Autumn Emberlyn Pepper Rhodes

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Dear Ms. Stewart and the Honorable Board of Directors:

One of my favorite girl scout patches is embroidered with the phrase, “Girls Can Do Anything.” We wear it on our vests, we have t-shirts and website logos. Our leaders make this statement on a regular basis. Yet, the Girl Scout Activity and Safety Checkpoints prohibit Girl Scouts from doing “anything”.

There has been a push over the last few years to excite girls about S.T.E.M professions and activities. However, as Million Women Mentors reports, only 24% of women work in a STEM related career. One such career is Aviation. Aviation is a subject many girls take intrest in. Aviation provides the thrill of adventure, seeing the world literally from above in a whole new way, and is closed to Girl Scout groups because it is deemed unsafe by Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. Meanwhile, Boy Scouts have badge requirements for Aviation and Space Exploration. In the Aviation Merit Badge requirements, one of their options is to “Take a Flight in an aircraft, and perform a preflight inspection of a light aircraft.”

This past October, my girl scout troop wanted to attend the Aerospace Discovery Weekend at Sun N Fun in Lakeland, Florida, to learn more about aviation. Because of the opportunities for “First Flight,” we had to change our registration and bring parents as a Family/Friends camping weekend rather than a troop Girl Scout weekend. Along with myself, two other girls in our group signed up for the “First Flight.” Sitting with our parents, were were surrounded by packs of Cub and Boy Scouts with leaders rather than parents waiting to go on their flight. We were the only girl group waiting to go up that was not there with other family. The rest of the day we learned about plane parts such as ribs, what they do, actually made a rib, and so much more. At this event, the boys also excluded us from playing dodgeball and laser tag because none of them wanted to play against a group of girls.

Even at the age of ten, the lack of gender equality and acceptance is something girls who are interested in STEM and area like Aviation are subjected to. Last year, I was awarded a full ride scholarship to Aviation Challenge at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. My Mach I team consisted of 30 ten to eleven year olds. Out of our group, only six were girls. In my patrol, the girls were selected last. However, I built the best RV7 glider, was the only person who know how to make military corners for our rack, and rocked the survival skills. At the end of the week, I won the Right Stuff Award for Mach I. One of the other Mach I attendees was complaining to his mother that I only won because I was a Girl Scout. While I didn’t learn any of those particular skills in Girl Scouts, I have continued to develop confidence and leadership skills. If organizations such as Boy Scouts allow access to aviation programs, how can we promote the idea of empowering girls to do anything, if we do not allow girl scouts the same opportunities?

For several years I have wanted to be a pilot. I want to attend the Air Force Academy, earn my degree in aeronautical engineering and eventually pilot a mission to Mars. These are my dreams, and I have set myself goals to achieve every single one of them. Right before I turned eleven, I took my first flight (on any airplane) with our local Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter. That 30 minute flight was better than a week at Disney World. I have been fortunate to have two more flights and am anxiously awaiting the next three years so I can start flight school. Last week, I used Christmas money to pay my official dues for our local chapter and now spend Thursday nights, after cheer practice, learning about building small aircraft. If Girl Scouts is the largest girl oriented organization in the world, why are we not providing opportunities for girls to see the world, literally from above.

I have added a new goal to my dream board. That goal is to open the world of Aviation and flight to Girl Scouts and with your help, I know we can achieve it.

Sincerely,

Autumn Emberlyn Pepper Rhodes

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Nobarefeetproject.org