the formality and respect of uniform attire. So, when I walked into the breakfast room, I was very clearly "a Scout." Not *the Chief Scout* ... just "a Scout."

A kind waitress appeared, ready to take my order; just she has done for what I am sure is a countless number of other customers over the years. Obviously, she didn't know me from Adam, but there was no mistaking the uniform and as she approached my table, tears swelled up in her eyes.

"I just have to tell you that I am so proud of these kids, 'my' boys," the waitress shared.

She had seen an interview earlier in the morning with one of the injured Scouts. He displayed the composure and empathy and maturity we've seen in so many interviews with so many of our Scouts over the past few days. But, what moved her to tears was this one comment from this particular young man: "Thank God," he said, "that this happened to us and not somebody else who wasn't prepared."

Incredible. And, just one small experience that captures the magnitude of what we are all going through, together. This is what makes Scouting so special. This is what makes our Scouts so dear.

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Courage

June 14, 10:00 p.m.

A Scout can face danger even if he is afraid." We know the phrase as one of the key tenets of our Scout Law. Over the past 48 hours, it has become even more meaningful, in ways I never imagined. Here, in an area stricken by tragedy and loss, I have heard about and even witnessed incredible acts of courage ... of every conceivable kind. Allow me to share just a few that may not make it into any news stories, but that deserve headlines of their own.

First, there is the courage of the mother of one of the Scouts who lost his life. I had an opportunity to spend some time alone with her and the rest of the family. We talked and consoled one another, even laughed a bit ... everyone believed that is what her son would have wanted us to do. When the moment seemed right, I handed to her a Spirit of the Eagle Award to honor the happiness and life-fulfilling experiences that the Scouting program made in her son's life. Prior to the tragedy at our camp, this is a mother who fully expected to hold an Eagle Scout medal in her hands. She had every right because her son was on such a solid path and he was determined to achieve our highest rank. It took all the strength she could muster to accept the award with grace and stature and joy. Courage, undeniably.

Then, there is the courage described by a Scout we visited in the hospital. He was one of the victims who sustained very serious injuries. A long line of stitches held together the wound on his head. With a huge smile on his face and this incredible energy in his voice, he shared what he experienced at the camp. He stated, emphatically, that he was "convinced I would have bled to death if my friend hadn't held my head together with his hands" until the paramedics arrived. That friend, of course a Scout, was injured himself ... suffering from a broken leg. Courage, beyond belief.

And, finally, there is the courage of the Scout we *didn't* get to see at the hospital. He had been there for a couple of days, but left just as we entered the building. Naturally, we thought he had gone home to focus on getting better. Instead, we found him and his family back at the local council office in the Scout Shop buying a replacement uniform for the one he lost at the camp. I asked him how he was doing. "Great!" he said with enthusiasm, looking up at me with his head held still by the brace around his neck. Courage, of an unusual kind.

I am *so* proud to be a Scout.

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A Special Father's Day Gift
June 15, Noon

I knew I had to come, but I didn't know what to expect. And, I'm a better person for having been here.

Over the past few days, I've become more committed than ever to strengthening our organization. I'm more determined than ever that the world needs us, and we need Scouting to be the very best it can be.

Now, I've been pretty darn committed to changing what needs to be changed in our organization to take us to entirely new heights. I know that isn't a surprise. But, something is different now. We have a whole new perspective on the exercise we've been going through. It has gone from cerebral to visceral; from intellectual to solemnly real. This is much bigger than any of us imagined. And, it is much clearer that we - the entire Scout family - has to succeed.

Never before has the value of Scouting been more vividly on display than it has been since the tornado came down on Little Sioux Scout Ranch. That validation is the gift of a lifetime. And, we cannot squander it away. It is up to us to make sure that Scouting is vital and vibrant for another 100 years.

God bless our Scouts.

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A Perfect Storm Meets the Perfect Kids

June 15, 9:25 p.m.

There isn't a cameraman anywhere who could capture the full extent of the utter destruction at Little Sioux Scout Ranch. It is massive. It is complete. It is unreal.

Today, Lloyd Roitstein and his staff did a remarkable thing. They opened up Little Sioux for a private visit by the Scouts who had been at the camp when the tornado hit. Families came as well, of course. So too did the emergency personnel who responded to the tragedy. It was one of the most emotional experiences of my life.

People hugged and talked and laughed. They walked across the fields hand-in-hand. They cried. Everyone sought to attain closure in their own, personal way. Spirits were remarkably high and the resiliency of those who had been impacted was strong.

At one point, the father of a Scout who had lost his life met up with a Scout who had survived. It was an intentional gathering. It was the reason this particular Scout traveled to the ranch. You see, the Scout had been overcome by grief because he wasn't able to revive the parent's son. The injuries his son had sustained when the tornado hit were just too severe ... he died instantly. The father and the Scout came together and embraced and healed. It was a sight I'll never forget.

The awesome power of the tornado was clear. Thousands of trees lay strewn around like an emptied box of toothpicks. In the trees that did remain standing, clothes, tents, and sleeping bags draped from their highest branches. There was absolutely nothing left of the ranch keeper's home, it was completely leveled to the ground. The local Sheriff said he had never seen anything like it and, given the hilly terrain of the camp, it was totally unexpected. "Tornadoes just don't come here," he said.

This was the perfect storm. And, seeing the camp as I did today, I have a more complete appreciation for the heroic response by our Scouts. These young men left even the most experienced of the paramedics awestruck. Amazed by how they used their Scout skills and triaged the situation well before the responders arrived. It is a case study in how to do things *right* in a terrible situation like this. Our Scouts have left a lot of lessons for *others* to learn.

This was an incredible force of nature. But, it was met by an incredible group of kids.

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Parting Words

June 16, 8:00 a.m.

Today I leave Iowa and Nebraska with an indelible, positive mark on my life. The past few days have been an incredible experience filled with sorrow and pride and pain and joy. I've been searching for just the right words to end this journey, and I've found them in the words of a Scout. The following is by Eric Kuehl, a Scout in troop 331. He wrote this beautiful prayer in memory of his good friend and troop mate Joshua Fennen, who we lost in the storm.

Dear God,

Please help all who are in need now. Help all the boys who have been injured or killed in this tragedy, and help their families too. Please find a place for Josh in your kingdom and help his family and friends who have suffered the loss of him. Tell him we miss him and all wish that it wouldn't have been his time. We are thankful Lord that you have given us a chance to be with such an amazing person. Try to give us a chance to look at all the things we have and be thankful for them. Help us to try to think of all the good instead of the bad in this time of sorrow.

Amen

Enough said.