

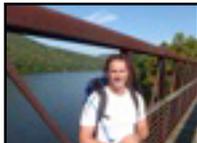
Julianna's Hike

2011

Annual Newsletter Ninth Edition

"Fall down seven times, get up eight."
 — Japanese proverb

We started this journey on Springer Mountain, Georgia in 2003. Last year marked our ninth attempt to achieve our long term goal to complete the Appalachian Trail and to reach Katahdin, Maine. After nine years of falling down we have now lived through 62 days of hiking covering more than 830 miles. If you were in the woods with the four of us during this time you would understand when I say, "I can't begin to tell you how difficult this has been at times."

<p>Day 1 14 miles</p> 	<p>Day 2 12.4 miles</p> 	<p>Day 3 12.7 miles</p> 	<p>Day 4 10.6 miles</p> 	<p>Day 5 14 miles</p> 	<p>Day 6 14.3 miles</p> 	<p>Day 7 12.8 miles</p> 
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Last summer over seven days, we hiked 90.8 miles. Daily climbs (5 times above 4,000 feet) and descents (4 times below 1,000 feet) overwhelmed our aging and out of shape bodies. We do not agree about many things on the trail, however, we do agree last year was our most painful week since our inaugural trek in steamy Georgia eight years earlier. In fact, the cumulative physical and mental fatigue has finally created doubt amongst us that we will ever see Maine. After one strenuous stretch in 2011, I remember thinking to myself, "This can't go on."

On Sunday August 29, 2011 Streek, Giggles, Barfy and Jules converge in Pennsylvania for the 6 hour drive to the Appalachian Trail in central Virginia and our ninth annual hike. We typically depart on a Friday and

begin hiking on a Saturday. This year our departure was delayed by two days due to Barfy's nieces wedding. I was not optimistic the vast amount of beer and food consumed at this Irish Party would positively contribute to his capacity to climb mountains. Nonetheless, I am ecstatic he is returning to the trail for his ninth year of personal torture.

We prepare to depart and say our goodbyes. I look for my little seven year old son Joey, who is nowhere to



be found. As I back out of the driveway, I hear giggling in the back seat. I turn around to find my little stowaway clone who wants to go hiking. He refuses to depart after several requests. I grow impatient with the routine and holler at him. He now sheepishly leaves. Obviously, I am already in hike mode.

We begin our trip south. One hour later I hear, "Hey anybody want a beer?" Here we go again. By the time we land in Buchanan, Virginia (after three potty breaks), Barfy is full of liquid confidence blustering how he is going to take this hike back. "I am tired of staying out in the woods...from now on we are staying at a hotel every night and ordering a wheel." I think to myself, this is going to be a long, long week. As it turns out, I was right.

After nine years of hiking the Appalachian Trail, we have raised and donated more than \$525,000. Last year the following organizations and a few others received more than \$100,000 in funding from the Julianna Hike Fund.

[CENTER FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN
\(WWW.GRIEVINGCHILDREN.ORG\)](http://WWW.GRIEVINGCHILDREN.ORG)

For the 9th year, The Center for Grieving Children, is the main beneficiary of our hike. The Center is a place where children can go to find peace, comfort and support when everything around them seems lost. I have witnessed the work this organization has accomplished as a board member.



The Center for Grieving Children will soon be housed at 3300 Henry Avenue, Philadelphia, (the Falls Center) in the East Falls section of the city. We are all very excited. The *new* Center for Grieving Children will be bright, inviting and comforting. We hope to have new play areas for dress up, sand tray, and art projects. We will also create the Center's *Talking Circle*—where children gather to start each group—and fill it with soft things to help them feel comforted and safe during their group work. Our funding is most helpful during this move.

[The Breathing Room Foundation.
www.breathingroomfoundation.org](http://www.breathingroomfoundation.org)

This is our 7th year supporting this foundation, which provides comfort (breathing room) to families suffering with cancer. BRF recognizes that a cancer diagnosis affects every aspect of a family's life; emotional, physical,

spiritual, and financial. They strive to provide a family with whatever it is that will allow them a bit of "breathing room" from their daily struggle against cancer. It is their hope that this will allow them to concentrate all of their efforts toward regaining their physical health. Our funding has always help support the year round programs including:



- *Holiday Program gifts and holiday meals
- *Valentine Program
- *Easter Basket Program
- *Summer Activities Program
- *Steps to Success Program
- *Back-to-School Program
- *Thanksgiving Dinner Baskets

The comfort this organization provides suffering families is truly inspiring and so appreciated by all the recipients. I currently serve on the board of directors for TBRF. Also, we are very active preparing and delivering meals to families. If you have an interest in getting involved in this part of TBRF, please let me know.

[Hopeworks N Camden
\(www.hopeworks.org\)](http://www.hopeworks.org)

This is our 4th year of support. Hopeworks was established by Father Jeff Puttoff, SJ ten years ago. They focus on youth ages 17 to 25 who have dropped out of school. They take teens, who live in Camden and teach them web development skills. At the same time they require kids to take basic course work to obtain a high school degree. The program is a great success providing youth a chance in life and to pursue college and trade school degrees. Their goal is simple: Enhance the lives of inner-city Camden youth by expanding the learning opportunities and pointing the way to a future of hope. The heart of the program is

technology training, which gives these kids a skill they can use throughout their lives. If you want to view their work go to www.juliannahike.org.

[St Bartholomew Outreach](#)

This is our 7th year of support. Eight years ago I was introduced to Sister Pat Denny, who had an outreach program at this Northern Philadelphia Church. Although Sister Pat died several years ago, we are continuing her good works. With Sister Pat's guidance, we have paid Catholic School tuition for a family, whose father is legally blind. His vision is also becoming progressively worse and eventually will not be able to see at all. His four young daughters have the same disease. Although they are on an improving economic path this family continues to need our support. Through the fund we are able to pay the children's tuition. Your gift has allowed this family to be educated in a place where they have learned and prospered.



[Variety, the Children's charity
\(www.varietyphila.org\)](http://www.varietyphila.org)

This is our 7th year of support. The Variety Club has been a Philadelphia Institution since 1935 serving children with temporary or permanent disabilities resulting from injury, illness or congenital condition.

[Need in Deed \(www.needindeed.org\)](http://www.needindeed.org)

This is our 1st year of support. Since its founding, Need in Deed's mission has been to use the classroom to prepare youth for civic responsibility and service to others, enabling them to become capable, contributing members of society. Working in public, charter, independent and faith-based schools, they train and support teachers as they adopt a teaching and learning strategy known as service-learning.



The start at Jennings Creek



After 8.7 miles at the Cornelius Creek Shelter



Still Smiling late on Day 1

Day 1 - Let the fun begin

I awake at 2:22 am in slight panic. I am worried I had forgotten bags for our trash on the trail. Of all the things to worry about hours before a seven day hike...damn trash bags. I am now awake for the night contemplating Julianna, this journey and my life until our 6 am alarm.

