

How Can you Help the Autistic Boy in Your Outpost: Kenslow Profile

This article started when we asked our Executive Committee members to seek some testimonies, specifically for the EveryBoy Initiative campaign. We were looking for boys currently in the ministry and men who were in Royal Rangers as boys but have transitioned to leaders. We were sent a testimony from Matthew Kenslow from OP33 in the SoCal Network. We were already familiar with some of his story. Instead of using it in the EveryBoy Initiative campaign, we decided to interview him and share more of his story. You will not only read his story but will also learn how to work with and encourage boys with other abilities to form friendships, to achieve, and to build confidence.

Matthew started Royal Rangers when he was five years old. He completed Straight Arrows and Buckaroos. Then, the group names were changed in 2001, and he started Discovery Rangers. He completed Discovery, Adventure, and Expedition Rangers, earning the Gold Medal of Achievement in 2013. Within in days of the GMA ceremony, he was working as a leader in Rangers Kids and then moved to Discovery Rangers a couple of years later. Discovery Rangers is where he continues to teach on a weekly basis.

Although Matthew's biological father was not involved in his life, his grandfather and Royal Rangers leaders filled that role, taking him under their wings and mentoring him. Matthew says that having the Royal Rangers as mentors and role models was vital in developing who he is today.

I asked Matthew about his favorite memories from Royal Rangers as a boy. They are centered around camping and outdoor activities. "My first one was in June 2003 at age seven, up at Pinecrest. For the next ten years, I attended campouts big and small. I will never forget the swimming, fishing, skits, canoeing, and even hearing a wild owl two nights in a row." He also shared about "hiking around the campus one night, all the different recreation activities, throwing tomahawks and knives, the pinewood derbies, and looking at a planet through a powerful telescope."

Now that Matthew is a leader in Royal Rangers, I asked him about his favorite memories as a leader. I think a similar thing drives all leaders to do what they do. They love mentoring boys and young men. Every leader will have the methods he likes the best. Matthew's joy is teaching skill merits. Astronomy was the first skill he taught on his own. He went beyond the knowledge base of the merit and incorporated visuals and science demonstrations to make it come alive for the boys. He says, "What I quickly learned, however, was that 8-to-11-year-old boys have the most astronomical questions that require a person with a Ph.D. to answer." He has also added science demonstrations to Weather, making barometers, thermometers, weathervanes, and anemometers.

Matthew started Royal Rangers at age five, but at age six, he was diagnosed with Autism, specifically Asperger's Syndrome, currently known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). What does that mean? I asked Matthew what symptoms or signs he recognized in himself from a young age. He said he was socially shy, easily distracted, loved to doodle, had a speech impediment, and sometimes didn't cooperate well. He also said that he had difficulty accepting change. Here are some additional symptoms or signs according to [American Psychiatric Association](#): "responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may

be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Again, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a continuum, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms.”

Achievement is one of the methods, or building blocks, for an effective ministry to boys. I asked Matthew how ASD affected him in achieving his goals Royal Rangers. For the average leader with a boy with an ASD in class, things will vary because every boy is different. However, this is what Matthew says made the difference for him, “None of them [leaders] had ever given up on me. They gave me equal opportunity to succeed in the program. They answered a lot of my questions and were willing to take time to discuss merits with me.” He also said, “Earning the merits, I would say, was relatively easy, as long as my commanders had time to discuss with me what I did for each merit on my own.”

Friendship is another of the methods for an effective ministry to boys. I asked Matthew about the friendship and relationships that he built in Royal Rangers. For many with ASD, bullying can be a terrible reality because they are socially shy, misread nonverbal interaction, and have difficulty building friendships. Here is how Matthew responded, “It was more difficult than easy to build friendships with other boys. I had gotten on good terms with the majority of them, but we were more acquaintances than friends. They hung out with each other before and after the meeting, only working with me if the other commanders partnered me up with them. This was due to my social shyness, which is a huge common symptom of Autism. Another common symptom is having a speech impediment, so I was not always understandable in my speech. I suspect both of those symptoms caused the other boys to not talk with me as much as the others. There was one boy in Discovery Rangers, however, who became my best friend and we always talked with each other.”

Building confidence in boys speaks to two other methods of an effective boys’ ministry—identity and leadership. I asked Matthew about building confidence in boys with other abilities. He said that building confidence for boys with other abilities can be difficult if they don’t feel like they are good at anything or are only good at one thing. I asked how he does this with the boys in his class. Matthew has made time in class for all boys to share their talents or knowledge about a specific topic. This could be a musical talent, short devotion, or knowledge about a specific skill merit. Matthew’s outpost uses the full patrol system and assigns boys to senior patrol leader or assistant patrol leader to build confidence and character; however, any leader can assign a boy to a leadership role for a quarter. If you don’t use the patrol system and you teach Discovery Rangers, then maybe each quarter a different boy would help with specific tasks during the meeting, such as taking attendance, passing out Bibles, or getting the skill merit supplies ready. As you rotate through the boys and give each one the opportunity to lead, all the boys will build confidence, but the boys with other abilities may begin to realize for the first time they do have what it takes to be a man.

Do you have a boy or two in your class right now with ASD? What are the takeaways for you as a leader? What has Matthew done in his class that any leader can replicate?

- Be patient with him.
- Be available to help him before or after the weekly meeting.
- Have a few tasks available for him if he wants to help set up the meeting.
- Give him motivation and positive encouragement.
- Offer him more opportunities and tasks according to his ability and willingness.
- Be watchful for bullying because it isn’t always overt. It could be the other boys ignore him.

- Partner him with multiple boys because you never know with which boy he will click and become friends.
- Don't require him to read aloud because concentration is difficult.
- Let him work on merits outside of class.
- Communicate changes in the nightly routine.
- Communicate changes to the Royal Rangers advancement system. (You may need to meet with him and his parents separately to explain the change and answer his questions.)
- Redirect outward vocal or movement expressions. (He may not be able to stop making noises, tapping, or speaking or singing aloud through the class. For example, if he is tapping or fidgeting, have him spin a pencil or use a fidget spinner under the table.)

For Matthew's time as a boy in Royal Rangers, he said that the one thing that had the greatest impact on him achieving his goals was "the equal opportunity for [him] in the program, despite Autism."

Matthew Kenslow has authored *Juggling the Issues: Living with Asperger's Syndrome* (River Birch Press, 2020) and has 1.2 million followers on Instagram. He has been interviewed by newspapers, radio, and podcasts. In May 2020, he began producing dozens of merit videos on YouTube. He has received many testimonials from all over the United States on how much those videos helped boys stay on track during the pandemic. After a lifetime in Royal Rangers, he created the blue Chemistry Basics merit, putting his degrees in chemistry and biochemistry to the test. Chemistry Basics was released in July 2022. Many leaders invested in Matthew. What will the boys in your outpost become because you invested in them?



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