

Girls Scouts CEO: It's more than cookies

By LAURA SCHREIER / Lincoln Journal Star

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Girl Scouts are a seasonal thing for most people, like Santa Claus or March Madness.

They arrive in late winter, distribute cookies and fade out for another year, until everyone starts craving Caramel Delights again.

That cookie-centered image isn't necessarily a good thing, Girl Scouts of the USA CEO Kathy Cloninger said Saturday in Lincoln.

The nation's top scout spoke to about 180 Lincoln-area volunteers, board members and scouts at a 95th anniversary celebration, where she laid out a plan to tackle the troubles facing the scouts.

People see Girl Scouts as an old-fashioned organization that just takes girls camping and distributes cookies, she added in an interview.

But scouts do much more - and the group needs to change its image and organization if it's going to fight shaky membership numbers.

"In order to stay strong for another 95 years, we've got to make some significant changes," she said.

Those changes include consolidating the scouts' 312 nationwide divisions into just 109.

Nebraska's five councils will merge into one no later than October 2008.

Leaders and scouts who attended were left with cautious optimism about the future of scouting - and questions about how the consolidation would play out.

"It's kind of scary," said Tannis Moore, a leader from Fairmont.

Each troop's council membership is an important part of how that troop works, she said.

Will leaders have to travel farther for training? How will they come up with money to change troop crests and uniforms, which now carry individual council seals?

Each council deals with different cookie vendors, so will the consolidation of councils mean an altered selection for cookie-buyers?

Cloninger and other scout officials said councils largely make their own decisions on such matters, so details will have to wait until the consolidated council emerges.

She did say the council would have strong regional affiliates to keep in close contact with troops.

Although the scouts still claim 2.9 million members nationally, the organization has seen a 4 percent drop in numbers in the past three years.

Cloninger congratulated the Lincoln-area council: Unlike most of the country, it gained members in the past few years.

The consolidation will let councils share volunteers and resources, and give leaders a simpler, faster decision-making process, she said.

The strategy includes organizing the girls into new age levels, brainstorming tactics for fundraising and

volunteer recruitment, and trying to revamp a slightly crusty image.

As a visual example of the self-reinvention, a poster flanking the stage read "Defy the Stereotype" and displayed a cute-but-tough girl hanging onto a skateboard - a far cry from the staid image that usually surrounds Girl Scouts.

Cloninger said the scouts promote science and technology activities, and the group has outreach programs for girls in juvenile detention centers and for children whose parents are in prison. Again, more than cookies.

While Cloninger's speech looked to the future, the event was still heavy with Girl Scout tradition.

Scouts wore their signature vests and ended their celebration with the linked-arm "friendship circle."

Vicky Wilkinson, another Homestead Council troop leader, said her scouts weren't worried about the consolidation - they were excited about having more chances to interact with girls in other councils.

"The girls think, 'Oh, we're going to have a larger pool of friends,'" she said.

Members of Wilkinson's troop said they didn't really think about the scout's image - they just liked the chance to do stuff with friends, such as a weeklong road trip to Nebraska landmarks.

The do service projects, go camping, hang out - "It's fun," said 14-year-old Victoria Kraeger of Raymond.



Girl Scouts of the USA CEO Kathy Cloninger, Girl Scouts from the Greater New York area and Bernard J. David, Director of nonprofit The Future of Life, Inc. kick off the 95th anniversary year of Girl Scouting with a tree planting ceremony, launching nationwide events celebrating Girl Scouts' tradition of building leadership through action that makes the world a better place. (Courtesy photo)