We wake and gather to eat our final real meal at the free buffet in the hotel lobby. I gaze in wonder at Barfy while he eats the scrambled eggs with his hands. Noticing my attention he glances over at me in mid bite and says, "I am just getting myself used to the trail." We all go back to shower one last time. Barfy resists making a logical choice, "What's the point?"

Homer Witcher, our trail transport, picks us up for the fourth year in a row. It is comforting to see his familiar face as we head into the wild. We pull out of the Holiday Inn when Barfy yells, "STOP." He notices a sign for Subway Hoagies. The consummate party pooper I yell back, "We are running late - Are you kidding me?" Barfy relents saying, "Forget it, I have some pride." I tell him, "no you don't" so we stop to pacify our reluctant hiker. Besides, Streek our resident dentist, needs to purchase a toothbrush, which the idiot forgot. He only has 10,000 of them back at the office.

As we pull out, Homer tells us, in an ominous voice, he needs to share

some disturbing information. We grow quiet understanding his tone. "A hiker has been murdered a few weeks back on the Appalachian Trail in the section you will be hiking." Homer had no more details, except a general location. We later learned the hiker was a 30 year old man from South Bend, Indiana. His name was Scott Lilly and he came to this part of Virginia to learn about nature and civil war history. His partially buried body was found on August 12th. He was strangled to death. There currently is a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the the killers arrest. Holy Shi*!! Why not a bear mauling? How about a rattle snake bite? Nope, just another senseless act from a psycho human being. This was the second incident (the other a double homicide) of murder we have dealt with in the last three years prior to our hike. Both murders are currently unsolved. We absorb this new and unsettling information in silence as we proceed to our starting point at Jennings Creek.

Minutes later Homer eyes my new knee brace, a monstrosity I just had fitted. "How are your knees?" he asks. I tell him without confidence, "they are fine." He responds back, "Well if you have bad knees, you will certainly feel it when you climb those rocks on the Priest (a mountain we will traverse on Day 6)." I am not positive, but I think Homer was trying to distract me from the painful thought of a brutal murder much like

when my kid's tell me their elbow hurts, and I punch them in the leg to divert their attention.

We arrive at Jennings Creek, mount up and depart by 8:45 am. Our goal was 8:00 am. Barfy cracks a joke. Giggles responds, "You know that is why we bring him." It certainly isn't his passion for overnight hiking. Before departure we pray to Nick Guyer, Mimi Price and Julianna...Please watch over us.

Our first eight miles are comprised of two major ascents. The first, Fork Mountain, is small and manageable as an 800 feet incline while the second, Floyd Mountain is less appealing at 5 miles in length and over 2,400 feet of elevation. We are stocked with water and provisions for several days making the start of our 2011 hike overwhelmingly hard. My knee countdown has begun. How long will they last? I am quite worried. Streek breaks the unhealthy negative focus on my bum wheel when he starts bellowing, "Don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me, don't you" in chorus. Although he is frustrated to have this pathetic song stuck in his head since early this morning, I am very happy for the current distraction.

Overcast conditions are giving us some reprieve as we struggle upward. After several hours, the effect of gravity combined with our steady climb has taken an early toll. When

life seems overwhelming, like this mountain does right now, I turn to my familiar motto. Take life one step at a time. I begin my count 1,2,3....

By 1:00 pm, we begin a needed descent and finally reach Cornelius Creek Shelter. We collapse. After several minutes we devour the Subway Hoagies. I can't believe we are deep in the Virginia woods experiencing nature while eating an Italian hoagie. Streek and Giggles retrieve the water while I elevate my weary knee and Barfy sleeps.

After our break we ascend to the next mountain - Apple Orchard at 4,225

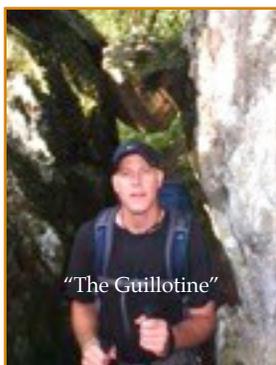
feet, the home of a now defunct Air Force Radar Base. This



Apple Orchard Mountain

mountain peak will be our highest elevation on the Appalachian Trail until we reach New Hampshire around the year 2020. We crest the mountain, admire the scenery (for 15 seconds) and begin our descent to our sleeping accommodations at the Thunder Hill Shelter. En route we pass under "The Guillotine", which is a huge boulder pinned over the trail in between two rock formations. My first thought when heading under the guillotine was that I would hate to be under this big rock during an earthquake. This was fresh in my mind since a 5.8 magnitude earthquake, which caused most of

downtown Washington DC to evacuate buildings, had struck central Virginia six days before our hike. We were now about 80 miles from the epicenter.



"The Guillotine"

The last few miles of our 14 mile day were fortuitously down hill. At one of our final breaks I did hear the usual complaint from one of the hikers. "What were you thinking making this day so long?" I had no response. I was just too tired.

At 6 pm we cross the the Blue Ridge Parkway and eventually reach our shelter site 3/10 of a mile later. We arrive to a party scene. There had to be 35 college kids around the shelter and surrounding camp sites. This was another freshman orientation just like we ran into last year. These overnight hikers were from Washington & Lee, a private college of 1,800 students founded in 1749, which is located in nearby Lexington, Virginia. The team mascot is the "Generals" for General George Washington and General Robert E. Lee. In 1796, George Washington saved the university from possible oblivion with an endowment of \$50,000. In gratitude it was chartered as Washington College several years later. It was changed to Washington & Lee, for Robert E. Lee, who was the University's President from 1865 to 1870. Another irrelevant fact for the overview. Robert E. Lee was married to the great grand daughter of George Washington.

There are two sources of water at this camp site. The first source was 100 yards from camp, which of course was bone dry. The second source was roughly 3/4 mile away along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Me and Barfy make this long journey. On the way I tell Barfy these humbling experiences teach us humility an essential ingredient to personal growth. Barfy scowls at my masochistic reasoning.

We reach a dirt path off the Blue Ridge. Next, we descend 500 feet eventually running into a crusty looking large concrete box with a small pipe protruding from it with a

slight trickle of water leaking out. We look at each other and agree this decrepit sight cannot be the water source. We look around and find nothing. We eventually surrender to using this nasty water out of sheer necessity. We begin filling one of our



Barfy gaining humility

five gallon jugs one cup at a time without

pumping through the purifier. We then pumped the water from the untreated jug into another clean jug we carried. The process took forever and was made more challenging by the swarming gnats. This was horrible. I repeat my story of humility to Barfy. It begins to rain. Barfy looks at me with disgust and says, "Is this humble enough for you?"

