JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / WINTER 2022

LOVE EDITION





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ON THE COVER
Ridges at dawn — Max Patch, North Carolina. Photo by Scott Hotaling

A JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / WINTER 2022

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THANKS SO MUCH FOR juxtaposing the historical information on A.T. beginnings with articles from more recent hikers [in the Fall 2021 issue]. I learned more about Benton MacKaye than I knew before — and appreciated the spirit of the Trail that still draws hikers of the 21st Century. The collection of articles in this issue will be an inspiration for the next 100 years.

Anne Maio
Abingdon, Virginia

THE FALL 2021 ISSUE IS absolutely stunning! I loved the extensive history on the A.T., especially all the background detail of Benton MacKaye's fascinating life. I feel blessed to have so much of this national treasure in my backyard.

Bunny Medeiros
Abingdon, Virginia

THE FALL 2021 ISSUE OF *A.T. Journeys* arrived and it is a keeper. The cover is exquisite. The content bears reading closely. You did a marvelous job noting the first century of the Trail and blending the historical with the current. I have been hiking on the A.T. for a half-century myself and have the sort of reverence for it as one has for a family member. Thanks to all those who keep it going. What will its second century bring?

Barry "Loop Trail" Chafin
Louisville, Kentucky

THANK YOU FOR THE FALL 2021 edition of the magazine and its rich and thorough history of both Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery. I was especially intrigued by David Field's piece on the two men, and particularly his observations



regarding technology. While I never wore earbuds and was always somewhat dismayed to encounter many younger hikers who did, I nevertheless had a cell phone with me during my entire hike. It was comforting to my wife to get near-daily text messages assuring her of my safety some three thousand miles away in northern California while my son and I pursued our dream of an A.T. thru-hike. I was somewhat amused that, as David was lamenting the overuse of technology on the Trail he advised readers to "Google" 'Carrington Event'. It only goes to show why seeking out the solitude of the Trail is such a challenge, but such a necessity in this digital age.

William "Ironman "Sauber
Sebastopol, California

THE SPRING-SUMMER issue of *A.T. Journeys* was maybe the best ever. We tend to view the A.T. remotely through video and photographs, but your showing it through the eyes of artists was wonderful.

Will Skelton
Knoxville, Tennessee

WOW! WHEN I BEGAN reading "Trail as Muse" [Spring/Summer 2021], I was struck with how art was infused into this edition. I was both thrilled and inspired to let you know how much it meant to me. I was transported back to my high school Girl Scout days (1950s) in Silver Spring, Maryland, where our Troop "88" planned hiking and camping trips nearly every weekend. Hiking short pieces of the A.T. was my way of immersing myself with all that nature had to offer, and the beauty surrounding me in all seasons was something I never forgot. Later, while teaching at Penn State University, I had the opportunity during several summers to hike Mount Monadnock before a more challenging Mount Washington in New Hampshire where I enjoyed the Ammonoosuc, Jewell, and Tuckerman Ravine trails. Every mention of Mount Washington and the White Mountains brings a smile to my face, especially when captured in any aspect of art.

Elizabeth Hanley
State College, Pennsylvania

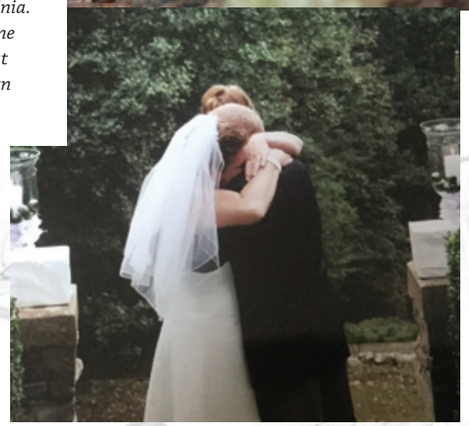
NICE JOB TO THE A.T. *Journeys* team on the Spring/Summer issue. I was excited to read it cover to cover, and I just wanted to thank you for the hard work. It's a keeper for sure.

Tom "Detail" Bieber
Boxborough, Massachusetts

A.T. Journeys welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

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From top: Sandi and her husband Chris on the Trail near Bears Den in Virginia. Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures; Sandi and Chris embrace at their wedding ceremony at Blackburn Trail Center in Virginia

IN LIEU OF THE TRADITIONAL PRESIDENT'S LETTER, FOR THIS ISSUE CENTERED ON LOVE, THE ATC'S PRESIDENT AND CEO SANDI MARRA WRITES ABOUT HOW THE MOST IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS IN HER LIFE HAVE BEEN NURTURED ON AND BY THE TRAIL.

A LOVE LETTER TO THE TRAIL

■ **BY SANDI MARRA**

THE BELOW-THE-FOLD HEADLINES OF *THE WASHINGTON POST* on Saturday, September 18, 2004, read: "Ivan Leaves its Mark on Nine States," "Tornadoes Pound Washington Region." Not exactly the best weather for an outdoor wedding ceremony along the Appalachian Trail.

Miraculously, that Saturday morning still dawned crystal clear, the world scrubbed to a high shine after the Friday deluge. Like with so many of our A.T. adventures before, and after, we just had better stories to tell, thanks to Mother Nature.

This is the story of a romance between me and my husband, Chris Brunton, that started and is continuing along the A.T. While for some couples the wedding marks the beginning of a life together after a relatively brief courtship, our relationship was long in the making with the wedding just the midpoint of the journey. And, the love we have with each other is mingled with the love we have for the Trail and all that it entails – physical challenges, personal rewards, and valued community.

MY BEGINNINGS / My start with the Appalachian Trail was one of those serendipitous events. I had moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1983 and began working for a nonprofit called the National Women's Education Fund. There I met a woman named Lynn Olson, who happened to be an active member with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC). She invited me out one weekend to a "cabin" she was working on called the Blackburn Trail Center. I did not grow up in a camping or hiking family, so I had no experiences or notions of what it meant to

be out in the woods or on the Trail. For some reason, something just clicked for me that weekend. I found myself enjoying the people, the atmosphere of the cabin, and the walks along the Trail. I also found myself fascinated with the idea of the A.T.

Even though I was from a Trail state (New Jersey), prior to this first trip I had no idea that this long, continuous trail even existed. As I learned that it was a national park built, managed, and maintained by volunteers, I became more enamored. I also fell in love with the community that surrounded the Trail. From volunteers to hikers, all came with a story and a unifying thread that helped a young twenty-five-year-old start, for the first time as an adult, to build a chosen family.

My Trail beginnings were as a volunteer instead of a hiker. I joined the PATC's shelter construction crew and worked first on building the Rod Hollow Shelter. I also learned how to prefab the buildings that sit over box privy holes, a skill that is surprisingly transferable to other types of building projects. My hiking experience began with short jaunts back from work sites or trips up the blue-blazed trail at Blackburn to the view overlooking the Shenandoah Valley. Eventually, I learned how to backpack as well as take on more leadership and management roles with the PATC and, eventually, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC).

IT IS HARD TO SUMMARIZE THIRTY-SIX YEARS . . . LOTS OF DAY-TO-DAY LIVING AS THE RELATIONSHIP MOVES FROM CHEMICAL-REACTION ROMANCE TO DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT, TO ONE DAY REALIZING THAT THIS PERSON NEXT TO YOU IS HALF YOUR BREATH. THE FACT THAT OUR RELATIONSHIP AROSE AROUND THE CONTEXT OF A BROADER COMMITMENT, DEDICATION, AND, YES, LOVE, FOR THIS PLACE THAT WE CALL THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL HAS ONLY MADE THE TIME TOGETHER RICHER AND MORE REWARDING.





From left: Sandi and Chris (a.k.a. "Trailboss") doing Trail work at Blackburn Trail Center in the '90s; The couple near Bears Den in 2018 – Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures

HIS BEGINNINGS / Chris's A.T. story also has elements of serendipity. His two sons were active in Boy Scouts, and he was approached by some of the dads who posited that, since Chris was a runner, he was the ideal person to help the boys earn their hiking badge. While Chris had walked as a child in England, growing up on the edge of the moorlands that eventually became Exmoor National Park, he really had no experience in hiking or backpacking. So, he went looking for gear and advice and ended up at a store in Oakton, Virginia, called Appalachian Outfitters. It just so happened that one of the part-time employees there was a man named Ed Garvey.

Ed was a leading volunteer with both the PATC and the ATC, as well as a strong advocate for the A.T. and the Trail experience. He thru-hiked the A.T. in 1970, taking copious notes along the way. His initial data collection, called the *Mileage Sheet*, became the foundation for the *Appalachian Trail Data Book*. In addition, he penned a combination memoir and the first real "how-to-thru-hike" book, *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime*. Not many people can say, "I met the person who literally wrote the book on how to hike the A.T.," but Chris, through the simple act of looking to buy backpacks for his sons, can make that statement.

Like me, he was enamored with both the reality and the idea of this long trail from Georgia to Maine. In fact, in his later years, he completed the entire A.T. as a section-hiker with his final stretch through the 100 Mile Wilderness. In the beginning, it was through Ed that Chris became involved in all the activities offered by the PATC – hikes, trail trips and, eventually, the shelter construction crew and work on the Blackburn Trail Center.

OUR BEGINNING / And so, this is where we found ourselves in the mid-1980s. I can't pinpoint exactly when I became aware of him, but there was always this red-headed Englishman hovering in the background. He was hard to miss, due to his incredibly high energy, strong hiking, and enthusiastic story telling. I also noticed that, while the crew was busy hammering and sawing, he would go off with loppers and disappear for hours down the Trail. Somehow or another, I found myself going along with him more and more on these jaunts. He was finishing up the flagging and building of what has become well known as the Roller Coaster section of the A.T., and he would take me out on Trail-siting trips. I also started to learn from him how high and wide you want to clip back weeds to keep the treadway clear. Somedays, we would hike for the pure enjoyment of it, which led to longer backpacking trips and, before I knew it, I was one half of an A.T. couple.

THE LOVE STORY / It is hard to summarize thirty-six years of a relationship in a few paragraphs. Super highs, and a few super lows, lots of day-to-day living as the relationship moves from chemical-reaction romance to deeper understanding and respect, to one day realizing that this person next to you is half your breath. The fact that our relationship arose around the context of a broader commitment, dedication, and, yes, love, for this place that we call the Appalachian Trail has only made the time together richer and more rewarding.

Chris and I both realize that it is rare to be able to share the same interest and values around something that has provided us with such joy, fulfillment, and personal and professional growth. In a way, it is the "family business." He is out on the Trail, digging in the dirt, as he likes to say, while I work to help the organizations that manage the Trail thrive and meet their goals of stewarding and protecting it.

More than anything, the stories of our relationship and the stories of our life on and with the A.T. are like differently colored threads that, when woven together, form this tapestry that is our life.

On the afternoon of September 18, 2004, we stood together at the top of the stairs on the lawn below the Blackburn Trail Center. The view east was clear and cloud-free, and the breeze, following the roaring winds of the night before, was warm and gentle. Family and friends witnessed our commitment to each other – all of whom either walked with us on our Trail journey or had heard the stories and knew of our passion for it. Choosing this location for that ritual spoke to our commitment to this place, this community, and this experience that is called the Appalachian Trail. Our lives are richer for it, and we hope, in turn, it will be richer as well from our lives spent working on it.

IMMERSION IN THE NATURAL WORLD BECOMES A PATH TO HEALTH, RESTORATION, AND FLOURISHING LOVE

A SALVE FOR THE HEART AND SOUL

■ BY ELIZABETH MCGOWAN



FOREWORD

I HADN'T SET OUT TO WRITE A LOVE STORY. NOR HAD I EVER PLANNED to pen a piece about my Appalachian Trail thru-hike, figuring the universe was flush enough with such blow-by-blow accounts.

What I had set out to do was make sense of all I had absorbed during a solo, continental bicycle ride I undertook, ostensibly to mark being five years cancer-free. The story that spilled out in what became *Outpedaling 'The Big C': My Healing Cycle Across America* surprised me.

Yes, I could comfortably fill chapters with riffs and perspective on the characters and geography I so cherished along my ride. But, I owed readers more than a linear recitation.

I needed to lay bare my arduous melanoma journey and, more pressingly, rediscover my joyous yet explosive father. He died of melanoma at age forty-four, when I was fifteen. How could I truly know myself – and grow – if I didn't understand his essence? Extracting such painful truths meant directing tough queries inward – the opposite of what a reporter usually does – and being vulnerable enough to answer honestly.

Upon publication, I remember breaking into a sweat when a television interviewer was effusive with his praise. The theme of my book, he insisted, was love and deep appreciation for my father, my spouse-to-be I met on the A.T., restoration endeavors on protected land, long-distance adventure, curiosity and the healing that allowed for such introspection.

