



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Tools of the Trail: The Path to Manhood – Part 2

Guest(s): Mark Hancock

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- Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: Well, welcome back to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and on today's classic episode, we're going to hear part two of Dr. James Dobson's conversation with his special guest, Mark Hancock. They'll continue their conversation about Trail Life USA. They'll also discuss the poor decisions the Boy Scouts of America have made and how Trail Life can actually help develop and nurture a boy's spiritual walk with the Lord through their program. Mark Hancock is the CEO and founder of Trail Life USA, which has been in existence for over 10 years now. To date, there are over 1000 troops in all 50 states. Mark Hancock decided to create this organization to give parents a Christian choice for boys to build their faith and character in the beauty of the outdoors. Now let's join Dr. James Dobson and his special guest Mark Hancock for today's edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: Mark, I wish we could summarize what we've said so far, because there are a lot of people listening to us today who didn't hear the program last time. But the essence of it is that, Boy Scouts of America has been an operation for over a 100 years, I guess, a long, long time, and it has, in our view, lost its way. Because it was decidedly Christian in the early days, but more recently they have begun allowing homosexual boys to become members, that more importantly they have allowed scoutmasters to take that responsibility even though they were themselves homosexual and now transgendered boys have begun taking their place there. And there's an awful lot of parents who are not comfortable with that. Then the scouting organization, BSA has lost, how many boys?
- Mark Hancock: I really don't know. They have a number of ways of reporting their numbers, but we do know that it's been a significant number. I believe over the last 15 years, the official numbers say close to 900,000.
- Dr. James Dobson: I have in front of me a report showing that on May 11th, 2017, the Mormon Church began pulling older teens from Boy Scout's programs, approximately 330,000 Mormon youths. The church said the move was made to shift focus to spiritual, social, physical and intellectual goals outlined by the church. Your organization's not the only one that's concerned about what they're seeing.

Your purpose is not to get into a war with the boy scouts, as I understand, it is to offer an alternative?

Mark Hancock: Absolutely. Dr. Dobson, I really believe that a program like Trail Life USA was in God's heart a long time before we came along. And initially about 50% of our troops were formerly Boy Scouts of America troops, now we're finding that churches that never chartered an outdoor organization program and their church are embracing Trail Life USA. They look at that and they say, "That's something we want." We see how that can help our church grow, we see how that can change our community, we see that that's not just growing that boy or that's just not giving him a good opportunity, but it's actually furthering the Gospel. And so a lot of churches are embracing the Trail Life USA program even though they had no interest in scouting beforehand.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, if I'm a single mom or I have a husband who is interested in reaching out to my son in this way and there's not a Trail Life available around us, what do I do?

Mark Hancock: Well, at our website traillifeusa.com, there's a map, a national map that shows where all the troops are located and you can click on those little dots and it'll show you how to contact that troop in your local area. If there's not one close, there's also another tab that says, "Start a troop." And it takes five adults normally chartered by a church, and you would approach the institutional head of that church, the pastor, the priest, whoever's leading that organization, and we would work with you in helping that troop get up and running. What we're finding is people are starting troops and they're estimating, we ask them at the beginning, "About how many boys do you think you'll be serving?" And we find that within three or four months, they're serving about twice that many. So they're underestimating the impact that they'll have, but once they get the program in place, boys are coming out of the woodwork.

Dr. James Dobson: When you begin thinking about taking these kids out into the wilderness or into the outdoors area, there are four things you said they need, what are those four?

Mark Hancock: Well, we like to talk about the things that you're going to put in your backpack if you're going to go on a journey. You need a compass, you need to know what direction you're going in, and we would say that our compass is the direction that we give through our Christ-centered focus, it's our oath and our motto, and what everybody agrees to, that's going to keep you on course, that's going to get you to where you're going. You need a flashlight, we're in a very dark world, there's a lot of evil around us, there's a lot of fear, and these boys have. The different things that they hear and the way that our culture has just become so aggressive towards one another. And we have the Word of God, we promise, and the Word of God, and the promises in the Word of God, are the flashlight.