We start the long trek back with the extra water weight. On our initial ascent back to the Blue Ridge, we are startled by one of the largest deer either one of us has ever seen. I guess that is better than a bear. After our one hour and twenty minute water retrieval operation, we return to the annoying sight of Streek and Giggles relaxed and clean at our camp site. They made it worse, by asking what took us so long as if we just went out to the corner bar to enjoy a few beers. These marshmallows were probably fraternizing with the co-eds while we were braving the wild. I thought to myself, next time we are retrieving the water at lunch.

The student noise in the camp combined with Barfy's iPod was far from peaceful. Although annoying, all the commotion did provide an unexpected feeling of security considering a killer was somewhere out there.

Thunder Ridge Overlook at 3,501' early in Day 2



Day 2

We awake after a cold night at 3,960 feet. I don't care how exhausted we were from yesterday's 14 mile hike, sleep never comes easy as we transition from the comforts of a cozy bed to the inconvenience of sleeping outdoors on the hard ground. Barfy, already frustrated with outdoor living, informs us he plans to bring diapers next year so he isn't forced to get out of his warm sleeping bag in the middle of the night.

My first move is painful just like it is after every other first day on the trail. The human body has roughly 640 muscles. Each one of them is feeling sore right now. When we finally squeeze out of our tent we are greeted again by all the Washington & Lee students spread throughout the Thunder Hill campsite.

We slowly gather our gear, put back on our dirty clothes, and prepare to

depart. We leave camp at 9:20 am. Our daily ritual is to stop at the trail head before departure and pray. I pray that each of us can reach deep down to find and nourish our spirit. We all need this time to reflect. As we pursue our growth in spiritual self awareness we must pursue choices that give our individual lives meaning.

"The minute you choose to do what you really want to do, it's a different kind of life."

— R. Buckminster Fuller

Our next quest is to make it through this day and reach Matt's Creek Shelter, 12.4 miles away.

The early trail is accommodating providing time to catch up and talk. Me and Giggles pair up. We recount the previous days events and laugh... mostly about Barfy. His comment about buying diapers for next year's hike is a classic "barfyism." Our

conversation soon gravitates another direction. Giggles comments, "I feel so sorry for angry people. Living your life mad at the world must suck." I immediately thought of my own disposition and my reaction to the pain I have been forced to endure. I clearly recall walking through the woods near my house months after Julianna was killed. I was alone. I began to think about my hatred for the man who recklessly got behind the wheel even though he was a known epileptic. I felt the hate burn in my heart. At this moment I knew I had one of two directions to go. I could live a life of hate and anger or I could attempt to live a life of love and peace. For my family and my own welfare, I could not be swallowed up in misery so I tried to choose love. I look back to the trail and comment to Giggles, "this is perfect weather for hiking and a perfect trail to walk on." Giggles responds, "Oh yeah, this is a beautiful stroll in the woods right

now. You've got to enjoy it and appreciate it while it is here." Amen.

We pass the Thunder Ridge overlook. It is breathtaking to look down onto the clouds with the Virginia countryside providing a beautiful backdrop. As we push ahead we intersect the Blue Ridge Parkway two times this morning, allowing us brief glimpses of civilization. Barfy appreciates this the most. We have been hiking for nearly four hours. We need to stop for lunch and a break soon. I ask Barfy where he wants to stop to eat. "How about Applebees?" I grimace as I know he is not even remotely kidding around.



Marble Springs

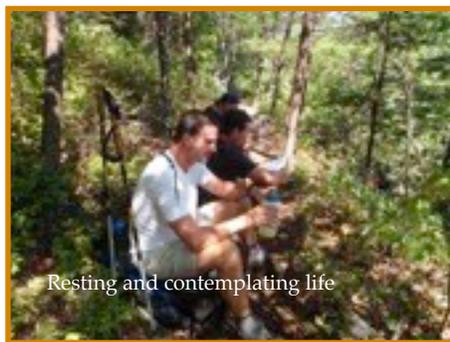
Our intermediate goal is Marble Springs for lunch. Before we reach this needed destination we must ascend High Cock Knob (got to wonder where they get these names). The trail is steep, rocky and the tree canopy has vanished leaving us exposed to the steamy mountain sun. This is the start of our real torture. I hear, "You said this was going to be easy today." My only thought at this moment: "come on - this ain't your first rodeo cowboy."



Barfy boiling water

Marble Spring is a quiet valley covered with shade trees and plenty of flat ground for camping or in our case collapsing. We eat peanut butter and pita sandwiches while leaning against the camp logs. Streek dozes off fantasizing about the pizza we ordered at Fontana Lake, NC in the second year of our hike.

After we get nice and stiff, we depart for our final 5.5 miles. We have flat terrain for a mile, which gives me time to focus on my right knee, which is starting to ache. We break on



Resting and contemplating life

the side of a mountain after a 500 foot climb. We begin throwing rocks. Streek comments that these rocks we are throwing will likely be in the same spot for the next thousand years in this desolate location. At that moment I begin to think about our time on this earth, and how short it really is. The time to live is now.

"Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think"

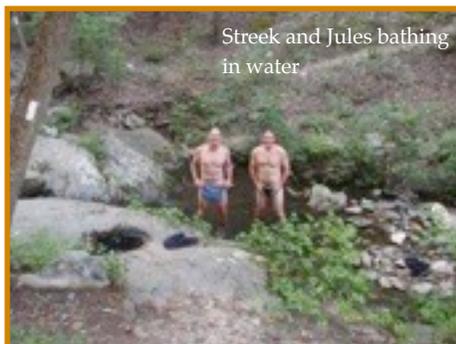
—Chinese Proverb



Barfy examining elevation chart once again

By 5:25 pm we descend nearly 1,800 painful feet reaching our goal at Matt's Creek. This location was spectacular made extra special by an enormous swimming hole adjacent to our camp site. Everyone got naked and jumped in. There is no pride out here on the trail. Barfy, the king of no pride, was first to get nude. We set up the tent on the opposite side of the creek from the shelter after finding a nice flat location under several tall trees. We have a sumptuous freeze dried meal and head to bed quite happy in this peaceful valley. The fact that we are relatively clean from the swimming hole makes this bedtime quite ideal. We just needed some warm milk to make it perfect. We fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, we are awakened by a large tree falling nearby echoing a thundering whack. The mountain wind was gathering steam certainly contributing to the crash. Streek, who set up the tent, becomes alarmed. He whispers to me, "The only thing I considered when picking the site for the tent was flat ground. I didn't think about the tree limbs overhead...shit."



Streek and Jules bathing in water



Giggles pumping water

Day 3

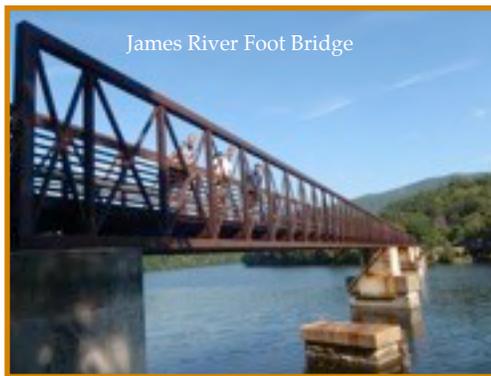
“Did I snore?” Barfy inquires. Does a bear poop in the woods? Barfy is a prolific snorer with these last two days of exhaustive hiking bringing out his very best.

