

Julianna's Hike - 2016

Fourteen year Journey on the Appalachian Trail



"NOTHING BEAUTIFUL COMES WITHOUT SOME SUFFERING"

DESMOND TUTU

In 2016, we completed another memorable year on the Appalachian Trail hiking 103.7 miles over seven grueling days on Pennsylvania/New Jersey rocky terrain. We have now compiled 1,335.7 merciless AT miles. As I reflect on this journey, it is truly remarkable that these friends have put up with me for fourteen entire years. Their devotion to this cause and the suffering they have endured has created something beautiful and memorable.

When we began this endeavor in 2003, we struggled in the extreme living by the motto...just take one step at a time. I never cared or imagined what the hike would look like in the years ahead. I certainly never dreamed it would look like our 2016 version. The day before the hike, our good friend Dan Castaldi threw me a curve ball. "I was thinking I would bring my camper to the hike this year, so you guys could sleep indoors at the end of each day," he offered hesitantly. He knew I was frustrated with the "soft" direction the hike was heading, which culminated in 2015 when we did not sleep outdoors on one single night. He must have wanted to throw me over the edge with this latest and seemingly endless push to make our trail experience less trail like. Dan's offer was very kind, but this was too much.

You may have noticed, I did not complete my exhaustive write up last year. In reality, I wasn't impressed with our 2015 performance. In fact, I was so frustrated by my hikers lack of enthusiasm for the outdoors that I threatened to end the hike or go on without them. I admit, at moments, I am a stubborn ungrateful SOB. It was too easy for me to forget their devotion to this cause and to Julianna, which has been beyond reproach.

Hiking for a purpose on the Appalachian Trail

Since 2003, we have donated more than \$1,100,000 through The Julianna Hike Fund

This year's proceeds will go to

The Center for Grieving Children
The Breathing Room Foundation
Take a Breather Foundation



Although Pennsylvania may be one of the flattest states on the Appalachian Trail, it is recognized as the most unforgiving due to the relentless rocks.

Their generous spirit has helped me return from the abyss. It may be time to rethink my vision of the hike and accept or at least tolerate their need for ease. (Barfy is jumping for joy right now) I have been stuck on the idea that the path to joy is not away from pain and suffering but through it. I need to change my mindset and recognize suffering is not bad, but forced self suffering is.

My reaction to Dan's generous offer came from two perspectives. First, my tough guy perspective: There is no damn way I am going to soften this hike any more. Second, my thoughtful perspective: Wow...that is very generous and I am blessed to have such a wonderful friend. I wasn't sure which perspective would win out so I asked Dan to keep this conversation to ourselves, while I contemplated this new option. I knew If this offer leaked there is no way the whole team would not jump on the camp wagon . Well...my decision was made for me within an hour when Giggles approached me and said, "I hear we are staying in Danny's camper this week." Friggin chatter box Castaldi. Consequently, the Julianna Hike camper has now joined the hike. With this revelation the team's hiking spirit is renewed. Barfy's sentiments reflect the groups. "I really love being together and you all mean the world to me." He pauses and finishes, "I still hate this hike though."

We have come a long way since we were baptized to the trail in the back country woods of Georgia. We have seen it all...a thousand high mountain peaks and valleys, quaint small towns, crazy people, cool people, bears, hurricanes, snakes, and grown men barfing. I am so grateful for this journey and this time I have spent with Julianna.

Day 1 17.4 miles

In our quarter century march north, the drive to the Appalachian Trail will never be shorter than 2016. One hour and fifteen minutes from our home in Malvern, PA we arrive at Hawk Mountain for our week in the woods. Unfortunately, we cannot locate the Appalachian Trail head. We are stone cold idiots as we criss cross the mountain several times before we eventually find our 2015 ending location. We gather our internal fortitude, strap up our boots, extend our hiking poles and enter the trail for the fourteenth year in a row. We stop to pray and give thanks.



"Being patient is difficult. It is not just waiting until something happens over which we have no control: the arrival of the bus, the end of the rain, the return of a friend, the resolution of a conflict. Patience is not waiting passively until someone else does something. Patience asks us to live the moment to the fullest, to be completely present to the moment, to taste the here and now, to be where we are. When we are impatient, we try to get away from where we are. We behave as if the real thing will happen tomorrow, later, and somewhere else. Be patient and trust that the treasure you are looking for is hidden in the ground on which you stand."

