



## Peer-to-Peer: The OA Scoutreach Mentoring Program

*By Kathy Vilim DaGroomes  
Photographs by Vince Heptig*

- [A Chance to Serve -- And Recognition, Too](#)



Starting with a clove hitch knot, mentor Garrett Saito (center) shows Christian Argueta (left) and Matthew Shioi the ins and outs of square lashing.

Some young boys grasp basic Scouting skills within a short time of joining a troop. Others need more time and someone to look up to. The Order of the Arrow's Scoutreach Mentoring program tries to fill that gap.

Joel Garay remembers the day last summer when he taught pioneering skills to a group of seventh graders in South Gate, Calif. The boys gathered around Garay, expecting to learn about knot tying. But the older Scout threw them a curve. He told them they were going to build a 15-foot-long monkey bridge.

"Wow! That's hard!" one of the unsure youngsters piped up. "Can't we just buy a monkey bridge?"

Garay laughed. Then he got creative.



As an OA Scoutreach Mentor in the Siwinis Lodge in the Los Angeles Area Council (LAAC), Garay is part of one of Scouting's most rewarding, though perhaps least-visible, programs. He was training the inexperienced boys in a variety of outdoor skills.

The mentoring program offers young boys the instruction they need to acquire a wealth of practical knowledge. But its real value comes from the tantalizing taste it offers of the entire spectrum of Scouting.

Garay's teaching techniques suggest that the OA's service to troops is the perfect way to help them deliver a quality program. To achieve success, though, mentors must get buy-in from the boys.

### **The mentor's way**

After demonstrating basic skills, Garay and fellow Siwinis Lodge Arrowman Christian Herrera encouraged the young Scouts to study the drawing of a monkey bridge in The Boy Scout Handbook. But the group still peppered the mentors with questions.

"What're these for?" they asked, pointing to the pegs they would pound into the ground.

"Why are we doing the lashings on this side?" they queried, while knotting cords to an A trestle.

Garay and Herrera worked patiently with the young Scouts until they got it. "As soon as they understood the logic of the tasks," Garay says, "they were OK." And as the boys absorbed the details, their initial lack of enthusiasm evaporated.

Five hours of intense outdoor labor later, with the 90-degree California heat taking its toll, the fatigued youngsters stepped back and eyed their finished product. Garay recalls that he could read the skeptical expressions on the boys' faces, telltale signs of one collective thought: I hope we built it right so that it won't fall down.

At just that moment, a passing Cub Scout looked at the bridge and exclaimed, "It's beautiful!" Satisfied grins soon replaced the young Scouts' apprehension as they watched the eager Cub Scout cross the bridge.

Soon, all 15 of Garay and Herrera's construction crew were clamoring to cross the bridge, jostling for position with cries of "Me first!" and "Me next." After all the Scouts had wobbly walked it one at a time, they looked up at the span again—this time revealing expressions of pride. It didn't fall down!

"What was really great," Garay recalls, "was that all the Scouts showed their newfound enthusiasm, continuing to ask me questions: 'What else can we do?' 'Can you teach us how to read a map?' 'Is that in the handbook?'"

## Team players

The OA Scoutreach Mentoring program allows rural and urban Scouting units to get guidance from the Order of the Arrow, Scouting's "National Honor Society."

Many troops in underserved areas don't have the experienced senior leaders to teach, run meetings, or take new Scouts camping or hiking. In the Order of the Arrow, peers elect members because of their exceptional service and leadership. Pairing the OA with this units began nationally in 2002. It reached the Los Angeles Area Council in 2004.

Longtime LAAC volunteer Camilo Castaneda first heard about the program at a national Scoutreach Committee meeting. A former district commissioner and assistant council commissioner, Castaneda believed too many of L.A.'s Hispanic population were unaware of the advantages Scouting could offer, especially for the area's children.

"In Scouting," he says, "we promote patriotism and citizenship, physical fitness, and character-building, and that's why I wanted to get more kids in L.A. involved."

Castaneda returned from the committee meeting with information on mentoring and shared it with his council Scout Executive Steve Barnes and others. Within eight months the council had adopted the program.

Bob Ulrich, Siwinis Lodge Adviser, says what impressed him most was that OA Scoutreach Mentoring goes beyond just teaching skills. "The real goal," he says, "is to show youth the fun and adventure they can have in Scouting."

"It's no secret that we have lots of gangs in L.A.," adds Rick Ussery, deputy adviser of the Siwinis Lodge. "But Scouting gives young people something else they can take home: leadership skills, fun, and the realization that they can find positive role models."