At first, I thought, huh? Then, aha, I nodded in agreement.

Love doesn't come in an instant and remain. It needs a willing, diligent, flexible, and educable steward. Figuring out how to tend to a scarred but venerated landscape can be as complicated as nurturing a human relationship. Time and research beyond the superficial must be invested for any bond to flourish beyond fleeting.

After all, it's with that learning that love, and a commitment to the values we find worthwhile, can take root.

Reading a December tribute to cultural critic bell hooks reminded me that love is first and foremost about knowledge. Love not only "requires integrity," the recently deceased author said, but also a "congruency between what we think, say, and do."

Spot on, don't you think?

~ ELIZABETH MCGOWAN



EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 25
OUTPEDALING THE BIG C

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

ONCE I BECAME FIXATED ON A GEORGIA-TO-MAINE WALK, I WAS LIKE THE proverbial dog with a bone. I wouldn't let go. Yes, I was incredibly disappointed my fourth round of chemotherapy in autumn of 1989 hadn't extirpated my lung tumors, but was I just supposed to hope I didn't die at my newsroom desk? I figured an extended break from the daily demands of journalism and the needles, scans, and probes would be purifying. Weekend walks in the wilderness wouldn't suffice. I needed full immersion.

In 1990 and early 1991, between covering government meetings, writing feature articles, and plugging away on an exclusive investigative series about a child abuse scandal in the county social services department for the newspaper in Wisconsin, I began plotting my thru-hike. That was Appalachian Trail-speak for a continuous end-to-end

Previous page: Sunrise over the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers – Harpers Ferry, West Virginia; Left: View of the A.T. ridgeline in Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. Photos by Raymond Salani III

trek. I dug into Trail literature and began stockpiling a tent, sleeping bag and pad, stove, water filter, boots, backpack, and other supplies. I decided that my thru-hike should be a clean break. Sabbaticals weren't common at small daily newspapers, and I couldn't fathom returning to the same place and schedule. The few people who knew what I was up to told me I was courageous to embark on such a hike without knowing what would come afterward. Deep down, I didn't see myself as brave. If anything, I was afraid I was being cowardly by running away to an adventure in the woods instead of sticking with my chosen profession. But, staying put seemed too safe. To save my life and sanity, I needed to move on.

In the fall of 1990, a fellow newspaper reporter had made tenuous plans to hike with me. She even drove to Virginia with me in late winter 1991 to attend a hands-on seminar taught by a quirky veteran Appalachian Trail backpacker. Despite that effort, part of me sensed her enthusiasm for a long-distance adventure was waning. So, I wasn't too shocked when she backed out two months before we were scheduled to start. Instead of letting that setback put the kibosh on my trip, I reshaped it into a solo venture. I traded in my two-person tent for a smaller and much lighter model.

On the practical side, I had to arrange for health insurance coverage during my hiatus and figure out how to distribute my few belongings. Although I hadn't commanded exorbitant wages as a reporter, I'd squirreled away what I calculated was enough money to support a shoestring hike. I left my job by mid-March and began doling out my stuff to willing friends. Wilbur, my delightful Maine coon cat, and I flew to Massachusetts because my mother had agreed to be his caretaker. Back in Wisconsin, I finished cleaning out my apartment and preparing my gear.

Fortuitously, a Wisconsin colleague who had recently moved to the South Carolina coast agreed to drive me from her new home near Charleston to the Trail's southern terminus in Georgia. I just had to transport myself to her home in early April. I was pretty much a backpacking rookie when my South Carolina friend and I piled into her Jeep and headed to Springer Mountain in the heart of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Yes, I had day-hiked and had tent-camped for years, but that was a far cry from carrying my entire house on my back.

On the afternoon of April 13, 1991 — two days before my thirtieth birthday — I was standing at an elevation of 3,782 feet in the fog of Springer Mountain, poised to take the first of an estimated five million steps toward Katahdin in Maine's Baxter State Park. The fourteen-state footpath, completed in 1937 along the spine of the eastern mountain ranges, was conceived by Benton MacKaye, a Massachusetts conservationist and regional planner. In 1921, he published an article in an architectural journal outlining what some called a harebrained and unachievable scheme. Some friends and co-workers, I am positive, thought my hike was equally ludicrous. But, I didn't care. I just wanted to get started.

As I walked north in Georgia, following the white, two-by-six-inch rectangular blazes painted on trees, I discovered that backpacking agreed with me. I naturally bent toward minimalism and had always attempted to honor the adage about beauty in simplicity. Less really is more. And that didn't mean leading an ignorant, unfulfilled life as an angry or isolated Luddite. It was about being aware that a world prepackaged with an overabundance of bells and whistles often offers nothing more than a deafening cacophony. Choices are wonderful, but just how many flavors of mustard do we really need on the grocery store shelves? Comedian George Carlin was on the mark with his wise skewerings of conspicuous consumption. Our homes, he joked, were nothing more than multi-room storage bins for unbelievable amounts of "stuff."



Bluets on the Trail
Photo by Mike Adamovic

I felt so happy hiking. The walking was demanding but not draining. I had such an uncomplicated sense of purpose. Everything I needed was scrunched into my red-and-black external frame backpack. And with each meal, my load lightened. At night, I slept on Mother Earth's belly under stars undimmed by light pollution. By day, I befriended an assortment of characters — "Mountain Goat," "Weather Carrot," "Hippiechick," "Sleepwalker," "Six-Foot Hobbit," "Trail Chef," "Yin and Yang," "Problem Child," "Lollygagger," "Web Breaker," "Pregnant Rhino in Heat," "Judge Roy Bean," and "Bad Dog"—all pursuing their own adventures. On sunny days in Georgia, when delicate flowers known as bluets optimistically poked through rock crevices in the middle of the Trail, I would lift my face skyward and ask if this splendor ever had to end. When feeling observed while writing in a journal at one of the three-sided wooden shelters along the way, I usually spotted a curious white-tailed deer watching from the underbrush.

My body toughened up as it reset its center of gravity and adjusted to carrying up to forty-five pounds of gear and food. I huffed up grueling ascents in Georgia and tried to keep my toes from turning to mush as they slammed forward in my boots on steep descents. Acquiring a "Trail name" is a tradition and most hikers learn it's better to christen yourself so as not to be cursed with one you despise. Three days in, I became "The Blister Sister." Some hikers insisted I must be a nun, but I cleared up those misconceptions by pointing to a plastic bag laden with a less-than-sanitary collection of moleskin, tape, bandages, and other first-aid supplies for my afflicted feet. All I lacked was an attending podiatrist.

Besides the hefty pack, I had a heavy load on my mind too. Before I left for Georgia, my Wisconsin doctors had strongly recommended that I detour from the Trail for a checkup with an oncologist. The tumors in my lungs weren't all that worried them. They were also monitoring something small but potentially suspect on my liver. They gave me the number for a clinic in Charlottesville, very close to the Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I said I would think about it.

I muscled my way out of Georgia and along the North Carolina- Tennessee border, sorry I had arrived too early to see magnificent rhododendron thickets in bloom. By mid-May, I was about a month into my hike and feeling fine as I neared the Virginia border. About a quarter of the Appalachian Trail, some 525 miles, traverses the state. I promised myself I would make that doctor's appointment when I neared Charlottesville.

ON SUNNY DAYS IN GEORGIA, WHEN DELICATE FLOWERS KNOWN AS BLUETS OPTIMISTICALLY POKED THROUGH ROCK CREVICES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TRAIL, I WOULD LIFT MY FACE SKYWARD AND ASK IF THIS SPLENDOR EVER HAD TO END.

Trail hikers tend to bunch together, creating cliques and moving along with the same clump of people. I was content to walk alone, pondering and wondering. I didn't mind the company of others when I stopped for the night, but I was equally satisfied to pitch my tent in a more isolated area. I wanted to hike my own hike, not somebody else's.

Several miles into Virginia, I met another northbound hiker who looked slightly familiar. He introduced himself as Don. I recognized his Trail name, "Tiger Tunez" — a play on being a graduate of Clemson University and his last name of Looney — because that was how he signed the spiral-bound journals left in the shelters by hiking club volunteers who maintain the Trail. He had introduced himself back in North

Carolina where the Trail crosses the Nantahala River. I was heading north out of Wesser, a little town that caters to kayakers and rafters, and he was just walking into town when we first said hello. That's when I found out he had also started his hike at Springer Mountain on April 13, a few hours ahead of me. I hadn't thought too much of that encounter because thru-hikers usually engage in such chit-chat.

When I met Don for the second time near a shelter in Virginia, he offered me crackers from his backpack. That was unusual. Hikers are usually so ravenous that, understandably, they tend to guard their victuals closely. He also told me he had been reading the observations I was recording in the Trail journals. Before texting and cell phones, those dog-eared journals served as a Trail grapevine along what amounted to a linear community. Word traveled north and south. Farther along in Virginia, Don confessed that he had calculated how far away I was by the time and date on my journal entries—and picked up his hiking pace so he could catch up to me in Virginia. He had fallen a bit behind when a hiker friend joined him for several days in North Carolina and Tennessee.

As the responsible adult I prided myself on being, calling the Charlottesville clinic haunted me. I kept putting it off. The truth was, I was finding the Trail rhythm so magical that I wanted to keep it needle-and scan-free. Sometimes, lying in my tiny tent at night, my pack stashed under the fly and my food and toothpaste stowed in a bag hanging from a tree limb to keep it out of reach of bears and other critters, I would play a tortuous mind game. It went like this: If I did see the Virginia oncologist and he discovered more cancer, what would he and other doctors be able to do about it? It's not as if a melanoma cure had emerged in the last eighteen months. And, if the Virginia oncologist found the tumors in my lungs—or the spot they were monitoring on my liver—hadn't budged or grown, then the journey to Charlottesville would be a colossal waste of time.

After the cracker-sharing episode, Don and I started hiking together, off and on. We walked at about the same pace. He told me he had planned on hiking only as far as Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, the scenic town at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. The geographic halfway point of the Appalachian Trail is in Pennsylvania, at Pine Grove Furnace State Park. But, for hikers intent on reaching Maine, Harpers Ferry has a reputation as the "psychological halfway point." If northbounders make it that far, they are more likely to climb Katahdin.

In Virginia, Don and I started a pattern of hitchhiking into a town every seventy-five Trail miles or so to stock up on food at small country stores. At the checkout line one day, Don noticed a tabloid headline blaring the news of actor Michael Landon's liver cancer diagnosis. "Oh, that's awful," Don said. "I always really liked him." My stomach tensed. I just nodded.

When I realized Don and I were forming more than a casual bond — though we continued to pitch our separate tents —I was quite blunt about my own cancer.

"You've earned my trust, so I think it's only fair I tell you the gory details of my cancer surgeries and treatments," I told him as we stomped up yet another climb. "I've had the same sneaky disease that kept re-erupting in my father's body before it finally killed him. I never asked my father if his cancer ever made him feel like damaged goods. But, I suspect it did because I know mine does, at least sometimes."

Don had witnessed the cruelties of cancer in his own family. Several years prior, doctors had reconstructed his father's digestive tract after a cancerous tumor



Elizabeth at Springer Mountain on April 13, 1991, before beginning her thru-hike.

nearly destroyed the older man's esophagus. Don had moved home temporarily to help his mother with caretaking duties.

Despite my cancer confessions, Don's steadfastness and apparent devotion didn't dwindle. This very competent hiker with the bright blue eyes and sometimes hard-to-understand drawl from the South Carolina piedmont kept showing up just about every morning when I was executing what weightlifters refer to as a "clean and jerk" to hoist my pack onto my T-shirt-clad back. We would split a packet of Pop-Tarts or boil water for oatmeal before setting off. Part of the attraction was our shared values. We both appreciated the natural world and the ability to hike together without feeling obligated to fill silences. Plus, we were both devoted baseball fans.

When I asked why he wasn't scared off yet, Don told me, "Well, I like who you are. And I've never met anybody else like you." His appreciation for individuality resonated with me. I had to admit to myself—and out loud to Don—that I had not yet been fortunate to meet anybody like this quietly persistent and patient person either.

One day after we had hiked beyond Charlottesville, I told Don about the potential trouble brewing in my liver and why I had gone silent when he mentioned the headline about Michael Landon's cancer. Still, I said I was feeling great and figured I could wait until my hike ended to see a doctor. Maybe that was a cavalier exercise in foolishness and denial, but that's what I decided. By then, I knew Don had a habit of including a short summary of each day in his succinct Trail journal. It always included a plus and a minus. I asked him about his entries that day. His minus was mentioning the Landon headline to me, and his plus was hiking with me.