As I lead the procession, I try to bring my thoughts of Julianna to the forefront of my mind. Over time, it has become my natural defense mechanism to push the memories away to avoid the pain of her loss. It is now our time together. I know the pain will be back but so will

the love. It is time to let my feelings out. The one wonderful thing about grief...it is a reminder of the depth of our love.

In my thoughts, I miss a turn on the trail and get lost. Next...I step on a few loose rocks and fall off the trail. In the tumble, I bruise my back side, crack my phone and bent my hiking pole. Unfortunately, with all the rocks in this section of northeast Pennsylvania, I will need to focus more on where my feet land than where my mind needs to go.

I finally get in rhythm after the first few miles of our 2016 hike. In this inaugural section, we are climbing over 1,000 ft to Dan's Pulpit. This was a long uphill climb, which proved quite difficult for these five old hikers...the tough Class of 1982. This year I am joined at the start by Jeff "Streak" Price, Dave "Giggles" Guyer, Murphy, "Barfy" Barton and our latest addition Dave "Tuba" Lafferty.

We proceed forward with resolve and warmth in our hearts. We also have gnats in our ears. We are so overwhelmed with the swarm Streak puts bathroom wipes in our ears to keep the little pests out. Although the gnats are a problem, the trail ahead is not. We have nice level trail for the next few miles until we intersect Route 309 and the Blue Mountain Summit. We stop in for a cool beverage at this popular Pocono watering hole. We also meet Dan and Joe Innes at this location who provide food and water for the rest of the day. These two are kind souls. Most people are lucky to have one generous friend, who will give and expect nothing in return. We are blessed to have two.

From Route 309 onward the trail is miserable. We are immediately faced with a giant uphill river of rock as the Pennsylvania rocks are in full glory. These prehistoric stones test our wills and require full concentration to navigate.

Rather than speak of love and friendship, this afternoon continues with a dose of politics. Our two hard core right wingers trash everything about the Democratic Party. After back and forth banter for a mile or so, I had enough, and yell at top of my lungs. "Can you morons shut up?" Probably not a good path to love and friendship, but they did stop.

The next challenge is the Knife's Edge. This uneven rock out cropping was particularly difficult requiring us to crawl on all fours over sections of this long peak. After this torment we face Bear Rocks, which adds to the pain we are already experiencing in our toes, heels, ankles, knees and hips. Adding to our frustration, the trail appears flat on our elevation charts setting our expectations to manageable. In the end, this is probably the most grueling terrain we have faced on the trail. My bad right knee was also starting to quiver on descents.

After a long afternoon, the day finally ends at Bake Oven Knob Road, which conveniently has a large gravel parking lot to hold our tent on wheels, the Julianna Hike Camper. The festivities commence after a painful day. Joe breaks out the grill, chairs and coolers. Barfy sums it up, "This is the way the hike is supposed to be." We savor burgers, dogs and brew. The days of setting up the tent, pumping water and eating freeze dried meals are a distant memory.

WELCOME TO THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL



Day 2 12.7 miles

In theory, sleeping in camper should be an upgrade. In reality...it wasn't. The bedding is cramped, the air is still and we had no air conditioning. I can honestly say I miss the tent in the great outdoors. That being said, we definitely don't miss carrying the tent, setting it up and breaking it down. As this week is a time for reflection, now is another good moment to give thanks for our friends. I am truly blessed to have people commit their time and love in this endeavor. They not only give their time but their talents when they grill up delicious bacon, egg and cheese sandwiches for our morning meal. It goes without saying, but so far the northern section of the trail has been a lot more hospitable than the southern section. We say the morning prayer.

A person who cares nothing for praise or blame knows great inward peace....Praise does not make you holier than you are, nor blame more wicked. You are exactly what you are, and cannot ever be any better or worse than that, in the eyes of God. Attend to what is really within you, then, and you will not care what others say of you. People look at externals, but God looks at the heart.

Once again, the morning hike looks easy on paper. Unfortunately, this does not translate to our real world. Before 1/2 mile we are back to the rocks that cause many a hiker to say Pennsylvania is the worst section of the trail. We have to agree right now. The result is an extremely slow pace ever mindful that one misstep could end this hike in a hurry.

Adding insult to injury, we actually climb down one extremely rocky section only to realize we have left the trail and are forced to climb back up. Barfy was the poor soul leading this wrong way charge. As I am big on suffering being an important part of this journey. I tell Barfy don't fret. "Suffering is the way to salvation" He responds, "Great, the I then I am definitely saved" The trail we walk on now is absolutely horrendous. We are cautiously hiking up and down relentless rocky mountains. This roller coaster section remind us of the others on the trail, but this has the painful addition of rocks. I hear multiple grumbles from the team and one comment, "Are you trying to kill us?"