As we wake, we all recognize the trail is starting to cause damage to our bodies now. My feet are feeling the effects of too much walking. The blister under my toe has gotten large and needs to be lanced. I am in good shape compared to Barfy, however, whose toes already look like hamburger helper. Barfy purchased new boots on the trip south from Pennsylvania a few days earlier, which he did not break in and certainly has contributed to his current condition.

We depart this beautiful campsite. Before we do we pray. May we all live a life of commitment. No matter whether we commit to our family, our spouse, our friends, or to a meaningful cause - may we stay committed and devoted to something other than ourselves.

Our first two miles this morning are ideal for four tired bodies. We head north on a flat trail to the James River, a 450 mile waterway connecting the Allegheny Mountains with the Chesapeake Bay. We walk along the James River Gorge with imposing bluffs on either side of the river until we reach the James River Foot Bridge, the longest foot only bridge on the AT.

Before departing Homer asked us if we were considering jumping off the James River Bridge. On the way this morning, we all debated whether we would jump. With my bum knee and my lack of



James River Foot Bridge

adventuresome spirit, I was a long shot from the get go. Giggles, Streek and Barfy were all on the fence. We all climbed the imposing wooden bridge, which covered a wide section of the James. We walked along the wooden trusses surveying the river until we got to a point 1/3 across the bridge where written in magic marker were the words, “Jump Here.” I don’t think this was official sanctioning for jumping, but it was good enough. We look down to the river 25 feet below and my butt puckers up. I was definitely out. Giggles was next. Not interested. Streek and Barfy were left. Barfy’s familiar comment, “I will jump off a bridge if you do Streek” was put out there. Streek was torn. You could see the internal conflict raging. Do I jump off and pursue life to the fullest like I always do or do I stay comfortable in my currently dry clothes? He debated back and forth. I was betting the jump side would win. In a last second burst of capitulation he says, “I am out, it’s too early in the day to get wet.” As we march off the

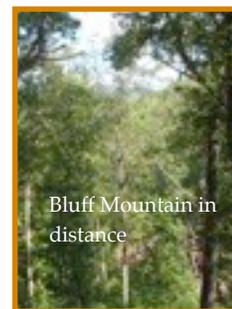
bridge I wonder whether this will be one of those things Streek will regret. For good measure, Barfy did jump in the next creek we traversed offering some small consolation for bypassing the big prize.

“Contemplation often makes life miserable. We should act more, think less, and stop watching others live.”

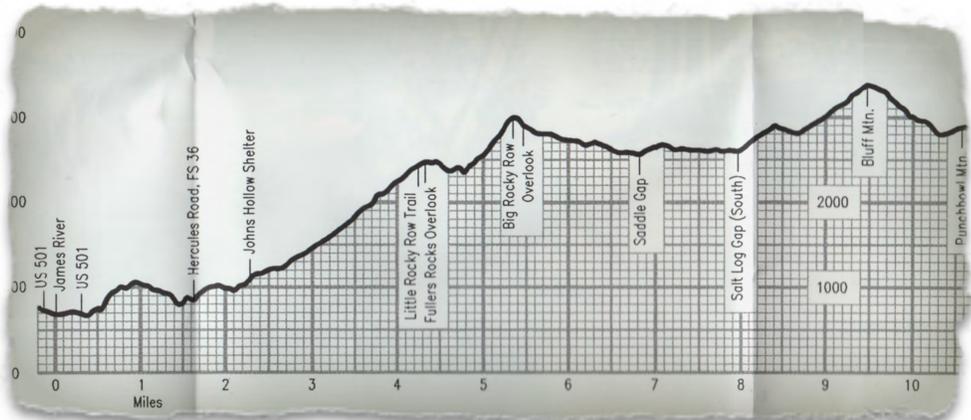
—Nicolas de Chamfort

The James River is at 678 feet elevation. We will need to climb to 3,372 feet by the end of this day including a four mile incline before lunch. As we begin our ascent Giggles comments, “My legs feel like lead. I also hate this friggin back pack.” Our intermittent goals were the 1) Johns Hollow Shelter at 1,020 feet, 2) Little Rocky Row at 2,472 feet, 3) Big Rocky Row at 2,992 feet and 4) Bluff Mountain at 3,372 feet.

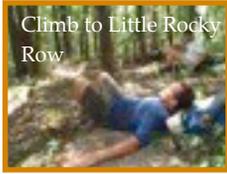
This was the beginning of the end of our hiking spirit. Everything was in a fog on this hot, sunny ascent. After walking for two hours, I remember looking up at another high mountain in the distance (see right), which we still needed to overcome. I could only laugh as I stopped to



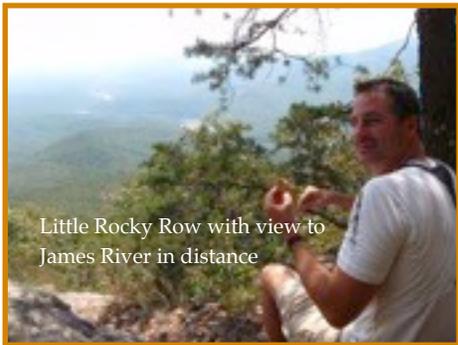
Bluff Mountain in distance



breath. Barfy looks over at me and says, "I think I am going to cry." We are drinking alot of our water on this climb. At one of our breaks, I am thinking how precious our water is right now. Of course, as life works, I was unknowingly leaning against my water bag causing water to stream out of the mouth piece making a nice mud pack on the trail. I curse aloud. By 1 pm, we hit the top of a ridge, which is providing a view below of the James River and the mountain we had just conquered. More importantly, it offers a cool



Climb to Little Rocky Row



Little Rocky Row with view to James River in distance

breeze. We break for lunch. Barfy pulls out his pad and says, "I am going to sleep." The rest of us find a nice rock and savor the peaceful view atop Little Rocky Row.

The name Rocky Row reminds us of ice cream, which just happens to be Giggles favorite - Rocky Road. A conversation now ensues about our favorite flavor ice cream. Yes - we all miss the comforts of home. The fun time ends too quickly. We must gather ourselves and march further up this mountain chain. We have 500 feet to Big Rocky Row. It is a long, long up.



Streak breaking before Big Rocky Row

Our spirits are currently at an all time low. Everyone is

agitated with the hike and me. The trail and heat begin to remind us of the pain we endured in Georgia.