And then of course, you also need a map if you're going to go somewhere. And the map in Trail Life USA, is what it is that we provide as far as adult leaders who

have been down that road already? And they've lined it out, they say, "I know where this path leads." And they can provide a picture of what it is that the boy's going into. That brings a lot of peace and comfort to a young man if he's encountering the outdoors and he knows that that man has been there before him. It's the same way in life, if he's encountering challenges in life, what does it mean to go from junior high to high school? What does it mean to go through puberty? What does it mean to go off to college? What does it mean to be pondering a relationship? If we have Christian men who can speak into the boys' lives, leading those things, they're a guide on that journey for that young man, both a map and a guide.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you bring a Bible?

Mark Hancock: Absolutely. In fact, we tell the boys, "You want to have your handbook, which is going to tell you how to survive in the outdoors and what it is that you need to do in order to pursue your growth in Trail Life USA." Lots of wonderful principles in there. Many of them you would be familiar with them, because you've been talking to us about them for 40 years. And then also we tell them they need to have their handbook and they need to have their Bible. And honestly, those two books, it'll take them all away to being a good father, a good husband, and a good citizen.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Don't you often say they also need a mountain?

Mark Hancock: They need a mountain, boys need a challenge.

Dr. James Dobson: You're impressed that I remember that.

Mark Hancock: Boys need a mountain, they need a challenge. And I think that boys are underchallenged. And I think that if we fail the youth of today, it won't be because we overchallenged them, it'll be because we underchallenged them, because they don't have a chance to succeed, to take on something difficult. And we carry that into our adult lives, those experiences. I know I'm getting ready to send son off to college and I talked with him about this last week, I said, "Remember when I took you to kindergarten and we sat outside that door and I got down on my knees and in front of you and I said, 'Now, you're going to go.' And you were a little bit afraid of going into that room, but we talked about the things that you had done before that you were brave about and you'd say, 'Okay, dad, I'm ready to go in there now.'"

In your entire life, young men are going to face those things, they're heading into something new and if they have the experience of climbing that mountain of accomplishing something difficult... Of course, it's a safe environment, we make sure that they're entering with an adult that knows what's going on and that they're properly trained. Our program starts at kindergarten and it's teaching them skills from kindergarten so they're ready for that experience of taking on some of these challenges.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, what kind of spiritual dimension is incorporated into the camping experience? You talk about the Lord around the campfire? Is there a devotional time? Do you pray together?

Mark Hancock: Well, we like to talk about it like carrot cake, if you eat a piece of carrot cake, you're going to get carrot throughout the whole thing, you're not going to get big hunks of carrot, but there's going to be carrot in every bite. And that's how Christ is infused in our program, whether it's a trail badge where they're working on rope work or Godly values or home maintenance or first aid or Christian heritage, you're going to find Christ in there. You're going to find the Gospel message in there. And then the more obvious areas are where our troop meetings start and end with prayer, usually led by one of the boys, and then of course, out of camping, a lot of our troops will have a Sunday morning service. A lot of troops will rush back to get to their own church on Sunday, but they'll usually have a campfire devotional experience.

But because troops are individually chartered and we're transdenominational, we have a lot of denominations that charter our troops, the flavor in that troop is going to be as different as the flavor in a Sunday morning service. We rally around our Statement of Faith and our Statement of Values. And our Statement of Faith is very simple but very clear, it talks about the Trinitarian God, it talks about Jesus' role, the Holy Spirit's role, God's role. We rally around that. And then we have a Statement of Values that talks about things like purity and integrity and stewardship and service. And so we rally around those points, but those of course will have a different flavor and will be walked out in different ways from troop to troop.

Dr. James Dobson: Some of the more meaningful spiritual experiences of my teen years were in a camping setting. There's something about that.

Mark Hancock: There is. And we hear that all the time, even the men in our program, and they want to repeat that, they want to pass that on. They want other boys to have the experience that they had as young men at a summer camp or you're in the outdoors with their family.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. All right. Now, let's talk about your standard, this is really interesting and this is a place where I wish we had cameras that would help people visualize what you're talking about.