## Community impact



Thanks to mentor Joel Garay (right), Jacob Espinoza experiences a touchy-feely encounter with a snake.

Scoutmaster Jesse Barreras desperately needed role models when he helped start Troop 561 in 2004. Barreras got hooked on Scouting after he accompanied his son, Jacob, from Tiger Cubs through second-year Webelos Scouting. “Not many of our adult leaders knew much about Scouting then,” he explains.

Troop meetings, Barreras admits, were more like classroom lectures. The kids were getting bored. “I was afraid of losing these boys because we weren’t really doing much that was exciting for them,” he says. But when Barreras attended an OA Mentoring Weekend with Jacob, he was impressed with the methods Arrowmen used to share their knowledge.

Soon, Arrowmen mentors from the Wiyot Chapter of the lodge began making regular visits to Troop 561. The older Scouts trained the troop’s Scouts in skills such as fire starting, fire safety, and the proper handling of woods tools.



Gimme shelter: Alex Livernois (right) gets tips on pitching his tent from the OA's Joel Garay.

These days several members of Siwinis Lodge, including Garay, of the Rio Hondo District’s Wiyot Chapter, and former Wiyot Chapter Chief Collin Van Vleet, regularly mentor young Scouts at camp-outs and help train other Scoutreach troops in various skills. And the program has grown.

In its first year with the program, the lodge mentored four troops; by the end of 2007, the number was up to eight.

According to Van Vleet, who recently worked with the youth of Troop 561 in the urban enclave of Pico Rivera, Calif.: “Many of those boys might never get to try some of these things. That’s because their adult leaders are new and have never done them, either. With the mentoring program, we can give new units a push in the right direction.”

Van Vleet has taught the boys about lashings, knot tying, orienteering, first aid, and other Scouting skills. In addition, he has also conducted sessions on practical skills such as how to make a sling for a broken arm.

“The kids really enjoyed doing that for the first time,” Van Vleet says. “Hopefully, it showed them that Boy Scouting isn’t just about going to troop meetings every week. It’s also about learning important skills that they will be able to use later in life.”

Twelve-year-old Adrian Jimenez, of Troop 561, gives kudos to the Arrowmen for teaching him at least one special skill when his troop was earning its Totin’ Chips. “I didn’t know the

proper way to sharpen a knife,” Adrian says, “or any of the safety rules for handing a knife to other people. They took their time with us, explaining it step by step.”

That’s the attitude that impressed Troop 561’s assistant Scoutmaster, D’Anne Hutchinson (aka “Miss D”). Hutchinson noticed the one-on-one approach the Arrowmen took with the young Scouts.

“Boys tend to learn better from guys who are just a couple of years older,” she says. “And that’s the remarkable thing about this program. Plus, the OA’s service considers the real-life needs of Scouts.”

Barreras says he’s grateful that OA Scoutreach Mentors are helping his younger Scouts. “It’s so great for our boys to be a part of this. They see how they are supposed to behave by observing the Arrowmen. Once you attend one of their programs, you’ll know exactly what Scouting is all about.”

### **Bridges to the future**

Garay has fond memories of his crew of monkey-bridge builders. At an evening campfire, the once-skeptical Scouts' enthusiasm showed that they were brimming with confidence, cheering and yelling their lungs out, still pumped from the day’s activities.

Garay was pleased with the results. “It’s those little moments that the boys will cherish forever,” he says.

The OA Scoutreach Mentor has witnessed growing excitement within Troop 561 and among other mentored Scouts. “The program builds bridges to the future because the boys get a lot more interested in their troop and Scouting,” he says. “Not only that, but they can really become committed to earning their Eagle rank. That’s something they can apply to the rest of their lives.

“When I first started in Scouting, I was always the shy kid in the back. I didn’t participate much. But all the activities we did eventually helped draw me out. So, I think if you know you can do more, why not do it?”

## **A Chance to Serve—And Recognition, Too**

The Order of the Arrow’s opportunity for members to mentor boys in Scoutreach units is available in councils nationwide.

Interested Arrowmen can get an application from their lodge chief or from the Order of the Arrow Web site, [www.oa-bsa.org](http://www.oa-bsa.org). The form should be completed and submitted to the OA member’s lodge service committee chairman. Selected mentors will be matched with urban

and rural units. The booklet The OA Scoutreach Mentoring Program (BSA No. 11-205) can be downloaded from the same Web site, along with additional information. Click on "OA Scoutreach Mentoring" under Leader Notes.

Arrowmen who successfully complete a first mentoring program will receive an OA Scoutreach Mentor patch with a bronze border and a certificate.