We reach Big Rocky Row, but still have Bluff Mountain to best. We break and eat some energy candy. I have a jelly bean in my pocket, I push on Barfy since he hasn't eaten all day. Upon reluctantly eating the bean,



Barfy doing what he does best

Barfy immediately begins to hurl. He is in agony asking, "What did you give me, a poison jelly bean?" "No, only barfy beans", I respond. He is struggling in the extreme as we crest Bluff Mountain. Fortunately, the next 1 1/2 miles extend down into the Punchbowl Shelter, where we plan to sleep. At the top of Bluff Mountain, we pass a location marked with a monument where they found the



Bluff Mountain

body of little Ottie Cline Powell, a four year old, who in 1890 became disoriented after trying to find firewood for his schoolhouse. The boy ended up on top of Bluff Mountain at this location. I pray for his little soul.

We are heading north at a snails pace. Streak and Giggles take the tent so they can set up camp while it is still light. Me and Barfy take it slow the

last one mile as we try to bite off small sections of the trail without creating more internal explosions from the big guy. By 6:30 pm, the drained second half of the hiking team arrives at this shelter to our second big party. Apparently another Washington & Lee freshmen orientation group is enjoying a night in the woods. I dump my gear and collapse in the chaos. On the other hand, Barfy proceeds to the middle of the camp site and throws up everything in his belly including his stomach lining. The co-eds stare in marvel at Barfy, the barfing beast of the Appalachians.

In addition to the co-eds, there was a pair of brothers who were camped at the site who were enjoying a nice fire. As the darkness beckoned, we took over their fire using all the wood they collected. They didn't seem to mind and who is going to mess with a 900 pound hiking team that pukes in the middle of a camp site anyway. The college kids were boisterous again making sleep more challenging. At least Barfy's iPod ran out of power. We finally dozed off around 10 pm. In the middle of the night Barfy unzips the tent and proceeds to barf once again. The poor guy was sick as a dog all night. To make matters even worse, by the time he got back to bed, two hoot owls began their mating dance (mating howls more like it) capping off a completely miserable night in the woods.



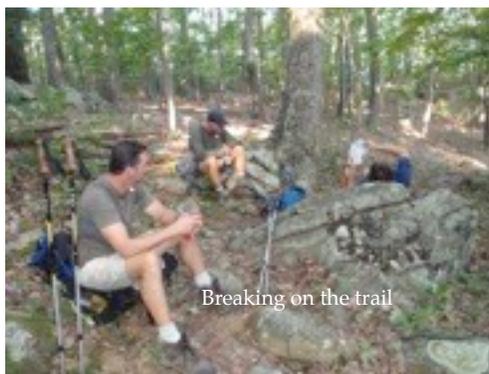
Two Brothers who shared their fire. They also left soda and cookies for Barfy at U.S. 60.



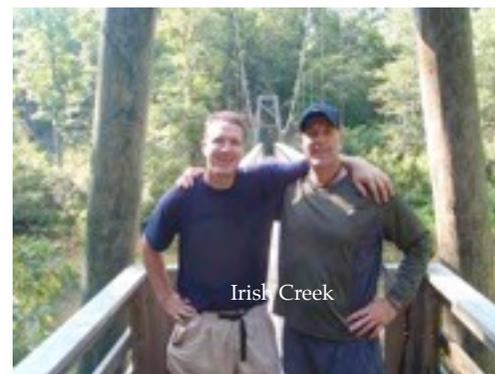
View en route to the top of Cold Mountain at roughly 4,000'



Team Photo at Punchbowl Shelter



Breaking on the trail



Irish Creek

Day 4

Suprisingly, we wake in a relatively good mood. Our spirits are lifted by two facts. First, we only have 10.6 miles of Appalachian Trail today. Second, we will be laying on a mattress at the Holiday Inn tonight.

We make the 1/4 mile walk back to the trailhead and stop. We pray...God gives us the grace to appreciate this day in the outdoors and let us be thankful for the break we will be taking tonight. Personally, I will remember Julianna and all she gave me.

We depart in silence. I am reflecting on my life and my love for Julianna. I feel closer to peace. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Barfy, who is in sheer misery from lack of sleep and nutrition. At first break Barfy examines the map as if it is going to share the secrets of life. He just stares

and stares. At this point I know he has been pushed to his physical limit.

The elevation on the map appears fairly flat, however, the map never seems to reflect the true geography of the terrain. The rocks and roots so prevalent on the trail are never noted. True to form, the trail ahead is a lot harder than shown on the map.

We pass the Blue Ridge Parkway, Robinson Gap. Rice Mountain and finally reach Little Irish Creek by 11:45 am. Upon sight, Barfy b-lines for the creek, disposing of his back pack, shirt, and shoes in fluid motion before diving head first into the creek. He just says over and over. "Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahh." Followed by - "Can you get Homer to pick us up here? Tell him to bring soda too."

On the bridge, over Irish Creek, a menacing looking character is gazing out at the water. He had the odor of a man who has not bathed in a long

time and barely acknowledges our presence as we pass. His behavior is not welcoming and I immediately recall Homer's warning about a murderer on the trail. We stay alert to this guy as our bathing beauty Barfy wades in the cool water below. After a few minutes, the man drifts past us without a word. We regroup continuing the trek to U. S. 60 and civilization.

We are all suffering. The break did not satisfy Barfy's need for rest. He yells out, "Get me out of this god forsaken place." I tell him not to worry, we only have 6.2 miles to go. This really depresses his spirit as he asks, "Why does this hike have to be so far?" We are all in the same boat right now wanting and needing to take a break from this trail.

We cross another footbridge over the Pedlar River at the base of the Pedlar Dam. We move north along a low ridge enjoying views of the damned



Green Apple on the trail



Barfy and Streek enjoy a waterfall



Giggles checking on Barfy

river. Although the terrain is relatively flat, our physical condition is heading straight down. We break at the next watering hole near Swamping Camp Creek. We tell Barfy he has to eat. He has not eaten in more than a day. Streek offers to peel an apple for him he had picked from a tree earlier in the day. He eats the apple while lying down on a cool rock by the creek. After a few bites he lays back down. All is good. Giggles offers him a 5 hour energy drink. He gulps the 2 ounce bottle down in one swig. All is not good: he informs us he is about to blow. He did. He also gave me ample opportunity to document the moment with my camera. I just couldn't do it. He was suffering and I genuinely felt bad for my friend. After his last heave, I ask him if he is ready for another 5 Hour Energy. The rest of us laugh...Barfy does not.

"If you're going through hell, keep going"

— **Winston Churchill.**

Our next goal is Brown Mountain Shelter. We reach it slowly since we are now stopping to break every 1/2 mile or so. We pass another watering hole with a small waterfall. There is a four foot wall in front of the small hole. Barfy, resembling Edwin Moses, sprints over this hurdle. He definitely has a reserve tank in there somewhere. This time Streek joins the fun as the two relax in a very nice swimming spot.

We push forward reaching U.S. 60 by 3 pm. We have arranged for Homer to meet us. Upon arrival, Homer asks us if we have seen anyone on the trail, especially the shelters. In four days, we saw many college kids and a few stragglers. Most notably the creepy guy from earlier today came to mind. This is a strange question. He tells us the FBI has been in touch with him regarding the murders a few weeks ago. They believe the killer could be a hiker on the trail. Since Homer is the expert on this section of the trail it makes sense they would want to get information from him. Alarm bells are ringing in my head. As they ring, I am very thankful we are getting off this trail right now.