Not long after that conversation, we were closing in on West Virginia. Don told me he was lengthening his hike. Instead of taking the train home in Harpers Ferry, he planned to hike to Maine with me. His work in construction as a glazier evidently allowed him three additional months off.

Beyond West Virginia, we agilely two-stepped across the millions of pointy, sharp rocks that coat the Trail in Pennsylvania. During that summer's drought, we were in search of the next freshwater spring that hadn't dried to a trickle. I realized physical toughening wasn't the only change my body was undergoing. Something else—a total surprise—was also happening. Most unexpectedly, I was falling in love, or at least very strong like.

Friends can confirm that I can be sentimental, but

DESPITE MY CANCER CONFESSIONS, DON'S STEADFASTNESS AND APPARENT DEVOTION DIDN'T DWINDLE. PART OF THE ATTRACTION WAS OUR SHARED VALUES. WE BOTH APPRECIATED THE NATURAL WORLD AND THE ABILITY TO HIKE TOGETHER WITHOUT FEELING OBLIGATED TO FILL SILENCES. PLUS, WE WERE BOTH DEVOTED BASEBALL FANS.

I will never ever be mistaken for a hopeless romantic. Cinderella and those other princess stories never resonated with me. So, no, I was not—ick!—out there in the woods looking for some sort of fairy-tale love. That thought never crossed my mind. Mostly I sought time and space to knit my body and mind back together, away from demanding editors who always wanted one more story and physicians who always seemed to need one more scan, one more blood sample, or some other dreadful procedure.

I also thought maybe I could learn to be a little more forgiving with myself, the person I tended to judge most severely. I didn't feel as if I knew what wholeness was, but I was certain I had not achieved it yet. When I looked at myself, I often saw something scarred and broken, and could not imagine why anybody else would want to be around that for longer than they had to be. Humor was the shield I used to deflect the pain that sprang from those insecurities. If I kept other people laughing, maybe they would be distracted enough not to notice my messy shortcomings unfolding before them.

Don and I persevered. In New Jersey, we were rewarded with a black bear sighting and an incomparable sunset. In Connecticut, I had to break in new leather boots because the originals that had carried me from

Georgia were as smooth-bottomed as the pair of Keds sneakers I'd worn as a small child. This was, er, no small "feat" for a hiker who hadn't been able to shed the name "The Blister Sister." The vendor in Wisconsin who sold me the original boots had promised to replace them if they didn't last the whole trip. He followed through by mailing that new pair to a post office in New England.

Don met my mother on the Trail twice—once when she joined us with family friends for a meal and laundry session in Massachusetts, and a second time when she drove to Vermont by herself so the three of us could have a picnic on a town green. Farther along in Vermont, Hurricane Bob drenched us and everything in our backpacks for several days. The bog boards positioned over perennially wet sections of Trail were sodden enough to be dangerous. When I slipped on one board and fell hard, I feared I would "turtle," that is, land on my pack and my back with my feet in the air, unable to right myself. However, I was so physically fit by then that I bounced back up like a rubber ball.

One night above the tree line in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Don and I wedged ourselves into a space about the size of a dining room table with three other hikers who had pitched a small tent askew. It was the only flat stretch near the Trail. We were so tired after rock-hopping all day that we couldn't wait for our noodles to finish cooking. We ate them almost raw. There was no space for another tent, so we pulled on all of our clothes, wormed into our sleeping bags, then spent the freezing night trying to avoid and forget the rocky edges poking us everywhere.

By the time I reached Maine, I instinctually knew how to tackle the hand-over-hand climbs and squeezes required to crawl through spills of house-size boulders. More daunting were the rains, which transformed usually fordable, bridgeless streams with rocky bottoms into raging rivers. At one crossing, the current was formidable enough to sweep away even the most surefooted hiker. Stepping in it would be folly. Instead of waiting a few days for the water level to drop, Don and I stripped off our packs and inched across the maelstrom on crisscrossed fallen logs that we hoped would be strong enough to hold our weight. The key was keeping our eyes on the opposite bank, not the roiling wetness below.

We averaged about one rest day per week. On the others, we walked twelve to twenty miles a day powered by Pop Tarts, oatmeal, peanut butter, rice, and noodles, occasionally supplemented with embarrassing episodes of gluttony at restaurants in Trailside towns where proprietors were still foolish enough to offer all-you-can-eat buffets.

WHEN I ASKED WHY HE WASN'T SCARED OFF YET, DON TOLD ME, "WELL, I LIKE WHO YOU ARE. AND I'VE NEVER MET ANYBODY ELSE LIKE YOU." HIS APPRECIATION FOR INDIVIDUALITY RESONATED WITH ME. I HAD TO ADMIT TO MYSELF—AND OUT LOUD TO DON—THAT I HAD NOT YET BEEN FORTUNATE TO MEET ANYBODY LIKE THIS QUIETLY PERSISTENT AND PATIENT PERSON EITHER.

By the time we reached Baxter State Park in inner Maine in early October, we were lean, mean, calorie-burning hiking machines. Baxter is home to 5,270-foot Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Trail, and northbounders can be barred from climbing the mountain if the weather makes it too dangerous or if rangers have shut it down for the season. After a few days of waiting for dark clouds to clear, October 8 dawned as a cold but "Class A" day. As I hoisted myself up boulders *via* metal bars bored into granite and picked my way over rime-ice-covered stones, I laughed at the way Trail maintainers in Maine seemed to delight in choosing the most convoluted route. I cried at the thought of the journey being over but simultaneously relished the idea of trading my stinky sleeping bag for a mattress with sheets.

After Don and I summited Katahdin together, we joined several other thru-hikers for a few days of recovery at a cabin in Maine owned by one hiker's family. Within a week, my mother came to pick us up. The three of us spent several days exploring the state's rocky coast before heading back to my mother's house in western Massachusetts. A few days later, Don took the train back to South Carolina, and I made plans to return to Wisconsin. We had no idea when we would see each other again.

I had to launch a job hunt, but my overarching worry was my health. After skipping the appointment with the Charlottesville oncologist, I knew I had to act. Reluctantly, I made an appointment at the New Hampshire oncology clinic and drove there alone from my mother's house. Whatever happened, I would have to figure out how to live with the consequences.

A young, vigilant doctor examined every inch of my exterior and performed numerous routine tests. He then ordered a series of lung X-rays and promised to call me with the results.

"Elizabeth, this will probably shock you as much as it does us, but we can't find any spots on your lungs," the doctor said on the phone a few days later. "They're clean."

My Wisconsin doctors were just as shocked when I relayed the astounding news. They didn't ask about my liver, and I didn't bring it up, content to leave well enough alone.

No doctor had a medical explanation. It could have been a delayed reaction to the chemotherapy regimen. There had been no studies, of course, about the possibility of tumors disappearing after six months spent walking, drinking spring water, inhaling mountain air, and burning every calorie that noodles, rice, oatmeal, Pop Tarts, and chocolate can provide.

I had always thought it a bunch of malarkey that Norman Cousins healed himself by laughing. Where was the science in that? Now, I wasn't so sure. My questions didn't mean I was on the verge of shunning Western medicine. That would be ridiculous. Maybe I was just living proof that a body could regain equilibrium with a combination of chemotherapy and an adventure that seemed a salve for the heart and soul.

When I told my mother the astonishing news, she exhaled a "Yippee!" In the next breath, she told me how, as a stubborn baby, I had graduated from crawling to knee-walking, developing thick calluses as I barreled across bare floors, braided rugs, and even cement. The pediatrician had told my parents not to worry. I would walk when I was ready. One day, several months before my second birthday, my mother was playing a stack of vinyl albums. She entered the living room and found me on my feet, dancing to the soundtrack of "My Fair Lady." She burst into tears.



Elizabeth and Don revisit Springer Mountain in 1992, the year after finishing their thru-hikes.

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Journalist, author, and New England native Elizabeth H. McGowan's 1991 northbound thru-hike as "The Blister Sister" inspired her to focus her reporting efforts on energy- and environment-related topics. She has won numerous writing awards, including a Pulitzer Prize for "The Dilbit Disaster: Inside the Biggest Oil Spill You Never Heard Of" as a staff correspondent for Inside Climate News.

Since 2001, she has lived in Washington, D.C. with Don "Tiger Tunez" Looney, the hiking partner (and later spouse) she met near a white blaze in North Carolina in 1991. Don and Elizabeth served as caretakers at the Blackburn Trail Center near Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, during the 1992 hiking season. To keep their carbon footprint to a minimum, the longtime members of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club maintain trails in nearby Rock Creek Park. They also remove invasive plant species in Rock Creek as National Park Service-certified Weed Warriors.

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The day's miles behind them, David Brill (left) and Nick Gelesko shed their packs and rest at the lip of a Trail shelter.

TRAIL FAMILY

Merged and melded in the Trail's crucible over more than five months together, my relationships with my fellow travelers – the members of my Trail family – were destined to endure through a lifetime.

■ **BY DAVID BRILL**

ALTHOUGH MY APPALACHIAN TRAIL THRU-HIKE WAS COMPLETED FORTY-THREE years ago, I can recall aspects of the journey as if they had occurred yesterday. In my memory, the elements of the adventure — star-flecked night skies, stiff ascents culminating in grand vistas, open-faced shelters set beside cascading brooks, the musky aroma of rain-dampened forests — are inextricably linked with the friends who shared in these experiences.

I gained my first A.T. kinsman, not on the Trail itself, but in northern Virginia. In January 1979, an outdoor shop hosted a presentation by Ed Garvey, author of *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime*, widely regarded at the time as the authoritative text for aspiring A.T. thru-hikers. Garvey described his early-1970s end-to-end trek and dispensed a wealth of tips. At the end of his talk, he asked the fateful question: "Is anyone planning to hike the Trail this spring?"

Two raised hands appeared. One of them was mine; the other belonged to a lean, bearded, sandy-haired man about my age of twenty-three. Within a half-hour, I was seated in a local bar across the table from Dan Howe.





Above: David Brill (seated foreground, left), Dan Howe (beside Brill to right), Nick Gelesko (squatting lower right in beige jacket), and Paul Dillon (rear right in red hat) with thirteen members of their extended Trail family on September 27, 1979. Below: Forty years from the day they first gathered on Katahdin's summit, five Trail brothers return to a mountain that looms large in their memories. From left, standing: Jeff Hammons (holding portrait of Nick Gelesko), Paul Phillips, and Paul Dillon. Crouching, foreground: David Brill and Dan Howe (holding a summit photo from '79).

WHEN WE EMBRACED EACH OTHER ATOP BAXTER PEAK, DAN AND I HAD FORGED A BOND THAT WOULD ENDURE NO MATTER HOW MUCH TIME AND DISTANCE SEPARATED US.

As we discussed our plans for the spring, we each surreptitiously gauged the suitability of the other as a long-distance hiking companion.

In that regard, Dan was an immediate shoo-in. His years at the University of Virginia, set in the shadow of the Shenandoah Mountains, had allowed him to hone his considerable backpacking skills and bestowed on him an academic degree in planning. Both would prove valuable on the Trail, particularly for someone like me who was profoundly deficient in both regards. After a few rounds of beer, we agreed that we would begin the Trail together and assess the partnership as we progressed north. A "shakedown" hike a month before our planned departure proved disastrous, at least for me. During two days of rain, my flapping poncho did little to keep me dry, and my new boots rubbed my heels to blisters. Meanwhile, Dan seemed to be thriving. I recall being beset by misery at our campsite while noting Dan's entirely antithetical response; he stood stark naked under a teeming waterfall, blissfully sipping bourbon from a plastic bottle.

April 21, our day of reckoning, arrived, and I tentatively shouldered a backpack that burgeoned with useless items I would soon send home. But the pack itself proved far less burdensome than the emotional heft of what I was about to undertake — a 2,100-mile journey on foot. As noted, Dan's woodssense far exceeded my own, and over the coming months, he would impart vital lessons on wilderness travel and backcountry living. And Dan, the planner, would soon emerge as field marshal, always measuring the months against the remaining miles and ensuring that we hewed to our tightly regimented schedule. Were it not for Dan, I suspect that Katahdin would have remained an elusive goal and one that I would never reach. But, by that September, when we embraced each other atop Baxter Peak, Dan and I had forged a bond that would endure no matter how much time and distance separated us. To this day, he remains at the very top of a short list of my dearest friends.

Dan and I welcomed our third family member, Nick Gelesko, the "Michigan Granddad," over a vegetarian meal at The Inn (now Sunnybank) in Hot Springs, North Carolina. Nick, then 57 and a veteran of World War II, was closer to the age of our parents, which initially created a bit of an intergenerational divide. But, the A.T. is a great social equalizer, and, after a few open conversations around our evening campfires, we would come to value Nick's life experience and wise perspectives. I immediately detected in him an irrepressible charisma — an attribute that would make him an endearing companion and prove remarkably resourceful in earning favored treatment from the locals we encountered along the way.

