



Photos by Kin Man Hul / San Antonio Express-News

Pack leader Yvonne Johnson joins her Scouts in the "ring of life" during a recent meeting of Pack 1004 at Columbia Heights Elementary. Pack 1004 is part of Project Aguila — an initiative started in 2011 by the Alamo Area Council to create "long-standing units" for boys on the South Side.

# Soaring to the top

Project Aguila makes it possible for more boys to enjoy Scouting

By Vincent T. Davis  
STAFF WRITER

The pounding of hammers rang in the air one recent evening in the Columbia Heights Elementary School cafeteria, as Maria T. Rocha helps her three grandsons prepare for their Cub Scout pack's pinewood derby race.

"These are my babies," says Rocha, who is raising her three grandsons and a granddaughter with her husband, Ramiro Ramirez. "My interest was to get them out into things."

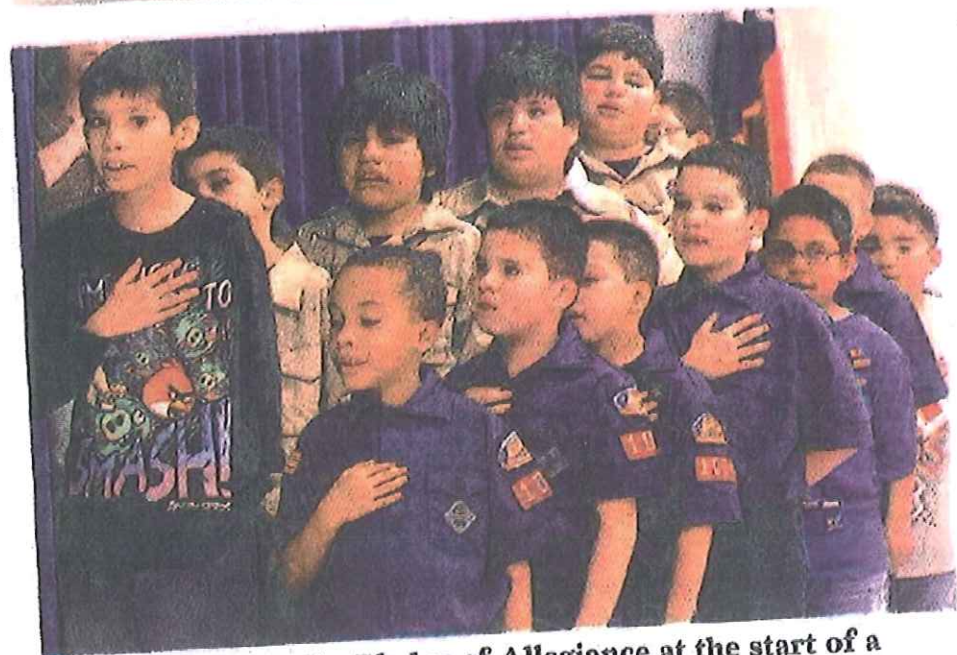
The boys, Lorenzo, 9, Daniel, 8, and Tristan, 6, nail silver dollar-sized wheels into blocks of wood Rocha's husband carved using a neighbor's jig-saw. As the boys shape their models into race cars, Rocha

talks about how Project Aguila (Project Eagle), a program Boy Scouts of America, Alamo Area Council, has helped shape her grandsons' character.

"I did not know where to start in getting these boys to learn respect, friendship and honor," she recently wrote in a letter to the council. "Thank you for what you have done and (are) doing for these boys. . . God Bless you."

Named for the Boy Scouts highest rank, Project Aguila is designed to get boys from families that otherwise could not afford it involved in Scouting. It pays for membership dues, training, uniforms, camp fees and supplies for three years, with the expectation that the packs eventually will become

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The Scouts recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of a PTA meeting.

Johnson helps Sc with the pinewood derby during a recent meeting the sch

# SCOUTS

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financially self-sufficient. According to spokesman Angel Martinez, the project is the first of its kind. Project Aguilar also encourages families to participate in activities with the boys. Martinez says the program brings Scouting to areas of the city where, for whatever reason, it may not have taken root.