Day 5

We have a lovely night at the Holiday Inn in Lexington, Virginia. For twelve hours we were living in fat and fast food heaven. In fact, the sudden introduction of greasy food upset all of our stomachs, except Barfy who felt like a million bucks. Before we depart, I go back to the room to make certain nothing is left behind. Nothing is there except Streek, who is shaving in front of the mirror with a backpack on. No doubt - my hiking team is ready to head back to the trail!

We make our way back to U.S. 60 near the location the hiker had been murdered last week. As you probably guessed, we needed comfort food and make a pit stop at the Subway for

hoagies en route. We pass through the nondescript Appalachian town of Buena Vista, whose primary claim to fame is being the birthplace of Phillie Phanatic Manager Charlie Manuel, which is highlighted on a marquee as you enter town.

We pray before we depart. May we not get killed out here by a crazy hiker. At roughly 9:45 am, we begin the 2.5 mile climb to Bald Knob. We will climb 2,000 ft in the first hour of hiking. Humidity is high this morning causing sweat, mostly containing last night's beer, to stream out of our pores. The elevation gain



Cow Camp Gap

has one major upside....the views. As we ascend we break at several scenic spots along the trail when the tree canopy gives way.

On one break I reflect on this journey and my three friends who I have tortured so much on this hike.

"The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for."

— **Bob Marley**

I don't know that I am worth suffering for, but I do know I am filled with gratitude for their sacrifice. They have given me more than I could ever dream to repay. How can I not feel like the luckiest man in the world to have such committed and loving friends? In reality, they have helped give me my life back again.

As we push higher my happy place is suddenly replaced by my painful place. I have one of my vivid flashbacks to Julianna's accident scene. I am frozen in this nightmare momentarily. I pump harder and harder with my legs and hiking poles. I am running from this misery. Please let it go away. I begin to hyperventilate during this episode. We stop. I regain my composure. None of my hiking buddies are aware of my torment. I guess this is my destiny. I have regained my life, but I cannot run from the pain, it is part of who I am now.

We pass Bald knob (4,059 feet) and head straight down to the next Gap (3,160 feet) and then up again to Cold Mountain (4,022 feet). The route to Cold Mountain has many false tops (we think there is no more climb around the next bend but there is) along the way. We always think (probably more hope) we are at the top of a mountain, but invariably we are not. I have learned to set no expectations when hiking. Just keep moving forward with head down. The next step is the only one that matters. My life's motto always comes back to me.

We are walking in a single column when a tree crashes to the ground to the right of us. We all stop in amazement watching this 40 foot tree fall in slow motion. Streek comments, 'Great, now I have something else to worry about.' By 12:30 pm, we finally reach the crest of the open top

of Cold Mountain. Immediately, we are treated to a fresh breeze and a stunning 360 degree view. We stroll over this glorious open mountain top breaking on an exposed rock formation.



Unsuccessful jump shot on Cold Mountain

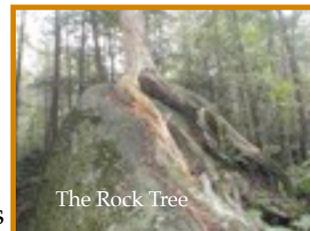
The break on Cold Mountain is magnificent. Streek, yells out, "I love this." Even Barfy is feeling chipper. He requests we try the jump photo. This requires timing our jump with the timer on the camera. As you can see, it doesn't quite work unless you think four dorky guys at 4,000 feet is cute. This wonderful rest cannot last for long. We have nine long miles remaining in this day.

Our next goal is Hog Camp Gap. We break for lunch in this open meadow under a shade tree. We dine on Subway hoagies. Barfy and I take the 1/2 mile walk to retrieve water. We are not happy souls on this journey and don't say a word to each other during the long walk. It is ironic the two least capable hikers have already put in an extra 3 miles on this hike due to the ridiculously far water sources we have been stuck with.

At 1:30 pm we depart. Relatively rested, a conversation ensues as we continue our hike on flat ground. We talk about our regrets. Me, Streek and Giggles recount our personal regrets. Barfy, listening patiently, tells us he has no regrets, except maybe starting this hike. The trail continues in typical misery. The cloudy skies overhead sink to the ground creating an enveloping fog on the trail. We

head through the misty woods and find something magical in the mist...an enchanted tree protruding from a large boulder.

We continue the march. Barfy's Subway hoagie with hot peppers and onions is creating



The Rock Tree

some indigestion. We pass Greasy Spring Road and hit the 800 mile mark on our Appalachian trail journey. Only 1300 miles to go!

Our next destination is the Seely-Woodworth Shelter, which we reach by 5:30 pm. Barfy immediately crashes, while the rest of us eat and sit around a camp fire. We meet a few thru hikers heading south who started on the AT on June 3. Jeff introduces himself as "Super Cool Guy." The hike has made him delirious. He starts singing, "Super Cool Guy on the AT...Super Cool Guy at this shelter...Super Cool Guy on the AT." Me and Giggles become hysterical. It was goofy and made no sense but nonetheless he had us in tears. We needed a laugh.



Our home for the week

We try to sleep under an oak tree, whose acorns are dropping incessantly on our tent. Giggles asks us how many of these acorns will hit our tent tonight. I guess five eventually fading to black after five days on the trail and 64 miles under our belt.



Tent accommodations



Attempting to get soda pop from Lloyd, the squirrel hunter



Spy Rock

Day 6

We awake to the pitter patter of rain, not acorns, on our tent. Thankfully, our new piece of camping equipment held up nicely through the night's rain. This is the first tent we have carried since 2005. During the past five years we have tried anything to eliminate weight. This year we had a change of heart, fearful of crowded shelters as we ventured north. So far two of the shelters were full, so our decision to carry cover has been a good one. Although this morning the confines of our tent has made the stench quite unbearable.

We get ready to leave, but before we do we decide on a hot meal in the rain and eat instant oatmeal. It was outstanding. We pray. Thank you Lord, it is by your grace that we are here together in this natural splendor.

"If we thanked God for the good things, there wouldn't be time to weep over the bad."

— Yiddish Proverb

Today, we will have two peaks over 4,000 feet, with Priest Mountain the most formidable. At 8:30 am we start our day with a welcoming down followed by a nonwelcoming up. Two miles into our day we here the pop of gun shots in the distance. We are now

on full alert again as we are well aware there is a bad man on the loose.

