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Confessions of a closet Girl Scout

By HELEN BEHAR

I was a closet Girl Scout.

From the age of 9, I'd been a proud and earnest Brownie. Outfitted in my officially issued tan uniform, knee socks and beanie, I loyally recited the Brownie pledge at the start of each meeting, getting goose bumps every time I uttered the sacred words. Although I didn't have the language for it yet, being part of a Brownie troop was my first real sense of community. During my short life, I'd been cloistered in a Jewish, lower-middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood. Suddenly, through the Girl Scouts of America, my world expanded. There were scouting ethics and values to embrace, and a motto to live by — the same motto for girls all over the country.

When I was 12, I "flew up." Graduating to the next level of scouting in a solemn, candlelit ceremony, I became a full-fledged, sash-wearing, cookie-selling Girl Scout. In the early 1960s, the merit badges that were possible to earn were limited in their scope. There was a decidedly heavy emphasis on our becoming good homemakers and hostesses. I made a great apron. There were opportunities for girls to dabble in health and safety, and nature activities. We learned how to tie a mean tourniquet. In spite of not being particularly outdoorsy, I learned the most efficient technique for starting a fire with twigs. I will never be cold if lost in a forest.

Simultaneous to all of this, I started noticing and being noticed by boys.

My introduction to sex was via a 16-year-old bad boy, a legend in our neighborhood. As a "hood's" girlfriend, I'd developed an instant notoriety. I had a "bad reputation." We'd walk down the street, his arm draped around me, his I.D. bracelet glinting on my wrist, and my skirt so tight I could barely walk. In the bad old days of 1964, girls who were sexual at all, or even ones who just dressed the part, were dubbed as "tramps." I may have been a tramp, but I was also a Girl Scout.

My boyfriend and the rest of my circle were clueless about my double life. Every Thursday evening, I'd scrub my face clean of my black eye makeup, comb down my teased hair and put on my uniform before sneaking out to my weekly Scout meeting. My secret was safe for quite a while, until one evening I was seen by one of my friends and outed as Girl Scout geek. Mortified, I quit the Scouts, never to return again.

Five years later, I was 17, pregnant, and not interested in having a baby. It was pre-Roe v. Wade. I was one of thousands of fortunate girls who connected to some Quakers and other good people who bravely navigated us through an underground railroad and helped us end our unwanted pregnancies.

Thirty-one years later, the Girl Scouts are making news. Scouting's priorities have shifted. No longer intent on molding girls into Susie Homemakers, the organization's mission is to encourage girls to become independently thinking, intelligent women, skilled and empowered in all aspects of their lives. Merit badges are now earned for proficiency in sciences, financial literacy, social activism and personal development. There's information on birth control available for pubescent and sexually active girls, provided by Planned Parenthood to the Girl Scouts. One of the merit badges now is called "Decisions For Your Life," which asks girls to explore the complex responsibilities of having a child. The Girl Scouts have been pro-choice for years. Who knew?

Now it seems that a Texas Christian radio station has asked its listeners to boycott the annual Girl Scout cookie sales because of the organization's practice of educating girls around birth control, and because of its progressive stand on choice issues. This boycott is seeping into other areas of the country as well. The Girl Scouts are being accused of trying to recruit innocent girls into a supposed lair of corrupting lesbians, who are strategizing to dismantle American family values.

Well, thank goodness. Finally, there's a decent rationale for my stockpiling as many boxes of Thin Mints as I can.

Got milk?

Helen Behar is a local resident.