Mark Hancock: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Boy scouts has merit badges, and when they reach a certain point of proficiency, they get a badge and that is attached to their shirt, right?

Mark Hancock: Right. It's sewn on to their sash.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. You don't do that, but you do something that I think is even more clever. Tell us about it?

Mark Hancock: Well, we love what it is, and it's for our older boys around the sixth or seventh grade. They cross over in our program called The Navigators. And at that time they start tracking their advancements, we have a very robust Advancement program that starts at kindergarten, about around fifth, sixth grade, they start tracking their advancements on what we call the Standard. And the Standard is a staff or walking stick, and ours is actually made for us, it's cherry wood, it's imported, three and a half year old sapling that's been harvested just for us. And they nail these metal trail badges to the Standard. And there's 15 required trail badges and that takes about all the real estate on the Standard, but I have the one here, it's just a beautiful symbol.

We imagine that boys, years from now, you'd walk into a home of a trail man and you'll see the Standard in the corner of a room or above a mantle or something like that on display, because it is that type of a display, but it's very manly symbol. And at that time, at that critical point in that boy's life, that 12, 13 years old, the program that I've seen over and over again troops do is, they will award that boy that Standard as a rite of passage for that young man and I love it. I've seen it done where there'll be a bucket at the front of the room and it'll have these Standards in the bucket, and the father will go up with the son and the father will choose a Standard from that bucket and present it to his son. And in that transfer he's saying to his son, so many things, "I'm acknowledging that you're crossing over." And that's just a beautiful symbol.

And then that Standard becomes the thing where he carries all of his awards, his trail badges are nailed to that Standard. And then at the top of the Standard is a brass, a solid brass piece about an inch and a half tall, that's the Freedom Award. The Freedom Award is the highest award in Trail Life USA. It's awarded to the boys who go above and beyond and they are the cream of the crop in Trail Life USA.

Dr. James Dobson: It's about five feet tall?

Mark Hancock: About that.

Dr. James Dobson: And it's a blank. It does not have the awards on it. And yet once they put those gold kind of a medallion on there, there really are something to value, aren't they?

Mark Hancock: Absolutely. It's becoming his. And you could tell a story by it, the boy can go down, he can tell a story about how you earn those different badges. Then we have hundreds of elective badges that they're actually tied to the Standard with paracord, and those elective badges are laser cut olive wood discs that come from a family in Bethlehem makes those for us, so we think there's a lot of significance to that, that they're attaching those to their standard and that's

how they customize it, because there's hundreds of elective badges that they choose from and they add to their Standard.

Dr. James Dobson: How long does it take to fill that Standard up?

Mark Hancock: Well, typically you're going to see a young man achieving his Freedom Award at 17 or 18 years old. Very difficult to get any sooner than that, there's certain hurdles that they have to cross before they can do that, but there's a lot of-

Dr. James Dobson: Give me an example of one of those.

Mark Hancock: Well, the Horizon Award is the equivalent, if you're familiar with boy scouts, our Horizon Award is similar to the Eagle Award and it just takes a while to get that. You have to accomplish a certain number of badges and we time them out, you can't rush through them. We appreciate the value of mastering a badge rather than just checking off a box and moving on. So it takes them some time to do this when they do it right. And so you're talking about ninth or 10th grade, maybe when they're getting their Horizon Award, and once they earn their Horizon, then they're free to begin work on their Freedom Award, which involves a project, a service project to the community, there's a faith element, we call it the Majors and Minors Program. They have to get some majors and some minors in different areas, so it gives them a broad range of interests.

Dr. James Dobson: Majors and Minors being like college credit?