Nick's nearly always-successful solicitation of acts of kindness — round-trip rides from trailheads into town, offerings of food and drink, permission to stay overnight in guest bedrooms — became the stuff of legend among members of the Trail community. For a time, we struggled with what to call Nick Gelesko's magical process. Finally, we fixed on a term derived from his last name. *Gel es´ko ing*: gerund, use of tact and persuasion by A.T. hikers to incline townsfolk to provide goods and services free of charge (also commonly known among contemporary thru-hikers as "yogi'ing"). And, we applied the term, in verb form, in the following ways:

"Where did you get that sandwich?"

"I Geleskoed it from some picnickers a few miles back."

"How did you get into town?"

"I Geleskoed a ride from a nice couple returning from church."

Far from feeling exploited, the Trail-town locals always seemed to delight in helping us out.

FOR PAUL, MILES DID NOT MEASURE LINEAR DISTANCE SO MUCH AS THEY TRACED UNITS OF EXPERIENCE. HE FULLY EMBRACED THE JOY, THE BEAUTY, AND THE WISDOM LURKING IN THE WILDERNESS, AND HE TRANSLATED THOSE ELEMENTS INTO VERSES HE COMPOSED ALONG THE WAY AND SHARED WITH THE REST OF US OVER OUR EVENING CAMPFIRES.

Perhaps Nick's greatest coup came on a cold, rainy night in Rangeley, Maine. We had arrived in town during peak tourist season with no leads on a place to stay and, bereft of other options, were preparing to roll out our sleeping bags under the shelter of the local theater's marquee. To delay what was sure to be an uncomfortable night, we settled onto stools in a local bar. While we sipped beers, Nick grabbed a few quarters and borrowed a phone book. After learning the names of local officials from the barkeep, Nick rang up the chief of police. He soon returned to the bar smiling. "Our ride will be here in five minutes," he reported. On schedule, the chief arrived, ushered us into his cruiser, and soon deposited us at the police station, our home for the night. It was my first and only stint in a jail cell, and I couldn't have been happier.

By then, we had welcomed the fourth member of our primary Trail family. When we had encountered twenty-year-old Paul Dillon, a lanky former competitive downhill skier, in Pennsylvania, he was making his third attempt on the A.T. This time he would go on to finish. Paul, a New Hampshire native with shoulder-length brown hair bound by a bandanna tied pirate-style, was easy-going to a fault, and he seemed inclined to abide whatever nature threw his way and try to make the best of it. For Paul, miles did not measure linear distance so much as they traced units of experience. He fully embraced the joy, the beauty, and the wisdom lurking in the wilderness, and he translated those elements into verses he composed along the way and shared with the rest of us over our evening campfires.

I didn't fully appreciate just how graceful Paul was on his feet until we had reached the White Mountains of New Hampshire, with their open, treeless ridges. Dan and I had arrived at Lakes of the Clouds Hut, nestled beneath the summit of Mount Washington, and after dumping our packs, we climbed to the top of nearby Mount Monroe. From our perch a couple hundred feet above the Trail, we watched hikers wend their way along the rocky pathway. Some surged ahead like jackrabbits, others clumped along, and a few labored like arthritic octogenarians. Then we fixed on a lone hiker, who, unlike the others, seemed to flow along the open ridge as fluidly as a brook coursing its way over the boulders of a streambed. It wasn't until he reached the base of the mountain that we recognized the familiar green backpack and red bandanna as belonging to our own poet laureate, Paul.

While the four of us constituted our core Trail family, over the course of the summer, we acquired numerous "cousins" — friends whose journeys intersected with ours multiple times along our collective march toward Maine. Messages conveyed through shelter journals allowed us to reunite for the Trail's final few miles, and on September 27 — Paul's twenty-first birthday — seventeen of us converged on Baxter Peak and posed for a triumphant group photo.

Following completion of our thru-hikes, Dan, Nick, Paul, and I returned to our homes, resumed our lives, and drifted apart for the better part of two decades. But in 1999, *National Geographic Traveler* generously agreed to fund a twenty-year reunion.

The plan was to stand atop Katahdin twenty years from the day of our first ascent. Nick, who was then seventy-seven, was a big question mark in terms of scaling what remains generally known as the A.T.'s toughest mountain, but with Dan's constant encouragement — and the occasional shove on Nick's bony butt along the steeper sections of the climb — we all reached the summit by early afternoon.



Clockwise from top left: Nick Gelesko, wearing his signature bucket hat; Lean, bearded, and roughly halfway to their ultimate destination, Dan Howe (left) and David Brill pose in front of the ATC headquarters in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia; Paul Dillon strums a borrowed guitar on a lakeside deck near Unionville, New York; David Brill with fish taken from Lower Jo-Mary Lake at Antlers Campsite in Maine's storied 100-Mile Wilderness.

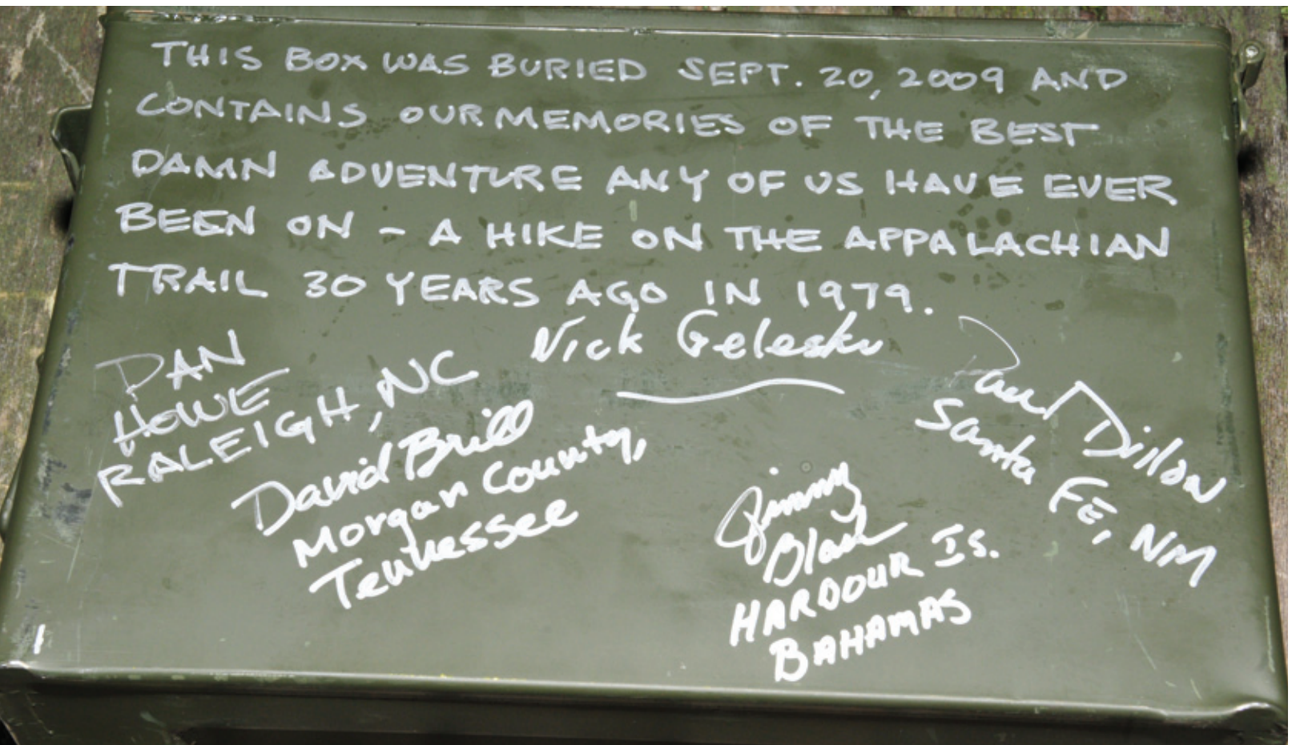






IT WAS ON THE TRAIL, IN 1979, THAT I BEGAN TO GRASP THAT THE ENDLESS CYCLING OF SEASONS — THE PERFECT METAPHOR FOR LIFE — IS MEANT TO BRING US AROUND, TO GUIDE US HOME.

Clockwise from below: For their thirtieth A.T. hike anniversary, Brill's Trail family gathered at his Tennessee cabin. An old Army-surplus ammo box containing mementoes from their shared adventure — including the sleeve, with A.T. patch, from the khaki shirt Nick Gelesko sported in 1979 — serves as a time capsule, buried beside a creek on Brill's property. Following their fourtieth-anniversary ascent to Baxter Peak, old friends gather for a photo, with Katahdin looming in the background. Seated, from left: Paul Phillips, Jeff Hammons, and David Brill. Standing from left: Robin Phillips, Jim Schaffrick, and Dan Howe. David Brill, now in his mid-sixities, continues to cherish the intimate connection with the natural world he first experienced in 1979 along his 2,100-mile journey.



For our thirtieth anniversary in 2009, with Nick now eighty-seven, Katahdin seemed out of the question, so we decided to gather at my cabin on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau. I had instructed the lads to bring mementos from our 1979 trek. We would encase them in an old Army-surplus ammo box — a time capsule of sorts — and bury them on my property. A stone cairn would mark the spot. Ultimately, the box contained journal entries, photos, poems, Trail guides, and maps. But, the most meaningful contribution came from Nick. In 1979, he had sported a khaki shirt bearing a blue A.T. patch at the shoulder. When he arrived at my cabin, he was wearing that same shirt, now thirty years old, the patch faded to dull blue. Just before we sealed the box, Nick removed the shirt and asked for a pair of scissors. We all watched as he ceremoniously cut the sleeve from the shirt, complete with the patch, and, before tossing it onto the pile of mementos, scrawled on it with a felt-tipped marker: "Michigan Granddad, Nick Gelesko, 1979."

In the months before the fortieth anniversary of our hike, Dan and I had reached out to the individuals captured in the original 1979 summit photo, and, in September 2019, eight of us converged on Millinocket, Maine. Gathered with us at the Big Moose Inn were Robin Phillips, a professional photographer, and his brother Paul, a medical doctor, both based in Lakeland, Florida; Jeff Hammons, a teacher of gifted students on the Navajo Nation in Shiprock, New Mexico; Cindy Taylor-Miller, a banker and former Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) guidebook editor who resides proximate to the A.T. in Wallingford, Vermont; Jim Schaffrick, a woodworker living in Litchfield, Connecticut; and Gary Owen, a retired engineer whose home is in Knoxville, Tennessee. Paul, a singer-songwriter, and Dan, recently retired assistant city manager for Raleigh, North Carolina (now in his fourth year on the ATC board of directors), were there, too, but one face was conspicuously absent. Our beloved companion Nick had reached the age of 94 before passing away in 2016. In his remembrance, we would carry a portrait of him to Katahdin's summit.

As before, our time on Baxter Peak inspired a range of powerful emotions. Among them, for me, was the recognition that we no longer enjoyed the buoyancy of youth and, with it, came the realization that this visit to Katahdin's summit might be our last. There wasn't so much sadness in the thought as gratitude for affording us the chance to gather, yet again, atop a mountain that looms as large in our collective memories as it does in the topography of north-central Maine.

The closing paragraph of my reunion article for *National Geographic Traveler* rings as true today as when I crafted it more than twenty years ago and says much about how I continue to regard the people who were central to my A.T. experience:

"It was on the Trail, in 1979, that I began to grasp that the endless cycling of seasons — the perfect metaphor for life — is meant to bring us around, to guide us home. Which is why I returned to Maine, to gather with cherished friends who are, and always will be, part of my family and, for a time, to reduce the complexity of my life to the simplicity of a white blaze and dirt path headed north."

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David Brill's articles on science, ecology, the environment, health, fitness, parenting, and adventure-travel have appeared in more than 25 national and regional magazines, including National Geographic Traveler, Men's Health, AARP the Magazine, Bicycling, Family Fun, *and* American Way.

Brill has published five nonfiction books. His first, As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker, *is a collection of essays based on his 2,100-mile trek of the A.T. in 1979. In 2020, the book was released in its fifth (thirtieth anniversary) edition and eighth printing. The new edition contains a new preface (on the fortieth reunion) and three bonus chapters. His most recent book,* Into the Mist: Tales of Death and Disaster, Mishaps and Misdeeds, Misfortune and Mayhem in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, *published in 2017, is now in its fourth printing.*

In 1981, Brill and three other former A.T. end-to-enders hiked the then-proposed Pacific Northwest Trail, which is now part of the national scenic trail system. He has climbed 14,400-foot Mount Rainier twice and, in 2001, reached Denali's 20,320-foot summit. Brill, his wife, Belinda, their dog, Zebulon, and their cat, Tater Tot, live in a cabin on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau.

