

# Eagle Scout Promotes VFW Youth Programs

## A college student in Florida remains in close contact with a VFW Post in Tampa that encouraged his development during his formative years

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When N’Jhari Jackson was 12, he earned the coveted title of Eagle Scout for his Eagle project called “NJ’s Love to the Rescue.”

To achieve this honor, a Scout plans and develops a service project and must also earn at least 21 merit badges.

Belonging to Boy Scout Troop 142, Jackson raised money for an automated external defibrillator and first-aid kit for the Paideia School of Tampa in Florida, which he attended at the time.

His Eagle Scout endeavors did not stop at 21 badges. Jackson went on to earn all 139 merit badges the Boy Scouts offered at that time. The last one he earned was the Bugle Merit, which took him three years to do.

“My mom always told me if you aren’t going to finish something, don’t start it,” Jackson said. “It was incredibly hard, the hardest one to earn, but I did it.”

The idea came to Jackson when he was attending the funeral of his grandfather, Riney Lee Lewis Sr., at Lincoln National Cemetery in Illinois.

There, Jackson noticed that “Taps” was being played via a recording at another veterans’ service. He didn’t think that was fair.

It was Jackson’s grandfather, who earned a Purple Heart while serving in Vietnam, who first introduced him to Boy Scouts and also to other veterans. His grandfather even made veteran introductions to Jackson via Facetime on occasion.

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“He was definitely someone I looked up to,” Jackson said. “I told my granddad that I would make my Cub Scout and Boy Scout uniforms look like his uniform, which was a motivating factor to earn Eagle Scout. I really miss our talks and how he introduced me to every veteran he came in contact with.”

### **A ‘REAL GO-GETTER’**

Jackson, who said he grew up in the VFW, credits his mom with putting him around positive male role models.

“She definitely put me in the right position in life,” he said.

Most particularly, VFW Post 10140 in Tampa welcomed Jackson when he and his mom moved there when Jackson was 5. Now studying sports media and journalism at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Jackson keeps in touch with the Post through members such as David Harris.

“He attends our Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen award programs,” Harris said. “He has grown up in the VFW, and everyone at our Post knows him.”

Jackson, who participated in VFW’s youth essay competitions each year he was eligible, promotes the program to this day.

“I like to help others know about the same opportunities I had,” said Jackson, who writes at the ESPN lab. “You just have to have the want to do it and apply yourself.”

Having that “want” to help others has never been an issue for Jackson. As a child, he started a program of delivering handwritten cards and blankets to veterans at the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital in Tampa, where his mother, LaShina Lewis, works.

“Just visiting with these veterans means a lot,” Jackson said. “I met one veteran about four years ago, and we probably talked for an hour. We still talk to this day and get lunch once in a while.”

Jackson also started a program for children in hospitals. Thousands of stuffed animals and backpacks with supplies have been delivered to patients in hospitals around the country as well as in Germany and China.

In 2017, VFW’s Department of Florida honored Jackson with its Eagle Scout of the Year Award. He also received top honors with the American Legion as its National Eagle Scout of the Year.

“He is a real go-getter,” Harris said. “In VFW programs, even if he didn’t come in first, he was still so energized and enthusiastic. He is a really good young man and comes from a

super family.”

In 2019, ESPN awarded Jackson with an honorary ESPY, given to athletes who give their all, on and off the field. Jackson played football, lacrosse and was an avid swimmer.

“You can be a great athlete, but if you don’t have the good morals as well, it cancels everything,” Jackson told ABC Action News after receiving that honorary ESPY.

Jackson, an avid writer who has authored three books with a fourth on the way, plans to work for a sports agency when he graduates in 2023. Regardless of the career path he chooses, Jackson plans to stay connected with VFW.

“I look at VFW as family for life,” he said.

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