After four miles of rugged hiking we now begin our descent to the Lehigh Gap and the Lehigh River. Approaching Lehigh Gap my hip hurts badly. I am feeling lethargic too. Christ...I think to myself I must have Lyme disease again. I say this often, but it is more likely I am just old and out of shape. Barfy is a wonder hiker approaching the Lehigh River and we all amaze at his new found stamina. He is leading the charge down hill by a huge distance. He may be the world's greatest hiker when he knows he has a prize at the end. Today the prize is Dan and Joe, who are scheduled to meet us with lunch. We arrive around 12:30 PM. Dan asks Barfy the secret to his hiking dominance. He quips, "Are you kidding with you guys waiting for me, I am almost enjoying this hike."



Our lunch location today is at the intersection of the Lehigh River and the Appalachian trail. We lunch amidst all the vacationers spending the day floating on inner tubes. I can assure you these guys were envious.

Our break ends too soon as the next mountain beckons. It is a doozy. After the peaceful break at the Lehigh Gap we are now facing a steep rocky ascent in the blazing afternoon sun. The gatorade and water we

consumed are instantly flushed from our bodies. In fact, the ascent was so rapid, it was actually too steep to use our poles. We climb, we break, we climb, we break.



Without question, the hike from Lehigh Gap was memorable offering a huge challenge while providing a spectacular reward at the top. We take our final break at the summit and soak in Pennsylvania majesty. We all reflect on how fortunate we are to enjoy life's little pleasures like this.

We continue the hike at the top of this ridge over more large rocks. This section was a widow maker. We just completed a demoralizing climb, now we have to navigate an awkward rock field which seems to never end. My head and body feel like they are at my limits. Adding insult to injury we remain fully exposed to the harsh summer sun.



The rocks eventually end give way to the most pleasant dirt path I have ever seen. The soft ground and surrounding grass almost make up for the torture we just endured.



No...not really. We are hiking on the top of a flat ridge, which allows us time to recover and reflect. I realize this will not last and within a mile we are back to the rocks. UGHHHHHHHHH.

The rest of the day is more of the same. Rocks, rocks, rocks, throw in some dirt, rocks, rocks and rocks. We end this day at Little Gap at Blue Mountain where our two hike angels are once again waiting for us. Tonight we drive to a campground, complete an in ground pool. We swim and shared memories of our long time together on this trail around a campfire. I hate to admit this, but this is kind of nice.



Day 3 - 15.4 miles

After two full days and 30 miles of Pennsylvania hiking, our bodies feel the full effects of the effort. The word sore is not appropriate. I think decimated is more suiting as our hips, knees and especially feet are aching in the extreme. AT Hike reality is now hitting us square in the noggin. The party is over. Moreover, we have no time to cook this morning since Dan and Joe need to get to work back in Philly. Before heading to trailhead, we need to find water for the day's hike as my princess hikers won't accept water out of the campground hose. The only store within miles is a tiny double pump gas station, which we nearly clean out buying around twenty bottles of water before we depart. Before you know it, our support team is gone when we are dropped off at the Danielsville Trail Head with full gear in our packs. We say goodbye and proceed north alone. We pray and give thanks.

Thank God for mothers! Mothers provide the most powerful influence on a child's life, and are the most important role models for positive change in our society. When people are in trouble, or know that they are dying, the first person they think of is their mother. When children start going wrong ways a mother's prayer is powerful. Mothers remind us that there is a loving God above us who will take good care of everyone, especially children. Whenever a tragedy occurs – no matter where in the world this happens – you will always find mothers both weeping for the dead and bringing comfort and security to the living.



We all give thanks for the mothers in our lives including our own moms and our wives. After our reflections we embark. Based on our trail elevation maps, the day again appears to be an easy hike in the woods. In fact, I have never seen a flatter mountain route in 100 days of hiking on this trail. I know there will be rocks but flat is always good. We could use the break, especially Tuba's whose feet are by far the worst. He had popped multiple blisters on both feet before strapping up the boots this morning. His first steps on the trail after Little Gap are slow and painful. This will be theme for the rest of the day.



After several hundred yards, we are demoralized finding elevating rocky trail (right). I think it is now advisable to no longer trust elevation maps in the future.