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THE OUTDOORS ARE AT THE CENTER OF FAMILY, FRIENDSHIP, VOLUNTEERING, AND LIFE WELL LIVED

THE RIGHT FOUNDATION

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DERRICK Z. JACKSON AND MICHELLE HOLMES

PART ONE

MOTOWN IN THE WOODS

~DERRICK Z. JACKSON

I SPENT MUCH OF MY HONEYMOON IN 1980 SINGING THE TEMPTATIONS' "MY GIRL" and Marvin Gaye's and Tammi Terrell's "You're All I Need to Get By" to my newlywed, Michelle. The location was no Parisian boulevard, Caribbean isle, or California oceanfront suite. I was doing my best Motown imitations deep in Baxter State Park in Maine while backpacking over roots and rocks and in muck and streams to get to pond campsites where moose munched in the shallows. And while ascending Katahdin, the terminus of the Appalachian Trail.

I'm a horrible singer — one of those kids they hid in the back of church choirs. But, in Baxter, no one could throw tomatoes at me. The worst that could happen was a chipmunk hurling a nut at my feet. On the way up rugged Katahdin, we both permanently scarred our wedding rings scrambling across sharp granite boulders. It was of no concern. We had blue skies, endless vistas, and pristine, pine-scented air. Instead of thousands of dollars plunked down for people to wait on us, we were in bliss over where our two feet could take us. She was my girl, I was her boy, and the outdoors were all we needed to get by.





Previous page: Milky Way over Hog Island in Maine. This page: Michelle (top) and Derrick (below) during a 2009 hike in the Mahoosucs, Maine/New Hampshire.

WE WERE IN BLISS OVER WHERE OUR TWO FEET COULD TAKE US. SHE WAS MY GIRL, I WAS HER BOY, AND THE OUTDOORS WERE ALL WE NEEDED TO GET BY.

That is still true forty-one anniversaries later. With exceptions we can count on one hand, our vacations centered on the outdoors. Parts of our first wedding anniversary were again spent hearing loons in Baxter, then going to see the sunrise from Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park. I noticed great blue herons for the first time at Prince Edward Island National Park. We picked blueberries atop the plateau of Cape Breton Highlands National Park. No hotel room could offer the view we had in Nova Scotia, laying on top of our car one night on a beach parking lot, marveling at the northern lights.

Our fifth wedding anniversary was spent backpacking in Yosemite National Park, with a golden eagle flying right over our heads at ten thousand feet. On that trip, we decided to have children while overlooking Tenaya Lake. The very next year, we were hiking on the Athabasca glacier in Canada's Jasper National Park, with me carrying on my back our bundled-up first son, Omar. Our tenth anniversary was spent — while Michelle was pregnant with our second child, Tano — looking up at bald eagles and Blackburnian warblers in Downeast Maine and looking out from promontories at breaching whales and walking in mudflats that stretched far out toward the horizon at low tide.

Our twentieth anniversary was spent hiking hut-to-hut with close friends in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Our twenty-fifth was spent wading thigh-deep in frigid water two miles into the Narrows of Zion National Park. We spent our thirtieth going back once more to Baxter State Park and climbing Katahdin. This time, we took the Appalachian Trail route with our youngest son and several close friends as part of Michelle's thirteen-year-long quest of section-hiking the Trail.

The outdoors were the backdrop for many other life events. To celebrate Michelle's graduation from medical school, we tent-camped in Death Valley and backpacked both at Point Reyes National Seashore and in Yosemite. When we both quit our old jobs at the same time in 1988, we delayed our new jobs so we could drive from Cambridge, Massachusetts to Alaska, car camping most of the way with our toddler, Omar. We saw grizzly bears, killer whales, horned and tufted puffins, and picked mussels at low tide for soup.

All of this exposure to nature had an effect on our growing family. Our boys displayed a caring for animals at a young age. When Omar was seven, we were bicycling on a rail trail in northern Minnesota. He spotted an injured blue jay that did not look like it was long for this world, but he insisted that we scoop up the bird and try to find a veterinarian to save its life.

The outdoors have been at the center of our family, friendship, and volunteering lives since Michelle and I met in 1979. More accurately, the summits, the loons with babies on their back, the western canyon and dune landscapes, the comets and shooting stars in the sky, the pastel purple dawns and blazing orange sunsets over land and sea, the simple scent of pines, and the ability to share them with each other and our community have in fact centered our lives.







Clockwise from below: Loon with chicks in Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, Maine/New Hampshire; Ice storm frost on Clingmans Dome – Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina/Tennessee; A puffin landing with fish for its chick on Eastern Egg Rock, Maine.

PART TWO

THE "UBUNTU PATROL"

~MICHELLE HOLMES

INTRODUCING MY SWEETHEART TO MY PASSION WAS ROOTED IN TWO THINGS. One was how the outdoors were woven into my being as a child. The other was my adopting philosophical alternatives to Western concepts of individualism and individual rights, which do not square with this nation's history of denying rights to African Americans and excluding Black people for so long from intellectual pursuits. I have felt the stings of exclusion as a Black woman scientist.

One alternative I've embraced over the years is the southern African concept of "ubuntu." It is generally translated across several languages and nations as "I am because we are," or "a person is a person through other persons." The late Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu defined ubuntu as meaning, "My humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up, in yours."

In unspoken ways, ubuntu is woven through much of African American culture. Some of the most powerful experiences of intimacy, connection, and love that I have experienced in my life have occurred in the wilderness, guided by the spirit of ubuntu. They almost all involve teams where individuals share the same goals and





From top: Michelle leads Cambridge Crew 56 up Mount Baldy, the tallest summit on the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico (at 12,441 feet); The "mighty" girls of Cambridge Crew 56 during their 2006 trip to the Philmont Scout Ranch.

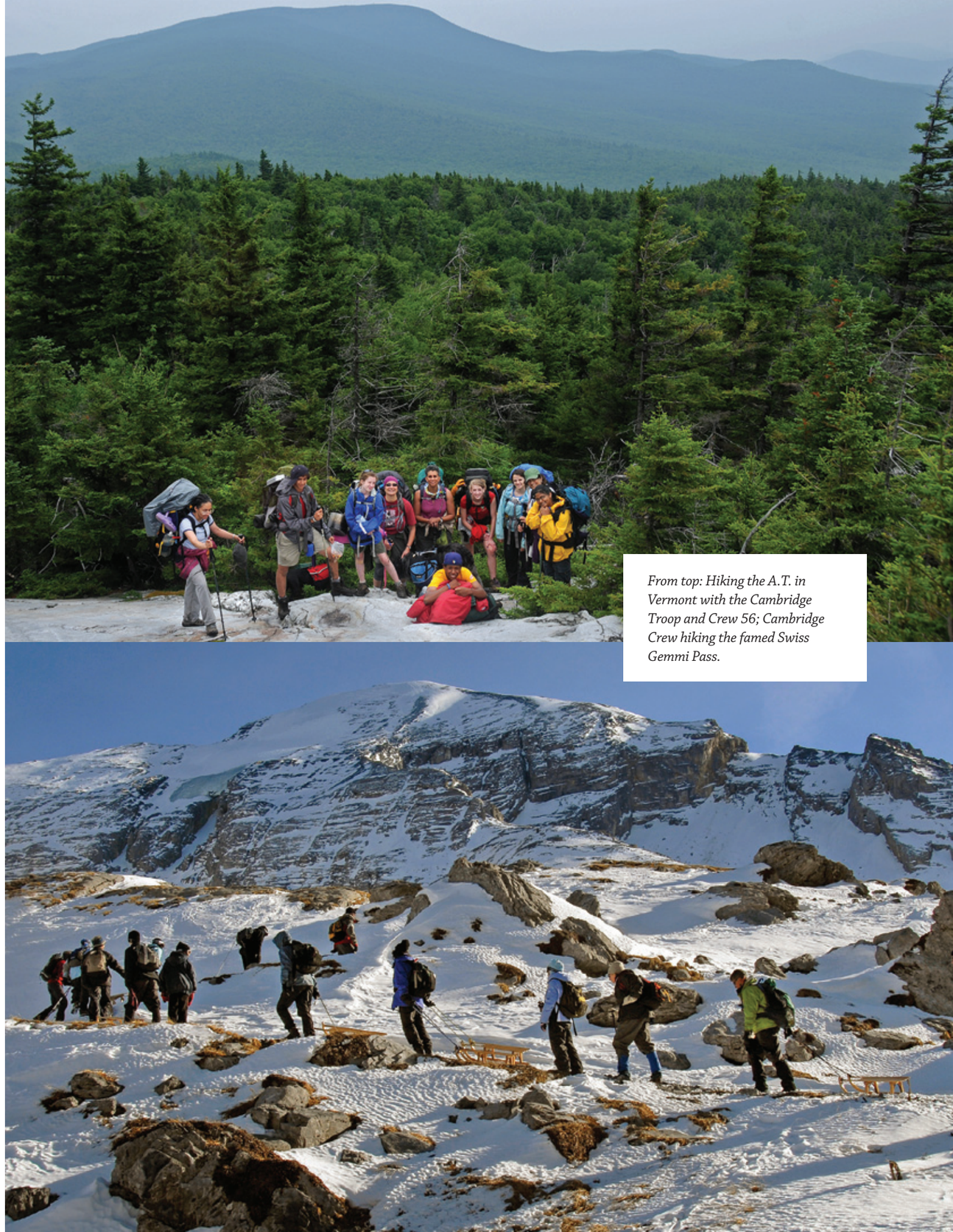
SOME OF THE MOST POWERFUL EXPERIENCES OF INTIMACY, CONNECTION, AND LOVE THAT I HAVE EXPERIENCED IN MY LIFE HAVE OCCURRED IN THE WILDERNESS, GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT OF UBUNTU.

commit to supporting each other, regardless of individual athletic ability and prior outdoor skills.

My earliest such experience was as one of "the Mariner Eight." It was my patrol of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old Girl Scouts at summer camp, on multiday canoe and sailing camping trips to islands on New Hampshire's Lake Winnipesaukee. I remember windless, hot days that becalmed the two sailboats, with two girls taking turns swim-towing them, the other two sailors lounging while the four canoeists paddled. There were no adults in sight as our counselors allowed us autonomy. Two miles from the nearest land, we sang at the top of our lungs. We were young, fearless, and intensely bonded.

I passed on that patrol experience to one of my sons, who eventually became an Eagle Scout. I've been a volunteer in his Boy Scout (now Scouts BSA) troop in Cambridge, Massachusetts for nearly twenty-five years. Unlike a sports team where the coach is essentially an autocrat, Scouting allowed us to do community parenting in a wonderful "sideways" manner, being in the background as youth made most major decisions of setting up camp, cooking, and cleaning up. Many nights were spent by adults in what we called "the Old Goat Patrol," laughing around the campfire, and smiling to each other over signs of maturity and discovery. An urban troop, Scouting allowed us to introduce youth to everything from trout in ponds to bears scrambling up trees, Everglades swamps to Swiss Alps peaks, and from winter snowshoeing in New Hampshire to blistering hiking at the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.

If I had to pick one seminal moment where the outdoors provided the backdrop for special connections, it was in 2006, when Derrick and I accompanied the first co-ed crew in our council to Philmont. The crew of five girls and three boys would backpack in the wilderness for ten nights, making every decision short of those that might truly risk a life. The hope is that they hit the trail as girls and boys and come off the trail more like young women and men. That happened, with every bit of ubuntu that could be mustered. There were a couple of days where bickering and sloppiness was being noted by other crews, all-White and male. I pulled the girls aside



From top: Hiking the A.T. in Vermont with the Cambridge Troop and Crew 56; Cambridge Crew hiking the famed Swiss Gemmi Pass.

THE FRIENDLY COOKOFF COMPETITIONS,
THE SIGHT OF SO MANY BLACK CHILDREN
HIKING, BIKING, FISHING, EXPLORING
FOR TOADS AND FROGS AND EXHIBITING PURE
JOY WAS WORTH ANY DISCOMFORT.

and gave them "the talk." Of the five girls, two were Black, two were White and one was Latina. I bluntly implored them not to feed into stereotypes that we don't belong in the wilderness. There were many tears, but they pulled themselves together so dramatically that the least-in-shape of the girls led us over the second-highest peak in the park – 11,742-foot Mount Phillips – and led us on our final thirteen miles in 102-degree heat.

We also promoted the outdoors among our closest friends. For a twenty-year period, from 1981 to 2005, we had what we called the "Black Pack." We gathered at a campground in the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic every Memorial Day and convened at a New England ski resort during February school holidays. We enjoyed watching whales out of Provincetown and wild horses romping at Assateague Island National Seashore. We gawked looking up at Jupiter in telescopes and screamed with joy when we spotted eagles from canoes. We huffed and puffed along cross-country trails in zero-degree weather and up toward summits such as Mount Greylock, one of the peaks in the Berkshires crossed by the Appalachian Trail.

