IT'S A DIRTY JOB and He *Gets* to Do It!

by Mark Ray

The Host of TV's 'Dirty Jobs' Reflects on the Values of Scouting and His Belief in Hard Work

To judge by his résumé, Eagle Scout Mike Rowe can't hold down a job.

Since 2003, he has tried—and has occasionally failed at—more than 200 jobs, each seemingly more difficult and dirtier than the last. He has inspected sewers, wrangled ostriches, exterminated termites, shucked oysters, cleaned a fuel tanker, driven a garbage truck, determined the gender of chicks, collected diapers for odor analysis, demolished houses in post-Katrina New Orleans, and helped paint Michigan's Mackinac Bridge.

Rowe, 47, has done all these jobs—and dozens more—as the host of "Dirty Jobs" on the Discovery Channel. Now in its fifth season, the program showcases the jobs most people go out of their way to avoid. In doing so, Rowe celebrates the plumbers, painters, farmers, truckers, and laborers who are the backbone of American society.

Here's more from Rowe, who commented recently via e-mail on Scouting, achievement, and the value of hard work.

You became an Eagle Scout in Troop 16 in Baltimore. What were the highlights of your time in Scouting?

I remember experiences more than accomplishments. Summer camp at Broad Creek in Maryland. Playing ridiculously dangerous games like "swing the thing" and "British bulldog." Whitewater rafting. "Capture the flag" in the dark. Going to Philmont. Riding horses in New Mexico. Singing songs. Hundreds of campfires. Really bad freeze-dried food. Spam. Lots of Spam.

For your Eagle Scout leadership service project, you worked at the Maryland School for the Blind's unit for people with multiple disabilities. What did you learn from that experience?

I realized I had been focused on the wrong thing. The experience really wasn't about "fixing" the kids; it was about the value of trying. I remember being baffled by how much fun the volunteers were having when I just felt demoralized. I couldn't understand how or why they were so cheerful. It wasn't until later that I realized their attitude was a conscious decision. They found meaning in service and fun in sacrifice. These people had made an affirmative decision to be loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, cheerful, and brave. They were consciously living a big chunk of the Scout Law every day and having a ball because of it.

Mike Rowe took on processing scrap metal in St. Louis, Missouri, during one show.

There seems to be a correlation between "Dirty Jobs" and Scouting's merit badge program: Both require one to learn about many different subjects. Do you see a connection?

Both have required me to work in areas outside of my comfort zone. And both provide endless variety. However, the context is different. The merit badge program is designed to reward accomplishment and instill a sense of consequence. You meet the requirements; you get the badge. Otherwise, no badge. On "Dirty Jobs," my only obligation is to make an honest effort and do the work at hand. The work itself (aside from my paycheck) is the reward. I am probably the only person working who is paid to try.

Do you see any other connections between your time in Scouting and your career?

There is nothing in my career or personal life that is not connected to my time in Scouting. The easy examples, like first aid or knot tying, are too numerous to mention. Suffice it to say that I use the practical knowledge acquired in Scouting every day. And the bigger dividends, like an awareness of self or a sense of confidence, are too influential to imagine being absent. Remove Scouting from my past, and I have absolutely no idea where I'd be today. Or, for that matter, who.

One of Mike Rowe's dirty jobs involved repainting the Mackinac Bridge in Michigan.

Can you give us the genesis of your new Web site, *mikeroweWORKS.com?*

I gave a speech last year to the employees and suppliers of a company called W. W. Grainger, which sells industrial cleaning supplies around the world. I talked about my belief that hard work and skilled labor were in need of a PR campaign, and wondered aloud what that effort might entail. Afterward, the CEO of the company pulled me aside and offered to help me in any endeavor that might bolster the dwindling enrollments in trade and technical schools.

When the CEO of a multibillion-dollar company offers that kind of encouragement, you don't dawdle. I devised mikeroweWORKS primarily as a call to arms. I wanted to point out the many ways modern society has declared war on the traditional notions of work and start a conversation about the true definition of a "good job."

What do you hope to accomplish with mikeroweWORKS? What have you accomplished so far?

I hope to make a case for hard work and skilled labor by challenging the notion that a four-year degree is the only path to a worthwhile career. I want to create a Trade Resource Center—a comprehensive online destination that provides thousands of links to scholarships and apprenticeships and opportunities for people who aren't afraid to work hard and master a trade. It's coming along. So far, we've assembled a ton of data and started to compile it into a usable format. There are forums for tradesmen and a place to contribute links and other relevant information.