After some time we intersect with Fish Hatchery Road. We cross this dirt road and hear the faint sound of rocks getting crushed. Barfy, looking like a hungry leopard...ok maybe a big overweight lion laying in the savannah, cunningly spots his prey driving down the mountain. He sprints to the roadway, puts up his hand and says, "help." He has been angling to get off the trail and this appears to be his opportunity. In the distance, I hear a conversation ensue between Barfy and the man in a truck. They talk for several minutes. Barfy proceeds to the truck bed and grabs two water bottles out of a cooler. He waves goodbye as the truck continues its escape from this mountain, thankfully, without our Barfy. He rejoins the group bristling. "Water, can you believe that is all they gave me?" The man's name was Lloyd, Barfy recounts. He told Barfy in his southern twang "I know yall grew up far north, but I was born and raised right here in Central Virginia. Use to raise cattle," he declared. The guy was a true redneck. When Barfy went to retrieve the water in the cooler he was greeted by 12 dead squirrels (thus the gun shots). Barfy was repulsed (lucky he was not queasy at this moment) and not comforted at all by Lloyd's culinary expertise, "That squirrel there - is the best tasting live meat there is."

We push forward in the morning mist climbing to Spy Rock. This rock offers 360 degree views and was supposedly a former confederate lookout during the Civil War. When we arrive there is large group of young men in tents milling about the base of the rock. Barfy asks for the soda pop he could not get from Lloyd, but finds none. The group of young men look more like a street gang than thru hikers. We ask one of the more friendly looking individuals how we get to the top of Spy Rock. He tells us to leave our bags on the far side of the large mass in front of us and climb the crevice. I opt not to leave my bag, making the 80 foot climb up this giant split on the big rock with a back pack on. This was stupid and did not help my knee.

When we crest the giant rock we are greeted by truly beautiful views and the site of two men in deep conversation. After a few minutes we ask them to take our picture. We learned they were part of a religious youth group out for a retreat in the mountains for several days. They also indicated they were getting off the trail this morning. After that statement Barfy sensed opportunity. "You are getting off the trail...I will give you \$20 to deliver a pizza to us at the next road crossing." I am embarrassed at this request and tell him, "No way, that is not happening." Barfy is not pleased with my rejection of this seemingly brilliant idea. After nine years of hiking I certainly know

how Barfy needs his comforts when on the trail, but I am caught off guard by this brazen request. As we navigate back down this mountain, Barfy is pissed at me and lets me know it. "I am here to hike this trail...not to eat this freeze dried junk." I snap back at him and then ask Dave for his knife, because I need to put someone out of his misery.

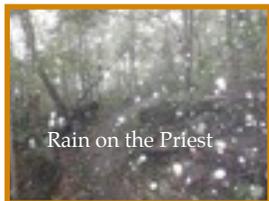
We continue the quest for Priest Mountain in silence. I begin to think to myself - this hike cannot go on like this. After nine years I now have doubts. This hiking team, at its current pace, will disintegrate before completion. Heck, it may be done even before we reach Pennsylvania. At times, the sacrifice and torture endured is just too much. Every one is at their wits end. Even Streek, who is hiking behind me is at his limit. I hear him ask God, "Please give me strength these next six miles."



Streek meditating

We walk in silent misery. We pass an elderly couple doing trail maintenance. I stop to say hello and ask them how they like doing this work. They hate the snakes and bee's just like us, but enjoy the feeling of accomplishment of doing something productive when they go home. I appreciate this sentiment. It now begins to rain.

We reach the Priest Shelter followed by the Priest Mountain itself. It is raining and thundering in this stretch. The hike to Priest Mountain was rocky and horrible as expected. The hike down from Priest Mountain (4,063 feet) to the Tye River (970 feet) is



Rain on the Priest

equally rocky and miserable. When you combine steep, downhill, rocky and now wet conditions - bad things tend to happen. The rock's under our feet become slick forcing us to inch



Detour on descent down Priest Mountain

ourselves down this mountain. Although we are not short of breath on the descent, this was a maddening walk. On this four mile descent, we run into a father and two sons with fishing rods heading to some high elevation fishing hole. We also run into a guy with running shoes sprinting up the mountain. In a flash, this man sprinted past us at full speed. I was quite impressed with this guy's conditioning, which reminded me nothing of us.

By 3:50 pm, we reach the Tye River. We collapse to the wet ground at a parking lot. Barfy drops his bag and heads to the street to find a ride out of this hell hole. For minutes no cars pass. He waits. The first guy to pull in was a middle age man. He was picking up his buddy, a marine, who was training for a sixty mile iron man run. Before we know it, we see the same young man who was running up the trail coming back down to get picked up. This guy just ran twenty miles up and down the mountain. I cringe when Barfy tells this guy he needs to get real food in his stomach. He requires a hoagie, chips and his beloved pop in order to go on. The closest town is seven miles away. I lower my head in humiliation. Barfy is now teaching me humility. This guy is picking up his buddy, who just ran twenty miles in rain, and we need

soda to go on. I can't believe it. Nonetheless, I am witness to the generosity of people, which is truly inspiring. The guy says yes. Before you know it, the smelliest guy on the AT squeezes into the back of a Mazda hatch back and takes off to his personal shangri-la.



Barfy on road trip

We are left to marvel at our friend. After one hour Barfy returns to the trail with two large bags of groceries in hand. Barfy offers the guy money, but he would not accept. He does leave \$20 on the car seat to pay for gas though. There is an assortment of sandwiches, soda, potato chips, candy and ice cream. Thanks to Mr. Bold we feast. I try not to indulge out of principal, but I can't resist the ice cream. I just ate the apple in the garden of eden. Everyone has their fill. Barfy, seeking to extend the party, pours a combination of Sprite and Dr. Pepper into his water bottle. Barfy looks up and asks, "I am still part of the team, right?"

We travel the last 2.5 miles of the day in slow procession. At 6:30 pm we arrive at Harpers Creek Shelter under a fading sun. This shelter is full too, so we find a nice camping spot and set the tent up for our final time in 2011. Me and Barfy retrieve water, only 1/8 mile away this time. As we prepare to pump the water he shows me his nasty toes, which he cleanses in the water we are about to pump. I better understand why he hates this week. We head back to the tent site and enjoy our final night together. By 8 pm, we are all ready for bed and fade to black again for the last time.



Soaking toe and pumping water



Day 7

**"These things I warmly wish for you:
Someone to love, some work to do, a bit
o' sun, a bit o' cheer, and a guardian
angel always near."**

— Irish Blessing

The scene is unfamiliar. I am in a large circular class with multiple tiers surrounding a stage where an older male professor is conducting class to a group of middle age students including me. During the class, the professor asks the students to break into smaller pre assigned groups. After we split, one of the other students asks me if I completed my homework assignment. I don't recognize this guy, but I already know I don't like him. Hmm...I didn't know about any homework and I certainly didn't do it. This student notices my confusion, gives me a smirk, and tells me, "you failed." Anger is my primary emotion right now, both at myself for screwing up and at this jerkoff for needling me.