Mark Hancock: Yeah. We use that language. A major would be something similar to a week-long event, like maybe a mission's trip, would get them a major or maybe a project or some commitment to do something that takes that amount of time with their major. Then they have to get minors too, but they have to get them in different, what we call frontiers or different areas of interest. And that's how we help the boy be well-rounded, because he's not just focusing on let's say, heritage or on hobbies or on sports and fitness, but he has to get these majors and minors in different frontiers, so that he has a more broad experience. Maybe he had no interest in outdoor skills, but he decides he's going to get a minor in outdoor skills and that broadens his involvement.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, how early can a kid get into this program?

Mark Hancock: Trail Life USA begins in kindergarten and it's in the Woodlands Trail program.

Dr. James Dobson: So it's not separated cubs and scouts?

Mark Hancock: No, it's not. And I think that that's a really remarkable thing. When we looked at the structure of the program, because we wanted leadership and character and mentorship to be focused, we wanted the boys to be together like a one room schoolhouse. But they do break out into their own programs, but there's the opportunity for the older boys to mentor the younger boys. It's not a program

where they go at some point and then they transfer over and change a uniform and go to something else. They start in the same uniform, they start with the same title of a trail man, if you're a kindergarten, you're a trail man, if you're 90 years old, and you're an adult leader, you're a trail man. So they are trail men through the whole program. But the Woodlands Trail is kindergarten through fifth grade, and they develop in a different way because they don't have their Standards yet. They use patches that adorn with branches and stars.

Dr. James Dobson: They don't a...

Mark Hancock: They don't don't get their Standard, they're not quite ready for that. There is some level of maturity if you're going to carry a big stick around. But they work on things. They work in what we call branches, and the focus would be things like heritage, values, life skills, sports and fitness, hobbies, science and technology, outdoor skills. And inside those things, they're working on things like Christian heritage. They're talking about founding fathers, armed forces, Godly values, how to serve your community. These are kindergarten through fifth grade, they're learning these things, truthfulness, integrity or focusing on those types of lessons, first aid, simple tools and machines about astronomy, rocketry, all these things that boys enjoy.

And then of course, there's the normal outdoor skills that you would expect, which would be rope work and orienteering and camping and hiking and edge tools and fire safety. There's all sorts of things that the boys are working on. And it's a very robust awards program, they're earning these pins and these stars that they get to put on a patch that hangs on their uniform. And then they move over to the older boys program, that's when they get the Standard and they start to adorn that with the trail badges, and that goes all the way up through 18 years of age, and the highest award is the Freedom Award.

Dr. James Dobson: Mark, one subject that means a lot to me, because there's so much misunderstanding about it, has to do with the differences between boys and girls. It is still a cultural campaign by women to denigrate boys and men, and boys often feel left out of that understanding. And it goes clear back to the late '60s when the Women's Movement was so hostile to husbands and fathers and men, but it carries down. If you watch sitcoms on television, the men there or the boy is usually the fool. That's the message that's been given. You don't think boys understand that they're being disrespected and assaulted there? And so our purpose here and yours is not to be disrespectful to women, Jesus was the first one to really hold women up in high regard, so it is not to pit males and females against each other, but it is to elevate one another and recognize the value of one another. Girls should be valued for what they do and who they are, but so should boys. And I'm telling you, boys get the short end of that stick.

Mark Hancock: It seems like the boys do get the short end of the stick, and that what came out of the '90s in order to make some adjustments on behalf of the girls which they need, they needed those adjustments. And that tamed the boy approach, where we began to structure even our churches, our schools, everything, as places that

really favored girl type behavior, sit still, be quiet. That tame the boy approach has had a horrible effect. And when you look at the numbers, even the Department of Education in 2009, the report that they released, boys are three times more likely to be enrolled in special education, because we look at their behaviors and we think there's something wrong with them where they're just being boys. They're four times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD.

High school girls outnumber boys two to one, when you look at the top 10 senior rankings, the latest census numbers show, there's more young men living at home than ever before since the census was started in 1960. Boys, they're losing out and they're not developing as strong capable men because we're not letting them fully be boys. We're not releasing them to be boys, to recognize that thing that we're identifying as ADHD, I know there are some legitimate cases, but a lot of that is just them being boys. They need to move around, they need to be active, and that's a beautiful thing. They'll develop a strong capable men if we can let them have more of those experiences as boys.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay, Mark, we've come to a good point now, because there are people listening to us that say, "That sounds good. I want to get my boy involved in this." For that matter, mothers and fathers of daughters will want to look into American Heritage Girls. That's a great program too.