Our country is in the midst of an economic downturn. How important is promoting the trades during a recession?

There's never a good time to not promote the trades because these are the jobs that make civilized life possible. And yet, that's exactly what we've been doing for decades. Hollywood portrays working people in stereotypes so transparent it's laughable. Madison Avenue tells us over and over that our unhappiness is a result of too much work and not enough play. "American Idol" is the No. 1 show in the world, and its message is clear: overnight fame and fortune. Work today is portrayed as drudgery, and that perception needs to change, now more than ever.

The new jobs to be "created" in the coming months and years will not require degrees in English or art history; they will require an understanding of our infrastructure and a willingness to embrace a trade and get physically dirty. Skilled labor—the kind that actually results in the making of a thing—has never been unnecessary, only unloved. That will change, but not until we see those vocations as worthwhile and celebrate the people who chose that road.

The "Dirty Jobs" host isn't afraid to get himself dirty to complete a job.

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—Mike Rowe

A Scout's father recently asked you to write his son a letter explaining why he should complete his Eagle Scout requirements. The letter you wrote told the Scout not to bother if he didn't have the guts to see it through. Why did you take that approach?

Personally, I was always suspicious of those platitudes about determination and perseverance that adults love to throw around, so I responded with a very candid reply that essentially told the boy to take comfort in the fact that a decision to quit would put him in the overwhelming majority of other like-minded Scouts who had chosen an easier path.

The truth is, the letter was really meant for the father. There's a fine line between encouraging a kid when he's stuck and dragging him across the finish line because he doesn't feel like running. I wanted to suggest that the journey is supposed to be difficult, and the odds are very much against you. That's what makes the award an accomplishment.

The vast majority of high school graduates will never make it to Harvard. The vast majority of Olympians will never get a gold medal. And the vast majority of Scouts will never make it to Eagle. Some people will find those facts discouraging. Some will find them challenging. Regardless, Scouting prepares kids for life, and life is not always about succeeding. Quite the opposite, in fact, which is why not making it to Eagle can have its own value.

During one episode, Mike Rowe tried his hand at shucking oysters in a job at an oyster reef.

Anything else you'd want to tell an audience of Eagle Scouts?

The Scout Law is still one of the best guides for living you'll find. But if you're going to deliberately ignore one element, make it "clean." It's overrated.

Mike Rowe's Letter to a Potential Eagle Scout

Mike Rowe sent this letter to a Life Scout who wasn't sure he wanted to finish his Eagle Scout requirements—and to the dad who was pushing his son along. Rowe also sends congratulatory letters to Scouts who do reach Scouting's highest rank. See *http://www.mikeroweworks.com/scrap-yard/eagle-scout-letter/* for details.

Kelby,

Your dad asked me to drop you a line and say something inspirational that might persuade you to dig down deep and find the determination to make the rank of Eagle Scout. It's a reasonable request, from a father who obviously wants to see his son succeed. But here's the thing. The Eagle Award is not really meant for people who need to be dragged across the finish line. It's meant for a select few, and I have no idea if you have the guts to see it through.

Statistically, I suspect you do not. Only one out of a hundred Scouts make Eagle, so if you fail, there will be lots of other people with whom you can share excuses. Quitting now might disappoint your dad, but I doubt that he or anyone else will be overly surprised. Anytime 99 out of 100 people do the same thing, it's not exactly a shock.

I'm not trying to be cute with a bunch of reverse psychology. When I was 15, there was nothing that anyone could have said to me that would have inspired me to do something I didn't want to do, especially a stranger with a TV show. So I'm not going to assume you're any different or pretend that I have some influence or insight that you haven't already heard from a dozen other people who actually know and care about you. I'll just tell you straight up that doing something extraordinary can be very lonely, and most people simply aren't cut out for it. Being an Eagle Scout requires you to be different than most everyone around you, and being different is really, really hard. That's why the award is called "an accomplishment."

Personally, and for whatever it's worth, the best decisions I've made in my own life are those decisions that put me on the outside of being cool.

Singing in the opera, working in home shopping, starring in the school play when the entire football team laughed at me, and especially earning my Eagle were all choices that required sacrifice, hard work, and delayed gratification. I have no idea if you possess those qualities or even envy them. But I can tell you for certain that not getting your Eagle will be one of the easiest things you've ever done.

Whatever you decide to do, Kelby, it's important to remember that the decision is yours. Not your Dad's, not your friend's, and not your Scoutmaster's. And you'll own that decision for the rest of your life.

Good luck, Mike