At that very moment my attention is diverted by a group of young children who start running around the multi-leveled room. Most of the kids had concentrated their shouting and cheering around the stage at the bottom of the classroom where the blackboard is located. The professor was getting visibly frustrated with these crazy acting children and summarily dismissed the entire class.

The class, as expected, rapidly departs rushing to a single rear door to exit. I leave in the flurry waiting outside to meet the teacher to discuss my educational fate. There is a long delay in the teachers departure as he gathers his belongings on the front desk. Impatient, I decide to head back into the class. I pass through the single open door when I run face to face into one of the children creating the confusion. This child is Julianna. Oh my God - a flood of emotions envelopes me. I tell her while crying, "I have missed you." I give her the biggest hug I could ever give. I notice a scar on her face from the accident. It is her and she is perfect. The love I feel for her right now is overpowering. I feel how much I adore her and miss her. We hold one another tight. I tell her over and over...I have you...I have you...I have you. In the next instant I awake in our tent confused, then happy, then sad. I relentlessly cry into my sleeping bag.

By 5 am everyone is beginning to stir. The last day is always our early day. Everyone wants to leave the trail as quickly as possible. At 6:08 am, we depart in darkness. We have only two head lamps between us. In an effort to decrease weight, two of our hikers, left their headlamps with Homer. At first, we could not find the trail. We eventually find it along with a lot of awkward rocks. Over the next 1/2 mile, we hike in near total darkness over rocky terrain making our forward progress incredibly slow and

uncomfortable. At one point Streek slips and violently falls on wet rocks in a section known for rock slides. We proceed forward over the dark trail. Barfy, who is lucid for the first time in three days, shrewdly says, "Aren't bear nocturnal?"

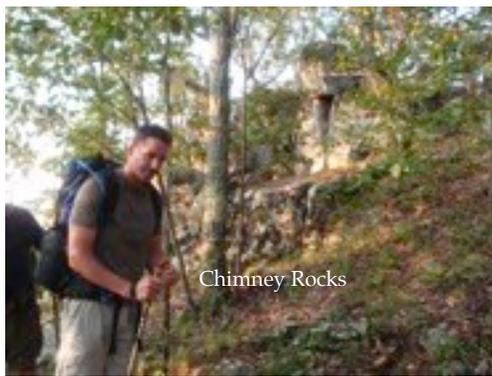
This is not our typical final day on the trail. Today, we are traveling 12.8 miles and elevating over 2,000 feet in the first few miles. This is an extremely difficult day. Our first conquest, after a 1,400 foot hellish climb, is Chimney Rocks, a series of upright projecting boulders. By the time we reach these rocks we are already exhausted. Our final assault, on this particular crest, requires us to navigate steep rock steps in an unusually humid morning. The sun begins to rise to our right through the dense trees. We break to catch our breath before our final ascent to the next crest - Three Ridges. We all admire the clouds at a lookout, which settled into the mountain valley overnight.

We push on. Our final major ascent of the week is at hand. There is little conversation. I think about Julianna. My bittersweet encounter with her last night brings out all my emotions again. I truly miss my little girl, but I am so happy that I got to see her again for the first time in nearly ten years.

The walk continues in silence. Barfy breaks the quiet. "Lets go to a hotel with a pool, get showered and buy a



Hanging Rock



Chimney Rocks

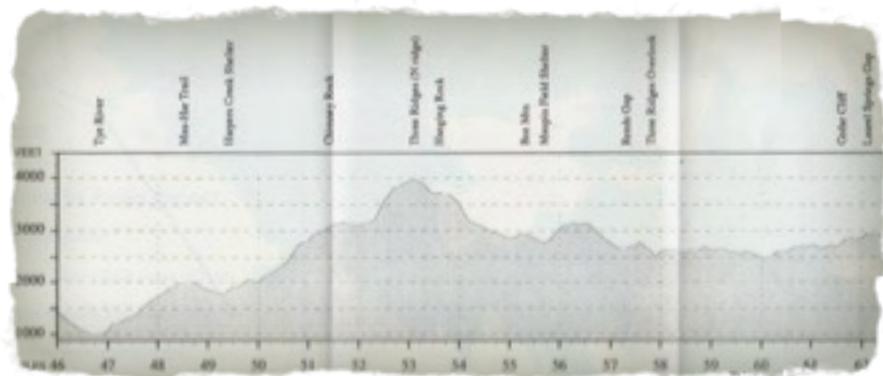


Another needed stop

wheel before we take off for home”, he offers. He sounds rather jubilant certainly not savoring these last few hours on the trail like me. He is methodically planning for his freedom from this wooded prison. By 9 am, we reach the last of the Three Ridges and begin our descent. The terrain remains rocky. After a short

on my swollen right knee, which is throbbing in and out of pain. We continue forward at a measured pace finally reaching the Three Ridges parking overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway by twelve noon. There are numerous tourists in this area. Me and Streek, who separated from Barfy and Giggles, wait under a shade tree

first half mile or so the map is accurate and the trail is accommodating. **Crap!!!** Our luck runs out as the dreaded undulating rocks return. We walk carefully but purposely with the end so close. We trudge these last few miles. Giggles makes the perfect observation. “You know when you think things are going well out here this trail always has a way of saying, **fuc# you.**” I couldn’t agree more. We past Cedar Cliff with a spectacular view to the west over more Virginia Farmland. Nobody cared, we just wanted this day to end. At 2:00 pm after 8 hours of hiking we make our final ascent to Dripping Rock on the Blue Ridge. After 90.8 miles, our 2011 hike is finally over....Hallelujah.



distance we come to another incredible location called Hanging Rock. We take a needed rest and enjoy the views of Three Ridges and The Priest behind us. Barfy enjoys the view of the inside of his eyelid.

On the positive side - We just finished our last major ascent of the week. On the negative side - We still have 8.6 miles left in this day. We all knew the first part of this last day would be exceptionally hard. Unfortunately, none of us were mentally prepared for what remained after Three Ridges.

We had all checked out.

We pushed ahead past the Maupin Field Shelter and Reed’s Gap on The Blue Ridge Parkway. I began to focus

for our hiking comrades. We wait for half of an hour and soon become worried. We begin to theorize Barfy probably bummed a ride off the trail. Finally, the two hikers stroll up. I asked what happened. They said nothing but had a guilty look on their faces. When we push forward I corner Giggles, who cannot tell a lie. He giggly tells me they borrowed a few sodas off a kind tourist on the Blue Ridge. The pleasure seekers were slowly savoring their newly acquired treasure without us.

We now have 3.7 miles left in this day. On the map, the terrain appears flat. I tell Giggles this hopeful morsel of information. Familiar with the accuracy of these maps, he says, “I will believe it when I see it.” For the

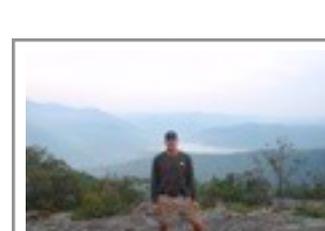
“As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them”

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy



Dripping Rock

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