We were taking a moment to center ourselves in a world that often tries to run circles around us. Most of us were frequently the only Black person doing what they do at their office. For several of our friends, it was the only tent camping they ever did and will ever do. But, the camaraderie over cards and Scrabble, the friendly cookoff competitions, the sight of so many Black children hiking, biking, fishing, exploring for toads and frogs and exhibiting pure joy was worth any discomfort. Our oldest son, Omar, said he found the winter Black Pack trips to possess "a mysterious and calming allure" with the quietude of snow-covered lands. He said the snow, particularly after "ridiculous" blizzards, "served as a natural remedy to stress."

We have also shared the outdoors with our elders. When they were alive, my parents and an aunt occasionally came up to our home in the western Maine woods, sharing sights of moose and hiking to White Mountain vistas. In 2005, Derrick took a beloved uncle to Death Valley, where they hiked in the dunes. At one moment, Derrick stopped to take a few pictures. By the time he was done, his uncle, then sixty-eight, had nearly ascended the summit, a mile off the road.



From top: Moose in Lake Umbagog – Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, Maine/New Hampshire; The "Black Pack," during a Memorial Day weekend outing in Maryland.



Michelle and Nubia on the A.T. – Sugarloaf Mountain, Maine; Close friends join Derrick, Michelle, and their son, Tano (top left) in Baxter State Park during their thirtieth anniversary hike (and a portion of Michelle's thirteen-year-long quest of section-hiking the Trail).

I REALIZED THAT MY ACTUAL JOY OF BEING ON A TRAIL WAS SHARING IT, WITH MY HUSBAND, WITH MY BOYS, WITH MY COMMUNITY. FROM THAT POINT ON, MY HIKES WERE ROUTINES OF LOVE.

I could not have completed the A.T. without ubuntu. I originally intended to be a thru-hiker in 2007. But six weeks into the Trail, I found myself lonely. My trip had started out with intense family support. Derrick, our Eagle Scout son, Tano, and my then-seventy-six-year-old mother, Mary drove me and my dog, Nubia from Cambridge to the parking lot for Springer Mountain in Georgia. We were joined by Derrick's sister and her two sons, who drove up from Tampa, Florida. We all hiked from our cars the short distance to the top of Springer Mountain to pose for photos with me at my journey's start. My mother sent loving packages of trail treats that she baked and faithfully mailed to post offices along the way.

It was not enough. I had many enjoyable interactions at camp but never succeeded in meeting up with people of similar pace to hike the rest of the way with. I realized that my actual joy of being on a trail was sharing it, with my husband, with my boys, with my community. From that point on, my hikes were routines of love. Derrick, who fortunately is a writer whose office is wherever he can take his laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot, would drop me off. If he had a deadline, he would wait for me at my terminus trailhead for the day. If he had time, he would hike in with our dog and meet me.

I fell into a perfect rhythm. Each day would begin with my solitude and experiencing wondrous views and flowers, birds, and animals along the way. I would begin to anticipate where I might see Derrick. On reunion, I could share with him what I'd seen, and he could share with me what to anticipate on the hike out. We could look forward to an evening of visiting local breweries (his "price" for supporting me, one I did not mind at all) and often sleeping in beautiful campgrounds in our camper van.

Many friends hiked with me along the A.T. over those years. I reserved the last seven miles in an easy part of the 100-Mile Wilderness to finish with some of those friends and my now-late dog, Nubia. The connections in that group boggle my mind. One of my hiking friends, Michael, a history buff, is fond of saying: "This is what humans are evolutionarily meant to do, travel distances by foot in small bands." By traveling by foot in small bands, I feel fulfilled in helping create the strongest of bonds.



From top: Derrick, Michelle, and their son, Tano, ascend the A.T. on Katahdin; A.T. hikers on the North Carolina/Tennessee balds.

NEW BEGINNINGS

~ FROM DERRICK

OUR THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY HIKE in Baxter State Park – when Michelle was completing this section and her accent of Katahdin – was particularly meaningful for me because of the time spent with our youngest son, Tano. As he explained to me, "Well Dad, I was a little bored. It was in between semesters at college." It was not boring once he hit the Trail with Michelle and I and a few close friends. Being a buff lad, he took the backpack of one of our struggling friends and carried it up the mountain. When the hike was over and we were at camp, more magic happened. As I wrote for the *Boston Globe*, "The rush of the rippling stream muffled all sound. Clear skies darkened for the Milky Way. My nineteen-year-old son Tano and I hunkered down over Scrabble at our campsite. The fire flickered. Our headlamp beams collided like sabers. Later, I walked to an open area in the park. Perseid meteor fireballs etched the heavens. No news good or bad could reach me. I was in that wonderful state of forgetting the actual day and date. All I needed was the bubbling creek, the scent of pine, and sizzling streaks from deep space, where the lines between antiquity and modernity are indeterminate."

And, where the lines between ubuntu and what makes us human were crystal clear. I had all I needed to get by. A wife to hike with. A son who will talk to you. And maybe a grandson? As I write this in mid-December 2021, Tano and his wife Clarissa gave birth to a son, Haven, our first grandchild.

The most powerful moment of intergenerational sharing of the outdoors I've ever witnessed was a 2008 trek to Philmont. One of the other crews in our council had three members of the same family, fifteen-year-old Julian Sookikian, his fifty-year-old father, Steve, and eighty-one-year-old father and grandfather, Vee. Julian told me in a piece for the *Boston Globe*: "We gave him a big head start, but we'd always thought we'd catch him. But, we were huffing and puffing, and, when we got to where he was, he was sunning himself."

Vee passed away a couple years ago at ninety-one. At Philmont, he told me, "I knew so many people who, when they turned sixty-five, all they could talk about was sitting in a lounge chair and smoking a pipe. To me, that was like preparing to die. I hope to do this until the day I die." He just about did. I hope to myself, singing horribly to Haven.

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Michelle Holmes became enamored with the outdoors as a child when her mother introduced her to Scouting and camping. As an adult she became a Scout volunteer for her sons and later for many other urban youth in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She started hiking the Appalachian Trail in 2007 at age fifty-two, and continued in sections over the next thirteen years. She completed it in 2019, having done half of the mileage on two artificial knees. As a physician and epidemiologist, she believes in the healing power of nature. She is particularly passionate that it be accessible to those who feel excluded, particularly Black and other People of Color.

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Derrick Z. Jackson is the coauthor of Project Puffin: The Improbable Quest to Bring a Beloved Seabird Back to Egg Rock *and* The Puffin Plan: Restoring Seabirds to Egg Rock and Beyond. The Puffin Plan *was winner of the 2021 Gold Award in teen nonfiction from the Independent Book Publishers Association. Jackson, a fellow at the Union of Concerned Scientists and a contributor to* Grist.org *and* ESPN's The Undefeated, *is also the 2021 winner in Excellence in Opinion Writing in the Scripps-Howard Awards and a double 2021 winner in social justice and sports commentary from the National Association of Newspaper Columnists. He is a Scout volunteer and his bird and landscape photography has been a finalist in several contests. He would probably have never become a bird-brain had it not been for Michelle.*

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LOVING THE TRAIL

A Life-long Story of Stewardship

■ **BY DAVID B. FIELD**

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID AND WRITTEN ABOUT "LOVING the Appalachian Trail to death." This phrase captures the fear of the impacts that could result from overuse and/or abuse of the A.T. I share that fear, but my hope is to explain how experiencing the Trail, especially as a volunteer Trail worker, can lead to loving the Trail.

I enjoy being in the woods. As a professional forester with the United States Forest Service, I appreciated my time working in the forests of northern New Hampshire nearly every day of the year. After I returned

DAVE FIELD TAKES A MOMENT DURING TRAIL BOUNDARY MONITORING WORK ON MOXIE BALD IN MAINE. *Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures*

My wife got used to me saying, "I need a forest fix"
and tolerated my expeditions out onto the Trail,
knowing that I would return home better for the experience.

to school for years of work that led to a doctorate and a career in forestry research and teaching, the Trail became my excuse for returning to the forest on a regular basis. My wife got used to me saying, "I need a forest fix" and tolerated my expeditions out onto the Trail, knowing that I would return home better for the experience.

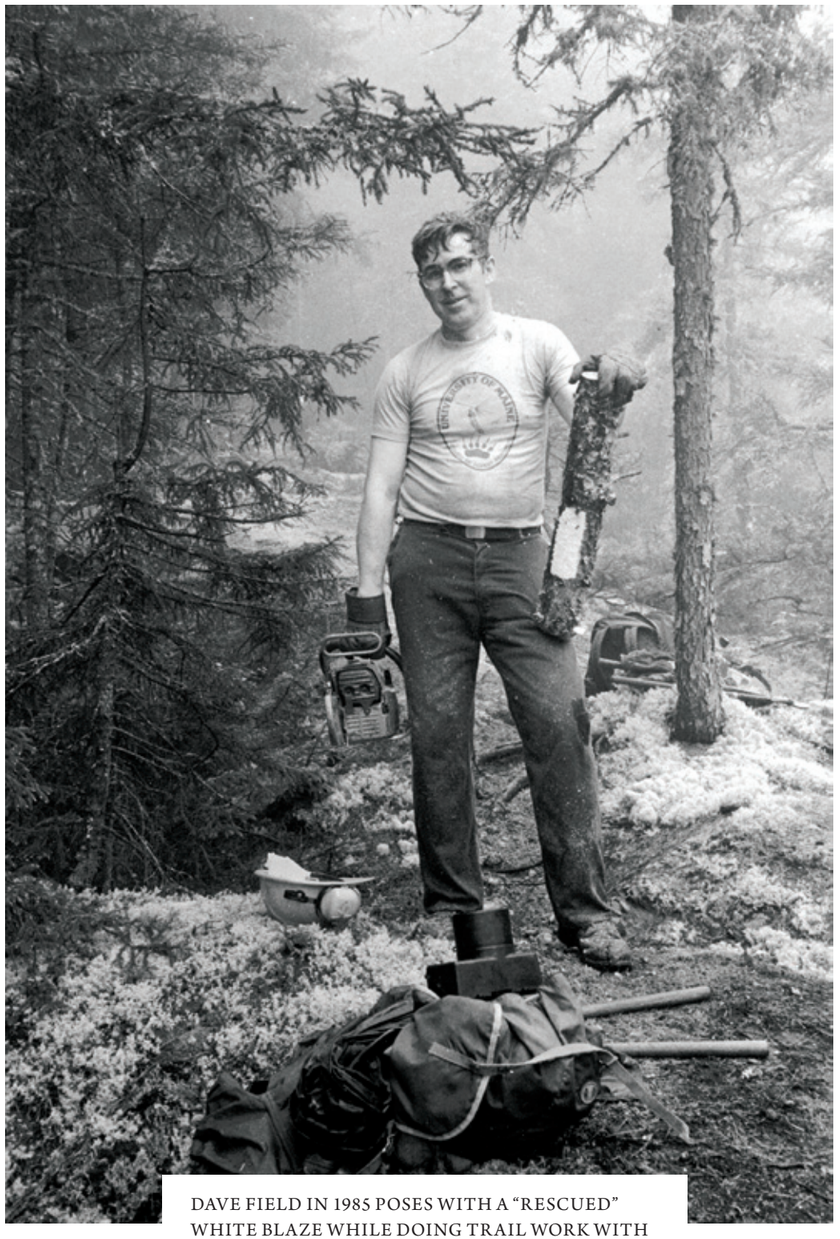
I began working on the A.T. in Maine three years after Myron Avery died. I've slept in lean-tos built by the Civilian Conservation Corps only twenty years before and hiked many miles of the original A.T. laid out on old logging roads — something Avery later regretted. I designed and helped build more than 100 miles of the 164 miles of relocations made by the Maine Appalachian Trail Club (MATC) from 1970 to 1990, largely to leave those old roads. The exploration and discovery enjoyed during those relocation years would later be replaced by the challenges and similar pleasures of corridor monitoring. I've never hiked the whole Trail but have stepped on the first blaze on Springer Mountain, walked a little in each state that the Trail passes through, and climbed Katahdin many times, although only once on the route followed by the Trail.