"It establishes a platform where kids can flourish," he says. "And their interest can perpetuate longevity within the community."

## Project Aguila

Every Wednesday, from 5 to 6 p.m., Rocha joins parents and guardians of 41 boys to teach them life skills. Her letter is one of many heartfelt testimonials Martinez says the council has received since the project launched in August of 2011 on the South Side.

Focusing on boys in the first through fifth grades, the program began with three packs of about 100 kids. Currently, there are 14 packs with more than 400 boys and 186 adult volunteers. To celebrate this growth, the council last month hosted a field day at McGimsey Scout Park with the boys and their family members.

The program launched with five Harlandale ISD



Photos by Kin Man Hui / San Antonio Express-News

Ruby Perez (left) and Maria Rocha share a laugh while helping Scouts with their pinewood derby cars during a recent pack meeting.

elementary schools and branched out to Edgewood ISD, Northside ISD, Southwest ISD and one school with the School of Excellence in Education system.

## Scout Promise

Yvonne Johnson, Cub Master of Pack 1004, teaches special education at Columbia Heights Elementary. Her pack has 41 registered Cub Scouts and 22 active members learning values and beliefs with their families.

But before Johnson bestows a uniform and first badge to the boys, they have to earn the honor by learning the salute, Boy Scout promise and handshake.

She says working with parents has made the

boys more confident and she's seen their self-esteem grow as they've helped out with neighborhood food drives and school projects.

Midway through Pack 1004's car-building session, Johnson calls the boys to line up and march to the stage. They raise their right hands to their brows, give the Boy Scouts salute and then bring their parents and siblings to their feet as they recite the Pledge of Allegiance in English and Spanish.

"This is such a good program for the young men here," Johnson says. "I think if we start them as leaders now and they continue the program, their lives will change."

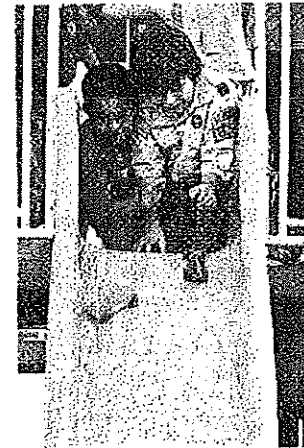
Before the boys transi-

tion to the Boy Scouts, they'll have to advance to the rank of Webelos, which stands for "We'll Be Loyal Scouts."

Reynaldo Gonzales says he's seen a big change in his son Joel since he joined the pack. He said the boy demonstrated one of the Scout tenets at church recently when he returned a \$20 bill to a woman who'd dropped it.

"I'm real proud of him," Gonzales says. "It's real promising to see him do stuff that some kids don't have the privilege to do. It's made him a real honest person; he's a real Boy Scout in the making."

Joel says he knows the Cub Scout promise ("I promise/to do my best/to do



Cub Scouts Seth Ybarra (left) and Alejandro Aguilar test their cars on a playground slide.

my duty/to God and my country . . .") by heart, thanks to his father, who helped him memorize the words.

For the 10-year-old fourth-grader, the best part about the Scouts is getting together with his friends.

"We talk about how fun it is," Joel says. "I like learning about Boy Scouts."

## Training days

After years of molding

young people into soldiers, retired Army Sgt. Maj. William Coleman Jr. took up teaching at Indian Creek Elementary School.

When principal Malcolm Williams asked for volunteers to lead pack 1015, Coleman once again took up the mantle to help youth.

An average group of 28 adults, including 15 registered volunteers, attend each Thursday meeting. Coleman says the pack's 51 Scouts have taken part in a variety of community service activities, including planting trees and flag-raising ceremonies.

Coleman has slowly worked Scouting values into the boys' lives and says he's observed the pride the boys display as they walk through the halls in their uniforms.

"It means a lot to them, and it's having a seriously positive effect," Coleman says. "We're really noticing a change and we're looking forward to building on our program."

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