

By Christina Quick

Much has been written in recent years about keeping young people in church. A 2007 study by LifeWay Research found that two-thirds of teens in Protestant congregations stop attending services within a few years of high school graduation.

As it turns out, such challenges are not new. Assemblies of God leaders in the 1950s were alarmed by a similar trend. Many young adults were walking away from the faith, and those who stayed were often unprepared to defend their beliefs. Ministries were needed to disciple and mentor youth. In October 1962, the national office launched a program for boys called Royal Rangers.

A rugged Texan named John Henry “Johnnie” Barnes led the ministry as the first national commander. An Eagle Scout, Barnes had planned a career as a park ranger before he sensed a call to ministry as a young adult. He envisioned a program that would bring together boys and men for fellowship, discipleship and outdoor adventure.

Barnes once said, “I have a dream of an army of Royal Rangers around the world lifting high the banner of Jesus Christ, making an impact on their generation for God.”

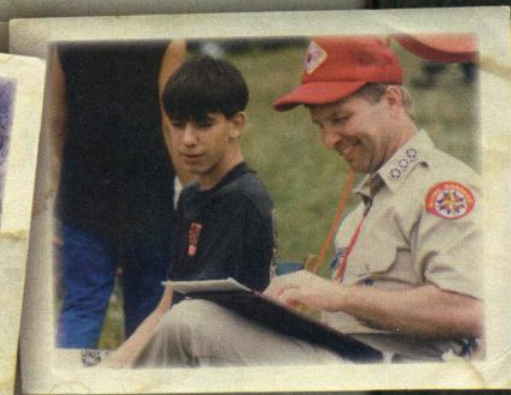
In 2012, as Royal Rangers celebrates its 50th anniversary, this army of men and boys shows no signs of retreating. Doug Marsh, the fourth and current national Royal Rangers commander, estimates more than 2 million boys in the United States have participated in the program. In addition, Royal Rangers has a presence in 86 countries around the world, with plans for further global expansion.

“I think my predecessors would be pleased with where we are today,” Marsh says. “We have a rich heritage for which we’re very grateful and celebrating this year. We’re also very enthusiastic about the future in ministering to the next generation of godly men.”

Marsh says Royal Rangers has been tremendously successful in its intended purpose of keeping boys in church and training them as



Johnnie Barnes, first national commander of Royal Rangers



future leaders. Many Royal Rangers have gone on to be pastors, missionaries and church lay leaders.

“There is something powerful about men investing in boys and speaking godly wisdom into their lives,” says Marsh, who earned the Gold Medal of Achievement, the program’s highest honor, during his years as a Royal Ranger. “When a boy gains an understanding of what it means to be a man and a servant leader like Jesus, he is set up for success in his spiritual life, his family life and every other area of life.”