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Trailblazing Eagle Scout Candidate Climbs New Heights

by Alan Pollock CHATHAMPORT



For Boy Scout Elijah Eldredge of Chatham, attaining the rank of Eagle Scout has been an uphill climb. Actually, many, many uphill climbs, sometimes helping to tote 300-pound timbers.

Under Eldredge's leadership, a small group of Scouts and volunteers have built a walking trail behind the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center in Chathamport. The trail brings visitors to the top of a hill offering glimpses of Ryder's Cove and Stillwater Pond. Once an overgrown footpath, the trail is now wide and free from obstacles, with benches at strategic overlooks.

On Jan. 19, Eldredge will go before an Eagle Court of Honor to present his

project, which will review the details and either accept it or send Eldredge back to do additional work. In any case, the project must be completed before Eldredge's 18th birthday this spring.

A passionate student of computer science, the high school senior chose the Marconi project because of his interest in technology and amateur radio.

"I was really interested in the Marconi station," he said, and so in 2012 he approached the Marconi Center board to ask whether they would be interested in hosting his community service project. The board suggested that he take on the walking trail, similar to one proposed earlier by a consultant. That project was estimated to cost \$21,000, but Eldredge was convinced he'd be able to do it without cost to the town of Chatham, which owns the property.

A number of vendors and professionals provided donations of materials, equipment and expertise, and Chatham Bars Inn donated the two benches. A small cadre of scouts and volunteers provided the key ingredient: manual labor. Many loads of brush were removed to convert the footpath into a proper four-foot-wide walking trail from the area behind the operations building 650 feet to the top of the hill. The Marconi Center is providing the finishing touches, in the form of three informational signs to describe the site to visitors.

One of the major challenges was preventing erosion on the hillside, which is mostly loose, sandy soil. Eldredge and his friends lugged 300-pound railroad ties up the hill, installing them on the pathway at slight angles to divert runoff. Because the area can't be easily reached by heavy equipment, and because dragging the timbers would have scoured the land, volunteers hoisted the ties on ropes and slowly walked them up the hill.

While there were some volunteers who pledged to help but then weren't available – something Eldredge said is to be expected in projects like this – there were enough workers to do the job.

"I learned how difficult it is to coordinate people," he said with a chuckle. Arranging volunteers means matching jobs with individuals' skills and abilities, all while keeping the project moving ahead. Family members and volunteers supplemented the relatively small number of Boy Scouts in Chatham's troop. Being part of a small Scouting group is something Eldredge is accustomed to; a few years back, he was the only Boy Scout in town.

"I was the sole Scout of Troop 71," he said with a laugh. It made for a funny display in town parades, but the condition didn't last. An influx of middle schoolers has caused the ranks to swell a bit since that time.

Eldredge learned other things during the process. He had to persuade the Marconi Center board and the Chatham Board of Selectmen to approve the

project, and he also had to work with Chatham Conservation Agent Kristin Andres to ensure that the trail was built without harming native plant species on the hill. He worked with Marconi Center board member Barbara Cotnam to ensure the path met the center's expectations and specifications. The job also offered Eldredge a lesson from the School of Hard Knocks.

"I came up the hill one day after we had done all the work on it," Eldredge related, and he discovered that all of the marker posts near the top of the hill had been pulled from the ground and tossed down the embankment. They all had to be set again, more securely this time, and that meant hauling concrete up the hill.

Though he won't be able to completely enjoy his accomplishment until after the project is fully accepted by the Eagle Court of Honor, Eldredge already feels pride in a job well done. His favorite spot along the trail isn't either of the overlooks; it's a small spot about 20 feet off the main path where a large, rusty iron base can be seen. The base once held a towering timber mast that was used as part of the original Marconi wireless operation. It had been lost in the thick mat of poison ivy for years, but Eldredge and his colleagues uncovered it and made it a focal point of the trail. The site is his favorite, Eldredge said, because it provides a great connection to history.

"Marconi stood in this same spot and looked up," Eldredge said, smiling..