GROUNDED BY CARE

From the start, I have been a steward of the Trail. My brother and I were assigned more than seven miles on Saddleback Mountain in Maine to maintain, beginning in 1957. The job became mine alone for many years, although I gave up a mile when I was elected to chair the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC – then known as the Appalachian Trail Conference) in 1995. In all of those years, the spring of 2015 stands out. It took me four days of chainsaw work to clear 175 blowdowns over my section. On my last trip of the year, in October, I noticed that my heart was acting a little funny. During the fall and the next spring, increasing palpitations and eventual severe heartbeat irregularity led to a diagnosis of atrial fibrillation, at which point it seemed wise to reduce chainsaw work. I gave up my beloved Saddleback assignment after fifty-eight years and focused on walking corridor boundary lines in search of survey monuments.

Although I had to give up my regular maintenance assignment, I wasn't quite through with the Trail on Saddleback. Myron Avery's original plan for routing the A.T. across the mountain range included descending a prominent, southerly spur in the middle of the range. One of my family letters documents that, in 1860, my great and great-great grandfathers hiked up Saddleback, probably over the same route, which had been used for many years by locals to pick blueberries and mountain cranberries high on the mountain.

I first walked most of this old route on Saddleback in 2004, finding that the landowner (who preceded my brother and me as maintainers of the Trail on that section) had kept the path marked. I worked with others in 2012 to develop a route over private land, National Park Service (NPS) land, Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust (MATLT) land, and ATC land, as a proposed new side trail to the A.T. After a lengthy approval process, half a dozen of us MATC volunteers wielded chainsaws and clippers to clear the 1.7-mile route in July 2016. In August, MATLT executive director Simon Rucker (who now maintains this section) and I blazed the trail. It was signed and officially opened as "The Berry Pickers' Trail" in September 2016. This is now



DAVE FIELD IN 1985 POSES WITH A "RESCUED" WHITE BLAZE WHILE DOING TRAIL WORK WITH OTHER MATC VOLUNTEERS ON THE LILLY POND RELOCATION, EAST OF MONSON. *Appalachian Trail Conservancy archives photo by Bob Proudman*

Volunteering, a sometimes unappreciated opportunity, accounts for much of my love of the Trail. I often work alone on the A.T., and personal experiences account for much of my attitude about being a volunteer: feeling good about making a favorable difference in someone else's life; taking intense pride in the careful stewardship of an assigned campsite or section of Trail corridor; and experiencing solitude on those special days when everything combines to make that spot on the Trail where you are one of the most exquisitely beautiful places on earth.

a beautiful, official side trail of the A.T. Fortunately, Avery chose a final route for the A.T. in 1936 that included the rest of the Saddleback range.

A SHARED LOVE OF LAND

As the MATC's manager of lands, I relish the challenges and pleasures of walking boundary lines, and documenting monuments and witness trees. Looking for encroachments with the sixty corridor monitors whom I have trained to share in caring for the integrity of the 33,000 acres of NPS corridor lands in Maine and keeping an eye on activities on the 8,000 acres of state-owned lands along an unmarked, nominal 1,000-foot corridor through those lands is time well spent.

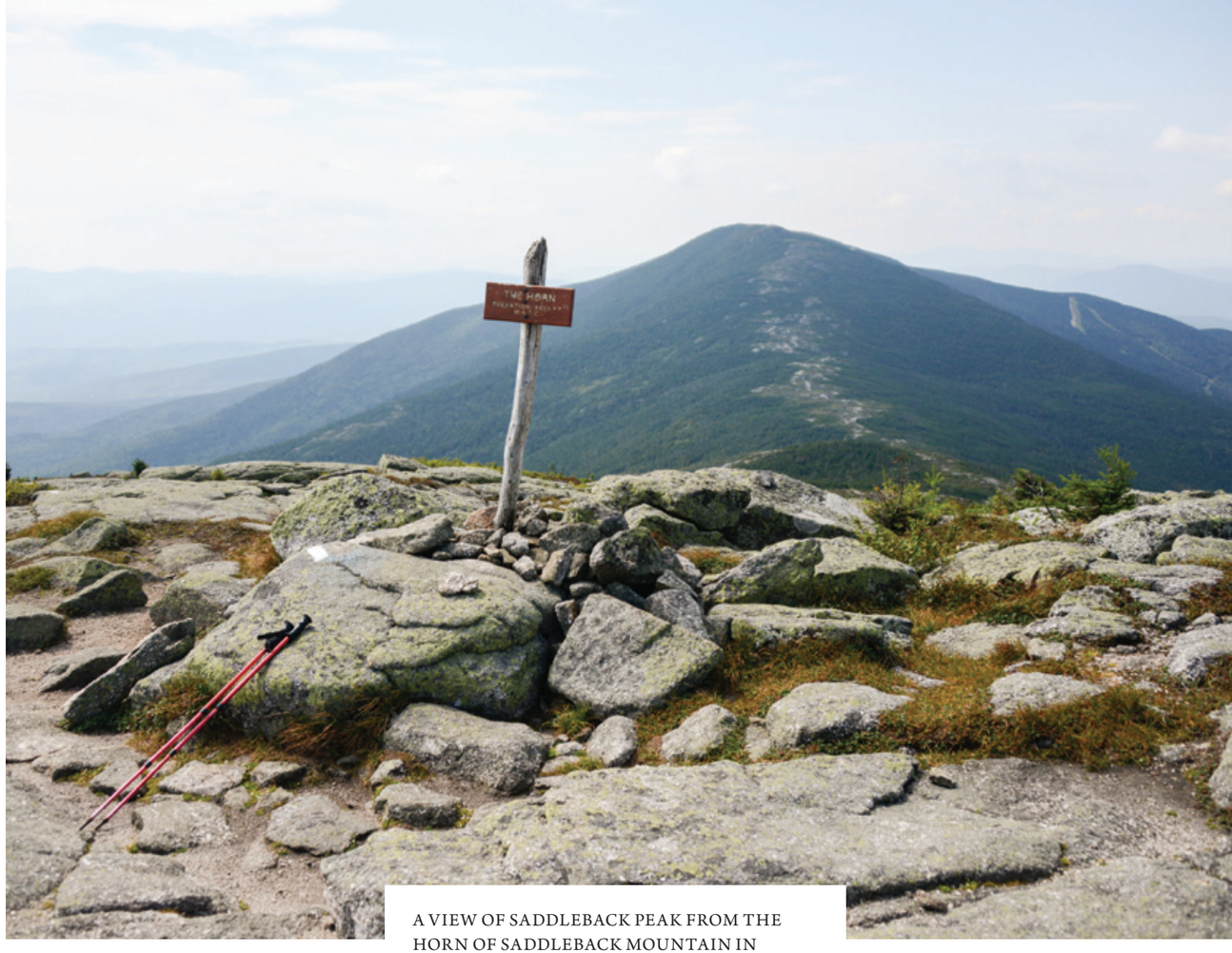
Of course, meeting fewer hikers is a downside of corridor monitoring. That was always one of the benefits of Trail-maintenance work. In the early years, hikers were few, and encounters were a rare pleasure. It was not unusual to spend several nights in a shelter without company other than fellow workers. In later years, thru-hiker numbers increased dramatically, and it was a delight to talk with them, learn where they were from, find out what they liked and disliked, and gather information about conditions along the Trail in Maine.

Sharing the Trail with others sometimes takes unexpected turns. After seeing my presentation on the A.T., a forestry student at Yale University returned home to South Africa and supported the creation of a hiking trail system. Another of my Yale students helped me load a U-Haul truck with my office supplies after I accepted a job at the University of Maine. Years later, the same former student sat across the table at the office of his new employer (a major Maine forestland owner) as we discussed NPS acquisition of land for the Trail corridor. Two of my Maine forestry students, now husband and wife, monitor nearly twenty miles of exterior corridor boundary lines in Maine.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Hiking on the A.T., at any length, must bring not only feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment but also some affection for the Trail and appreciation for the volunteers who make it possible. Volunteering, a sometimes unappreciated opportunity, accounts for much of my love of the Trail. I often work alone on the A.T., and personal experiences account for much of my attitude about being a volunteer: feeling good about making a favorable difference in someone else's life; taking intense pride in the careful stewardship of an assigned campsite or section of Trail corridor; and experiencing solitude on those special days when everything combines to make that spot on the Trail where you are one of the most exquisitely beautiful places on earth.

It all comes together in these moments. Talking personally with the squirrel, the moose, the chickadee whose home you are visiting, and sitting at tree line as a white-throated sparrow's incredibly beautiful mating call unlocks decades of mountain memories. When the work is not solitary, it means laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with good people in a common cause. It is sharing a brilliant solution to a tough Trail design challenge, cutting a key shelter beam six inches too short, stuffing thousands of guidebooks and maps into little plastic bags, learning that folks from a different region can really handle a saw, as they try out each other's techniques, philosophies, and food; and sitting together under a full moon, reminiscing and anticipating. This is how a deep love of the Trail reveals itself and then comes around full circle.



A VIEW OF SADDLEBACK PEAK FROM THE HORN OF SADDLEBACK MOUNTAIN IN MAINE. *Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures*

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David Field, chair of the ATC from 1995 to 2001 and a member of the board in various capacities from 1979 to 2005, has been a Trail maintainer and overseer since the 1950s. He is a retired University of Maine professor of forest resources (and one-time department chair), was president of the MATC from 1977 to 1987, and helped lead a nearly total redesign of the A.T. corridor in that state. He currently serves as the MATC's manager of lands and is the author of Along Maine's Appalachian Trail *and an unpublished history of the Trail in Maine.*

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A.T. THE HEART

Everyone's connection to the Appalachian Trail has its own powerful back story. These love stories are as unique and eclectic as the vast A.T. landscape. And some become beacons of inspiration for many others. Stories of healing, community, care, education, people, and place. These relationships are the ties that bind Trail to heart and build hope for a bright future.

The A.T. near Rice Field Shelter in Virginia.
Photo by Sarah Jones Decker

WARD CAMMACK

HEALING



Ward with his other daughter, Ward, during a hike from Rockfish Gap to Harpers Ferry.

HOW THE A.T. HAS SHAPED ME IS THAT OF A PERFECT, LONG MEDITATION, LEARNING THAT LISTENING AND QUESTIONS ARE WHAT LIFE IS ABOUT.

HOW DO YOU FIND A WAY FORWARD WHEN what you love most is suddenly taken away? In 2013, Ward Cammack's 23-year-old daughter Martha died of natural causes in her sleep. Struck with grief, Ward turned to the Appalachian Trail to seek the sort of solace and therapy only nature provides. In his words:

"Bereft, and wanting to feel the love and connection of the universe brought me to the Trail for healing. It was an opportunity to let my thoughts stretch out, think about our loss, and try to come to terms in some way."

The idea of the A.T. being a therapeutic space and experience is not new. Earl Shaffer turned to the Trail, completing the Trail's first-recorded thru-hike, to "walk off the war" or, as we know it now, cope with the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) he experienced during World War II. While each person's connection to the Trail and experience is unique, Ward captured what the Trail meant to him after his daughter's death:

"The A.T. is sacred, evolved of matter, space, and souls. A mysticism of thin-space, aloneness, connectivity, rigor, and wonder . . . . I wanted that."

Turning to the A.T. and finding myriad values and benefits — emotional, psychological, and physical — was the first step to Ward's long-term relationship with the Trail.

"I'm 65 and first hiked a section of the A.T. with my wife in 1998. Since my initial journey, I have hiked almost half the total distance of the A.T. in various sections in Maine, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. I usually hike in May and June, and my favorite section is the Roan Highlands. It has shaped me as living within the Trail, meeting so many different people and listening to their stories – Buddhist monks, war vets, people from so many other nations, hikers needing help, those helping others, those seeking the perfect Trail diet and so on. How it has shaped me is that of a perfect, long meditation, learning that listening and questions are what life is about."

NEVILLE HARRIS

COMMUNITY



Neville on the porch of Woods Hole Hostel.

LOVE IS THE COMMUNITY THAT HIKES. HOPE IS THE TRAIL VOLUNTEER, THE TRAIL ANGEL, AND THE ATC, AND JOY IS THE RESULT.

WOODS HOLE HOSTEL IS LEGENDARY. Most Appalachian Trail long-distance hikers who pass through southwestern Virginia will happily identify an overnight stay at Woods Hole as a highlight of their journey. Not only is the hostel a beautiful, warm, and inviting space, but its owner — Neville Harris — reflects these qualities herself.

Neville owns and operates the Pearisburg, Virginia hostel following in the footsteps of her grandparents Roy and Tillie Wood. The Woods first found the cabin in 1939, lived in it, eventually purchased it along with 100 adjacent acres, rented it out to hunters for over 40 years, and then opened it as a hostel in 1986. Neville's memories remain strong:

"I was four the first time I visited. My love of the Trail was nurtured through watching the community. When I was young, I don't remember hikers making an impression upon me. I just remember them being at the breakfast table. I remember them being fascinated by my grandmother and the stories she shared about her and my grandfather's own connection with nature. In their twenties, my grandparents had lived at the cabin for one year without electricity and running water. I think hikers were inspired and moved by this story along with many others she shared.

