

A walk in the woods



Hiking the Appalachian Trail to help end MS

by Mike Knight

Stretching nearly 2,200 miles from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Katahdin, Maine, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is the longest hiking-only footpath in the world. More than 3 million people visit the trail annually; 3,000 of those visitors attempt a “thru-hike,” traversing the trail’s entire length through 14 states all in 12 months or less. Though flat in some areas, the trail is a continuous string of long, slow ascents and descents, and completing a thru-hike is equivalent to scaling Mount Everest — 16 times.

Two separate sets of National Multiple Sclerosis Society Do It Yourself (DIY) fundraisers chose to attempt thru-hikes on the Appalachian Trail in 2019 to help end multiple sclerosis and to show support for loved ones living with the disease.

Three friends walked onto a trail...

A 2019 graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology (known as Georgia Tech), Daniel Oliver decided to hike the trail with his bandmate and Georgia Tech classmate Garrett Godbey and childhood friend Gabriel Foral. They did this in part because Oliver’s father, Douglas, has MS, and Oliver has other friends and family affected by the disease. Oliver and Foral had previously hiked shorter sections of the Florida National Scenic Trail and the Appalachian Trail together. They even kicked around trying an Appalachian Trail thru-hike after graduating from college.

Then, Oliver had an idea.

“We knew we wanted to hike the trail anyway and it just occurred to me one day that it

would be a great idea to try to do it for charity,” he says. “I started thinking about what kinds of stuff I could do, and since I had this personal thought of my father, and my parents both donate to the Society, it just made sense.”



From left: Bob Fesler, Garrett Godbey, Gabriel Foral and Daniel Oliver. Fesler, Oliver’s uncle, met up with the trio in Maine and hiked Katahdin with them. Photo courtesy of Daniel Oliver

The three planned to complete their thru-hike via the Harpers Ferry “Flip Flop.” Rather than hiking north or southbound only, flip-flops let hikers customize routes to take advantage of milder weather, more moderate terrain and fewer crowds, making them especially popular with college students who graduate in late spring. Oliver’s group began in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in early June and planned to finish in late October in Springer Mountain, Georgia.

A walk to remember

Colleen and Ben Gauntt of Concord, New Hampshire, wanted to do something special for their fifth wedding anniversary in 2016, something meaningful to them as a couple and as individuals — and something they’d never forget. They chose to hike a 100-mile section of the Appalachian Trail in Maine.

Hiking, Colleen says, “is something we really connect with.”

The two enjoyed their anniversary trip so much that they decided to try it again the following year and began talking about trying a trail thru-hike someday. Then Ben started to experience blurred vision and vertigo. He also started to develop foot drop while walking to

work each day along with a painful, “knotty” sensation along his spine.

In January 2018, Ben was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS, something neither saw coming. “When the doctor told me about the MS, I was kind of blindsided,” he says. “I was like, wait, what?” The diagnosis began what Colleen calls “an escalation of symptoms,” including mood changes and depression brought on, she believes, by stress.

The couple continued hiking as Ben’s health allowed, and if he seemed like a different man out on the trails, Ben says, that’s because he was. “When I got on the trail, my whole mood changed,” he says. The teamwork necessary to complete long hikes made him feel good. “Feeling useful again was great.”



Hiking is one activity that brings Colleen and Ben Gauntt closer together. Ben was diagnosed with MS in 2018, and the two still go hiking when his health allows. Photos courtesy of Colleen and Ben Gauntt

In May 2018, Ben and Colleen participated in MuckFest Boston, which is a 5K fun run, obstacle course and fundraiser for MS. “It was amazing to go through and see how much money gets raised,” Colleen says.

The experience stuck. When Ben lost his job in early 2019, the couple decided to attempt a thru-hike while he was able. Colleen applied for a Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) accommodation to secure her job. Then, like Oliver’s trio, they decided to turn something they were passionate about doing — in their case, conquering the Appalachian Trail — into a DIY fundraiser for the Society.

Jennifer Odence coordinates fundraising events for the Society in the New England area, including Finish MS, Jet Pull and more. Odence helped the Gauntts launch their fundraising hike. DIY fundraising, she says, is a growing source of financial support for the Society's vital research, services and other programs. More than 1,250 people now participate in DIY events across the United States annually, raising nearly \$4 million each year to help end MS. Many are deeply linked to the cause. Of the 1,570 who participated in DIY events in 2017, roughly half had a direct connection to MS, almost 250 identified as living with the disease.

"You might not want to do a run or a walk, or Muck Fest or a Society event," Odence says. "We give you the same tools and a fundraising page; people can fundraise with you online. You are the planner, but we are here to support you." Odence helped the Gauntts develop and launch their fundraising campaign.

One trail, two journeys

Shortly after beginning their hike in June 2019, Colleen twisted her ankle. The couple returned to the New England area for treatment before attempting a flip-flop from there. But Colleen's injury refused to heal, and after hiking 300 miles (and raising \$300), the Gauntts decided to put the hike on hold. But spurred by their time together on the trail, a new journey for the couple was just beginning.



Hiking the peaceful Appalachian Trail taught Colleen and Ben Gauntt that stress is a big factor in exacerbating Ben's MS symptoms. Photo courtesy of Colleen and Ben Gauntt

Initially saddened by their inability to complete the full hike, the Gauntts began to see it instead as an opportunity in waiting. "We ended up realizing through the whole thing how

much stress is such a huge indicator for Ben with his symptoms,” says Colleen. “On the trail, he had so few symptoms based off of, I’m sure, the lack of stress of home life and being in nature and being active.”

Not long after returning home, they decided to leave their busy lives behind and relocated to a small town in Maine. “We always wanted to move up here where life is just a little slower,” Colleen says.

“We’re hitting a reset button,” Ben says. “We took a big jump, and it came to work out.”

On Nov. 3, 2019 — nearly six months after setting foot on the trail — Daniel Oliver’s group walked the last of the trail’s 2,192 miles with friends and family on Springer Mountain in Northern Georgia. Existing on a daily diet featuring some combination of salami, sausages, Fritos, Cheetos, tuna packets, Oreos and Little Debbie cookies, Oliver managed to shed 45 pounds while he hiked. His group faced wind gusts over 70 miles per hour along narrow trails in the mountains and a few “sketchy people” along the way. They also encountered other hikers raising money to help end MS.

In all, Oliver’s group managed to raise more than \$5,000 — their fundraising goal and an amount they found especially meaningful.

“We felt proud about the \$5,000 mark,” he says, “because that’s about the range of what you would expect to budget out to do the whole thing. That’s the amount we would have had to raise to fund an extra hiker to come with us. So, it’s kind of like [raising money for MS] was that fourth person coming with us.”

Mike Knight is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

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