Bill Marriott

A lifetime of learning from Scouting, and he's only getting started.

Facilitating the requirements to be an Eagle Scout isn't easy for anyone, but for J.W. "Bill" Marriott Jr., it was somewhat more difficult than for most. The reason, explains the executive chairman of Marriott International, is that Troop 241 was based in Chevy Chase, Md., within the Beltway of Washington, D.C.

"I was a city boy and didn't have much chance to go camping," Marriott says. "I really had to work hard at it." The Boy Scout merit badge was particularly difficult. At the time, Scouts were required to find and identify at least 40 different birds—not easy in the middle of a city. But Marriott kept going on birding walks until he had spotted all 40.

He says the camping merit badge required him to spend 20 nights outdoors. But wilderness was nonexistent in Marriott's childhood neighborhood, so he spent most of them in his own backyard.

Marriott remembers another prerequisite for the Camping merit badge was to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together. A skill he says was one of the toughest he had to master during his time in Scouting. But Marriott feels the difficulty of these challenges was an essential part of their benefit.

"It was good to work hard to achieve a goal," he says. Marriott has that and one of the reasons why he supported the movement today—Scouting gives boys another opportunity and encouragement to work to achieve goals.

As an adult, Marriott has long helped the Boy Scouts' National Capital Area Council. His support has established the Marriott Scout Service Center in Bethesda, Md., and bolstered the Girls Scouts Reservation near Great Falls, Va., which hosts several Scout camps offering camping, hiking and outdoor fun.

More recently, Marriott sparked development for one of the Summer Bechtel Reserve's primary training facilities for leadership—one of his particular interests. "I think that teaching leadership skills is not done very often, especially for young people, and I think this is a great opportunity to teach those skills," he says.

Marriott spent four decades as chief executive of Marriott International, which has more than 4,200 properties in 80 countries, so his understanding and appreciation of leadership run deep. His father, J.W. Marriott Sr., started the company as an A&W Root Beer stand in 1923. It has since become one of the most recognizable brands in the hospitality industry.

The J.W. Marriott Jr. Leadership Center at the Summit Bechtel Reserve will offer weeklong courses for youth to help them build core leadership skills. Marriott stresses that these skills should include the ability to teach others as well as the capacity for compassion.

"I'm looking for young people to develop leadership skills and understand the importance of compassion for others," he says. "That's a major part of leadership. You have to learn how to teach others, because I think a good leader is a good teacher. And all those can be done here at this learning center."

Compassion is a character trait Marriott saw in his son, Stephen, also an Eagle Scout.

Despite Stephen's own struggles with a chronic and debilitating illness that took his life in 2003 at age 54, Marriott says his son always put others first.

"He was a very proud Eagle Scout, and one of the highlights of his life was the Scouting experiences," Marriott says. "We recorded it because with all his physical ailments, he never complained or said, 'Why me?' It was always, 'What can I do to help somebody else?'"

Stephen was involved in Scouting at an adult and served the National Capital Area Council like his dad.

As he grew, Marriott fostered his hearing and vision, and experimented other physical disabilities. But he had a long and distinguished career working for Marriott International and was a key part of helping the company develop a global reputation for embracing diversity. In recognition of Stephen's life and his values, the Marriott Leadership Center at the Summit Bechtel Reserve will stress accessibility. Bill Marriott considers supporting Scouting to be an opportunity to celebrate his son as well as the values that shaped his own career and the path of the company founded by his father.

Scouting, he says, provides invaluable guidance and training to strengthen the character of youth. "It develops a side of a young man's life that he wouldn't get in school or college," Marriott says. "It's a wonderful extra dimension in the development of the life of a young person."