"It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I fell in love, not with the hikers, but with this place. I saw my own healing happening deep in the woods. The nurture that nature provided. Of course, I loved the hikers. They were all so kind and grateful. But, it was this place that ultimately attracted me to the Trail."

Neville's grandfather passed away in 1987, and her grandmother continued to run the hostel until her death in 2007. It was at that point that her mother asked if she wanted to live in the cabin and operate Woods Hole. "The Trail became a vehicle for my personal growth when I began serving the hiker community in 2009. My relationship to the A.T. is a connection."

"The Trail is not the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), the Trail maintainer, the hiker, the Trail angel, or the forest. It's the combination of all these entities and more. I feel blessed and lucky to have my small part along this path. I read a quote the other day: 'Faith is the seed, love is the power, hope is the sun, and joy is the flower.' Faith is that the Trail will always be here. Love is the community that hikes. Hope is the Trail volunteer, the Trail angel, and the ATC, and joy is the result."

That joy has been reflected many times in the experiences of many hikers who have found, in Woods Hole and in Neville, a reflection of the spirit of the Trail itself.

MARIANNE SKEEN

CARE AND EDUCATION



Marianne (far left) enjoys the Chattooga River with the group during a GATC outreach backpacking and camping trip.

MY ATTRACTION TO THE A.T. IS ABOUT THE PEOPLE AND THE QUALITY OF THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE.

FOR MOST, HIKING THE APPALACHIAN Trail is an expression of love — for the experience, for nature, and for the feeling one gets immersed in the green tunnel that stretches seemingly forever. Far fewer find love in caring for the Trail itself.

Marianne Skeen's love language is Trail stewardship. She loves hiking the A.T. and being outside, but she is also passionate about developing the next generation of Trail stewards and maintaining her section of Trail. As Marianne says:

"My attraction to the A.T. is about the people and the quality of the volunteer experience. My best friends are the people I hike with, and they have encouraged me to try adventures I might not have otherwise, including more vigorous hiking and international trekking. It is also the continued relationships with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy(ATC) staff, A.T. hikers, Trail volunteers, government employees, all who share a common interest in the Trail. My volunteer experiences with the ATC have been well organized and high quality, which is not always the case when giving of your time. There are so many ways you can do things for the A.T."

Marianne, now 77, has lived this credo. Her involvement with the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC) has spanned 43 years, in roles as diverse as the club's president, Trail supervisor, and lead for the GATC's Forest Plan Revision Committee for Chattahoochee National Forest. She served as chair of the 1993 ATC Conference in Dahlonega, Georgia, and twelve years on the ATC Board of Managers starting that year.

She has also worked tirelessly to develop the next generation of Trail maintainers. Helping introduce inner-city children to the outdoors through the GATC Outreach Program — which emphasizes Leave No Trace ethics and is a program that has now spread to many community schools in the Appalachian Mountains — will surely have a lasting impact in the region and a lasting impact on the Trail that Marianne and millions of others love.

As Marianne, and thousands of volunteers have shown caring is not only a way to express love for the Trail but a way to make sure it's there for others to love in turn.

"BEARS HANG BOB PEOPLES' FOOD BAG for him."

"When Bob Peoples builds a switchback, an angel gets its wings."

Those are just some of the legendary epithets concocted to honor Bob Peoples. While the epithets may be hyperbolic, it's undeniable that Bob is an Appalachian Trail legend. He and his late wife Pat opened Kincora Hikers' Hostel in Hampton, Tennessee, in 1997 and have hosted more than 25,000 hikers since. In Bob's words:

"I'm 77, and I retired from the Air Force, where I worked in aircraft maintenance. We settled in Vermont, and my interest in hiking grew from time spent on the Long Trail near my home. We were in search of land close to the Trail to open a hostel, which eventually led us to Hampton and Kincora."

But, Bob's contributions to the A.T. extend far beyond hosting the thousands of hikers who pass through Kincora. He has completed more than 11,000 hours of Trail maintenance with the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoeing Club. "I do Trail maintenance because it is pay back. Someone built trails for us. I'm working to make it better for the next hikers. To help reduce overuse at places like Max Patch and Carvers Gap, I am also assisting the Eastern Tennessee Trail Club to build new trails for people to explore."

Working with the Hard Core Trail Crew, he also helped introduce hikers to Trail maintenance. "This was started by the Eastman Hiking Club in 2000 and thru-hikers sign up at Trail Days in Damascus each May to work on the Trail for a couple days. The volunteers have helped build, relocate, refurbish, and repair the Trail, as well as build bog bridges and a shelter."

It's not surprising, though, to learn that Bob's love of the Trail extends beyond the place and is squarely devoted to the people of the A.T.

"My love of the backcountry and the Trail all comes down to the people. In the backcountry, people will go so far out of their way to help you. It is the same all over the world. It really reestablishes your faith in mankind. People are not so wound up with stress and they have slowed down. Being on the Trail gets people away from their phones and computers, giving them time to think, reflect, and get their mind back. You realize the things you thought were important are really not."

It's clear that Bob has not only found what's important to him, but his love and care of the Trail and its community is the stuff legends are made of.

BOB PEOPLES

PEOPLE AND PLACE



Bob during a Hard Core Trail Crew work trip.

MY LOVE OF THE BACKCOUNTRY AND THE TRAIL ALL COMES DOWN TO THE PEOPLE.



THE LONG WAY HOME

EACH YEAR, THOUSANDS OF HIKERS SET OUT TO FIND their own path along the Appalachian Trail. Some seek adventure, some aim to complete a lifelong goal, and some walk with another pursuit in mind. Whether we know it or not, many of us go into those woods in search of something deeper. Purpose, healing, peace, passion, fulfillment, direction, or a combination of various needs drive us in our desire to hike the A.T. I was no different.

The idea of thru-hiking came to me while taking a Backpacking 101 course for a quick and easy college credit. Throughout my life, I had heard of the A.T. I knew what it was, but what I didn't know was that people attempt to hike the entire Trail from Georgia to Maine every year. The revelation that someone could undertake such an adventure simply blew my mind and ignited the aspirations for what would become my future passions. Over the next eighteen months, I prepared for my A.T. trek by taking in every bit of information I could find, going on shakedown hikes, and purchasing my first camera to capture the journey.

In March 2017, at the age of twenty-five, I left my home in Georgia and set out alone with the intent to conquer the Trail in its entirety. As I stood at the summit of Springer Mountain, nervous and full of determination, I had the idea that this was merely a grand adventure that would expose me to a world outside of the comfort zone I called home. What I didn't know is that I would find far more than I was searching for.

■ **TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KOTY SAPP**



DANYA "LOINS OF ARABIA" SAADAWI
A.T. START DATE: **MARCH 19, 2017**



AFTER SPENDING THE FIRST sixteen years of her life growing up in Saudi Arabia, with summer visits to the U.S., Danya moved to the states full time. She spent the next twelve years living in Cincinnati, where through family and friends she found a love for backpacking. Her big plan was to hike the Trail with her aunt, who shared her passion. However, after 200 miles, her aunt was needed at home. At this point, Danya was unsure if she should keep hiking and found herself contemplating if she should return home as well. Ultimately, she made the decision to continue on with someone she had only known for seventeen days.

KOTY "TRASH PANDA" SAPP
A.T. START DATE: **MARCH 17, 2017**





Above from top left: Danya "Loins of Arabia" at mile 100 in North Carolina; Koty at mile 200 just past Clingmans Dome; Koty and Danya near Jane Bald soon after they met. Opposite page: Danya on the Trail in the Smokies.







WHILE OUR JOURNEY WAS FILLED WITH OVERWHELMING JOY, WE ALSO EXPERIENCED SETBACKS IN THE FORM OF INJURIES, FATIGUE, AND THE "VIRGINIA BLUES."IN THE INTEREST OF TIME AND A CHANGE OF SCENERY, WE DECIDED TO "FLIP" UP TO MAINE WITH A NEW SENSE OF PURPOSE.

This page clockwise from top left: Koty on McAfee Knob, Virginia; Danya in New York City after she and Koty "flipped" their hike from Virginia to Maine; View from Barren Ledges, Maine. Opposite page from top: Danya at Mahoosuc Notch, Maine; Goose Eye North Peak, Maine.















THE BEAUTY OF THE TRAIL SEEMED TO BE NEVER-ENDING AND IT IS THIS NATURAL BEAUTY THAT FUELED MY PASSION FOR PHOTOGRAPHY.

Opposite page clockwise from top: Moose at the summit of Mount Moosilauke, New Hampshire; A.T. near Mount Madison, New Hampshire; Danya on Mount Race Ledges, Massachusetts. This page from top: Danya and Koty on Mount Washington, New Hampshire; Koty at Smarts Mountain fire tower, New Hampshire.













THEY SAY HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS. WELL, MY HEART IS WITH THE FAMED DIRT FOOTPATH ALONG THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS, THE COMMUNITY THAT EMBRACES IT, AND THE PARTNER I FOUND WHILE TAKING A LONG WALK IN THE WOODS.

Opposite page clockwise from top: Danya on Moosilauke's south peak, New Hampshire; Danya on the New Jersey/Pennsylvania line; Koty on the New York/New Jersey line. This page clockwise from top: The couple at the Trailside Museum and Zoo in New York; At the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia; A.T. Mason-Dixon line, Pennsylvania/Maryland.

HOW TRAIL LOVE LIVES ON

~ BY SHALIN DESAI

THERE IS AN ACUTE SENSE OF WITHDRAWAL that intensifies in the days, weeks, and months after finishing a thru-hike. Some call it post-hike blues. Others experience it as low-grade depression. For me, it started with numbness. I was unable to accept that an experience, which fundamentally transformed my life, was over. The transformation I went through during my thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail in 2015 was so intense that it compelled me to toggle between two, discrete lives. There was life on the Trail: wholly connected to nature and to a simple, restorative experience. And there was life off Trail: completely divorced from these things.

I found myself comparing the experiences provided by these discrete lives. On the A.T., I woke up to the sound of whip-poor-wills or a fellow hiker shaking the dew off their tent. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I live now, I wake up to the lazy groan of a garbage truck barreling down the street at six in the morning, ambling out of bed just as the coffeemaker burps out the final drops of Ethiopian blend. On the Trail, I distilled my life to the basics: nourishment, hydration, navigation, and destination. Off the A.T., I am enmeshed in a complexity that forces me to organize my life through apps and meeting requests.

There was a clear distinction in value between these two lives: the sense of raw, physical reality the Trail offered and the dissociative "busy-ness" of life off Trail. It was in this distinction that I learned the Trail is a tricky thing to love. Like biting an Edenic apple, one taste and everything else is suddenly cast under a pall. Worse still, the Trail experience is — for nearly everyone — temporary, and there is a special kind of angst that arises from loving something from afar.

One sign of loving something is the sense of withdrawal when it is taken away. And, yet, it's possible to continue loving something even as this sense of withdrawal grows. So, how does my love for the Trail endure — long after my A.T. experience is over?

One of the residual benefits of my A.T. experience is that it widened the aperture through which I see the world. The "ah-ha" moment occurred on top of Avery Peak in July 2015 when, in the earliest hours of the morning, a world previously hidden to me was suddenly revealed. The sunrise cast hues of amber, yellow, silver, and indigo over the expanse of Flagstaff Lake. The northern woods seemed denser and more verdant than ever. And, the cold, lung-charring air whipping over the summit made me draw inward, seeking a warmth within myself that could only be supplanted by the steaming coffee in my camp mug. Would the people who followed in my footsteps see what I saw at that moment? Would the magic of this moment strike them in a similar way?

These questions compelled me to think beyond the recreational experience and focus on care. Because, for many and certainly for me, care is an essential love language. I found myself connecting to other caretakers, notably my local Trail maintaining club and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), first as a volunteer and then as an ATC staff member. The work I do, each day, is an expression of my love for the Trail, and it ensures that the Trail lives on for others to love. I find myself encouraging others to do the same — to think beyond the hiking experience and find another way to love the A.T. through stewardship, through financial support, and through community connection. It's the only way the A.T. will exist in the future and continue to be there for others to love in their own way.

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Shalin Desai is the outgoing Vice President of Advancement for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. He thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2015 and subsequently thru-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in 2016 and the Continental Divide Trail in 2017.

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Early morning, Flagstaff Lake, Maine.

ONE OF THE RESIDUAL BENEFITS OF MY A.T. EXPERIENCE IS THAT IT WIDENED THE APERTURE THROUGH WHICH I SEE THE WORLD.

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A.T. on Roan Mountain, North Carolina/Tennessee. Photo by Mike Williams