



Girl Scouts lose members to Christian-based group

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By Angela K. Brown, The Associated Press

CRAWFORD, Texas — Donna Coody disbanded her 7-year-old daughter's Brownie troop and took her 9-year-old daughter out of a Girl Scout troop because she was upset over the organization's endorsement of two Planned Parenthood sex education seminars.



Donna Coody pulled her daughters from the Girl Scouts and put her in a Christian-based group, American Heritage Girls.

Waco Tribune-Herald
via AP

But Coody didn't want her daughters and their friends to miss out on camping trips, educational activities and service projects. So she decided in March to start a troop affiliated with the Christian-based American Heritage Girls.

"I felt like the Girl Scouts' morals were definitely lacking, and the girls needed another choice," Coody says.

American Heritage Girls was founded in 1995 by a Cincinnati-area woman and her friends who were unhappy that the Girl Scouts accepted lesbians as troop leaders, banned prayer at meetings and allowed girls to substitute the word "God" in the oath.

What started with 100 girls in Ohio has turned into a non-profit group with 2,800 members in 22 states. It has had a 40% enrollment boost since the fall, founder Patti Garibay says.

Troops must be chartered by a church or private school with the same basic religious beliefs as American Heritage Girls. Leaders must sign a statement of faith, but girls don't have to be religious to join.

The organization receives no government money and operates by donations, fundraising, membership dues and merchandise sales.

The girls do activities or service projects to earn badges. Each meeting starts with girls praying, pledging allegiance to the American and the organization's flags and saying the oath while holding up four fingers to symbolize God, family, community and country.

"It's people who really want a wholesome program for their daughters," Garibay says. "They're not religious fanatics."

Officials with the New York-based Girl Scouts say their numbers are up, too. About 2.9 million girls nationwide are in Girl Scouts of the USA, which was founded in 1912 and chartered by Congress in 1950.

The organization has not been deluged with complaints or had a mass exodus, spokeswoman Ellen Christie said. But if a parent takes a child out of Girl Scouts, the organization's headquarters may not find out about it or know why, she says.

"We are not a Judeo-Christian or religious organization at all. We never have been," Christie says. "We've always been a spiritually based movement."

In 1993, in an effort to be more inclusive to girls of all faiths, the Girl Scouts decided to allow youngsters to say "Allah" or another word instead of God in the oath: "On my honor, I will try to serve God and my country, to help people at all times and to live by the Girl Scout law."

The Girl Scouts also does not have "a discrimination policy," meaning that the organization is open to all, including gay Scout leaders and girls.

However, the organization takes no position on sex education or abortion, Christie said.

Those polarizing topics are what led to a Girl Scout cookie boycott in the Waco area last month after some parents found out that the Bluebonnet Council of Girl Scouts, which oversees troops in Crawford and 13 other counties, endorsed two Planned Parenthood sex education programs.

Pro-Life Waco, a group that opposes abortion, aired radio ads criticizing what it called the Girl Scouts' "cozy relationship" with Planned Parenthood and urged people not to buy cookies.

Coody and some other mothers in Crawford, about 20 miles west of Waco, joined the boycott. They also were upset that the Bluebonnet Council

gave the executive director of Planned Parenthood of Central Texas a "woman of distinction" award last year.

The Bluebonnet Council responded by removing its logo from materials related to sex education programs sponsored by Planned Parenthood, a national organization that provides educational and health services, including abortions.

Council officials say they never gave money to the organization for anything, including the workshops.

Still, some mothers say they feel better about taking their daughters out of Girl Scouts.

"The more I know about the Girl Scouts, the happier I am not to be in it," says Lisa Aguilar, who pulled her daughter from a Crawford troop last month.