Mark Hancock: It really is.

Dr. James Dobson: We're not here to talk about it today, but we've done it numerous times on Family Talk and we'll do it again, because we need both programs. Today we're talking about boys, Trail Life USA. All right, tell parents how they can find you and tell pastors and board members of churches and leaders of churches how they can get in touch with you.

Mark Hancock: Okay. And I'd also love to appeal to men who are looking to mentor young men, and you go to traillifeusa.com, and there's plenty of information there. They can click on find a troop and it'll open up to a map that shows where troops are locally if a parent's looking to get their son involved, or if a man is looking to get involved in troop to mentor young men, and then they can also start a troop if there isn't one nearby. We immediately put them in connection with either a volunteer or a staff member that helps them go through the process of starting a troop in their local church.

Dr. James Dobson: What's it going to cost?

Mark Hancock: There's a fee for churches chartering, it's \$325 for the first year, and then it goes down to 195 in the second year.

Dr. James Dobson: Not for individual troops?

Mark Hancock: No. That's for the church to start to charter the troop, and then there's a \$26 annual fee for members. But most of the troops have fundraisers and they offset the expense of the troop by doing fundraisers.

Dr. James Dobson: You find this rewarding, Mark?

Mark Hancock: Oh, it's what I was built for. When I look back over everything that I've done, I'm amazed that I get to sit in the seat that I'm in, working with the people that I work with, both on staff and we have over 7,000 volunteers around the country who, like I said earlier, that trail men are the best men I know and I get to be around these men who care about boys, who care about the future generations, who recognize the importance of the Gospel, who recognize the importance, that it's to give a boy permission to live a little bit dangerous, to get outside of his comfort zone, try something he hasn't tried before, and to grow along with other boys in Christian fellowship and to be mentored by Godly men. That's a powerful thing.

When I think about what I'm doing, I recognize how it's benefited my own sons, but as you know, when you talk about legacy Dr. Dobson, there's a time that you turn back and you say, "I've got a responsibility towards other people's sons too." So I'll continue working at what it is that I'm doing until the Lord takes me in a different direction.

Dr. James Dobson: Thank you for caring for the nation's boys.

Mark Hancock: Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: And you will take kids into your program who are not Christian and hope to win them to Christ.

Mark Hancock: Absolutely. We will.

Dr. James Dobson: Appreciate you being back with us and give your family my love and regards and let's do it again.

Mark Hancock: Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Roger Marsh: Well, the outdoors certainly provides a great place for boys to develop or sharpen their faith amongst their peers indeed. That was the conclusion of our special two-part conversation today here on Family Talk featuring our own Dr. James Dobson and his special guest, Mark Hancock of Trail Life USA. Now, remember, if you missed any part of this part of the interview or yesterday's program, remember you can always listen to them by going to our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Now, if you are the parent or caregiver of a boy or a young man and you'd like some encouragement as you raise him to become a God-honoring man, you really should get a copy of Dr. Dobson's bestselling book called, *Bringing Up Boys*.

This valuable resource is available as our way of thanking you for a suggested donation of \$20 to Family Talk today. And you can get your own copy today when you go online, just visit drjamesdobson.org, then select the resources tab and then click on store. Once you're there, you can select the book *Bringing up Boys*, you can also pick up the accompanying DVD as well, truly a valuable resource for any mom or dad. Again, to get your copy of the book and DVD, visit drjamesdobson.org, select the resources tab, and then click store.

Well. On behalf of everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh, we pray that your family continues to grow closer each day that you walk with the Lord, and may God continue to richly bless you and your family as you grow deeper in your relationship with him. Hope you have a blessed weekend, and be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.