

Hiking the Pine Barrens for MS



What a multiday hike taught a New Jersey woman about living with MS.

by Matt Alderton

Because its soil is sandy and acidic, southern New Jersey's Pine Barrens wilderness area is inhospitable to most crops and plants, save for hardy species like blueberries and scrub pines. It's the kind of place where only the strong survive.

It's hard to imagine a more appropriate setting in which to do what Rachel Bunting decided to do last year: Newly diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she resolved to hike the nearly 60-mile Batona Trail—one of the longest hiking trails in all of New Jersey—to raise funds for MS research and programs.

"I had already been planning a hiking trip in the Pine Barrens because I wanted to spend more time outside," says Bunting, 36, of Lumberton, New Jersey. "After my diagnosis, I decided to move forward with it because, although I'm optimistic about how good I feel today, I recognize that I don't know how I'm going to feel tomorrow."

Bunting was diagnosed in January 2015 after a six-week period of escalating numbness and tingling in her limbs and core. Along with her friend, Andy DeLong, who agreed to join her on her trek, she began training in March and planned to do the hike in October. All told, they estimated, the hike would total nearly 60 miles and take approximately four days to complete.



Rachel Bunting, left, and Andy DeLong, right, hiked roughly 31 miles of the Batona Trail in 2015 and plan to tackle it again this fall. Photo courtesy of Rachel Bunting

In July, Bunting started fundraising. “Service has always been a big part of my life. It’s important to me to have a connection to my community,” she explains. “I decided to make my hike a fundraiser because I thought it would be a good way to remain connected to a community that I was beginning to recognize as my own.”

Bunting added a section to her personal website—where she advertises her poetry readings and events—to share updates about the hike, and linked it to her fundraising page on the National MS Society’s website. She also solicited donations online from Facebook friends and Twitter followers. Although her fundraising goal was \$750, she raised nearly double that: \$1,469.94.

When the big day finally arrived, the hike hit her like a hard slap across the face. “We were too ambitious and had not trained appropriately for the conditions we would encounter,” Bunting confesses.

Although she and DeLong traveled 17.5 miles on the first day of the hike, the rough terrain proved insurmountable. “By the time we got to the end of the first day, our muscles were absolutely worn out,” Bunting recalls.

The next morning, DeLong couldn’t walk and the entire sole of Bunting’s left foot was a single, giant blister. “We decided to take Saturday off to recuperate,” she says. The next day, she and DeLong hiked another 15 miles and camped that evening before admitting defeat on Monday morning. “The temperature had dropped below freezing overnight, which we hadn’t expected, and our muscles were locking up because we’d slept on the cold ground. So, we decided to pack it in. We didn’t do the full 60 miles, but I was really pleased that we did at

least half of what we set out to do—roughly 31 miles.”

Bunting says the experience taught her a few important lessons that have helped her adjust to life with MS. “The first thing I learned is that it’s really important for me to listen to my body,” she says. “At the end of day one, my feet were numb again and I was starting to feel that sensation creeping up my legs. If I hadn’t [taken Saturday off], I don’t know what would have happened.”

The second thing Bunting learned is the importance of tenacity. “I have trained in martial arts, and one of the things they teach you is the idea of the ‘indomitable spirit’ and never giving up. We took a day off from hiking, but there was never a moment where we said, ‘We can’t do it; we’re never going to try this again.’ ”

In fact, she’s going to try again this year—this time with an even bigger fundraising goal. “We’ll keep trying until we finish all 60 miles,” Bunting concludes. “That idea—that I need to keep trying and keep moving forward—is something I’ll take with me from the hike. Even though the past couple of years have been really hard, I need to keep trying and learning—because what else am I here for?”

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

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