

JULIANNA'S HIKE

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Murphy "Barfy" Barton



Jeff "Streek" Price



Dave "Giggles" Guyer



Steve "Jules" Doherty

92.8 MILES ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

SALT SULPHUR TURNPIKE TO JENNINGS CREEK, VIRGINIA

Is it possible for four middle-aged men to improve with each passing year? After eight years of hiking, I have an answer. In theory, what we lose in physical strength due to the natural aging process should be more than offset by our annual spiritual and mental growth. The hike's two primary goals: hiking as far as possible (the physical) and finding greater inner peace (the spiritual/mental) provides a perfect real world test to this question. After our 2010 hike, I can tell you with absolute certainty our physical assets have diminished. You just need to view the back page for visual confirmation. We have found the hiking limit of four out of shape and aging men. Nonetheless, the hike is not just about going the distance but also about gaining perspective. Is it possible our spiritual/mental growth exceeded our obvious physical decline? Here is our story.

After last year's debacle on the plane (when we were prepared for an imminent crash landing) we opted to avoid air travel this year. The day prior to our hike, three members of our team embark from Philadelphia for the six hour drive to Roanoke, Va. Giggles, traveling from Salt Lake City, does not have the same luxury and will fly in later this day.



Our drive south begins at 9 AM and is uneventful for the first two hours. Smooth traveling ensues until we near our exit for the trip south on Interstate 81. Just before this turn off a motorist emerges from her vehicle on the side of the road. In an instant, I see desperate flailing arms on the roadside as we pass at seventy miles an hour. We were traveling in the left lane unable to pull over due to a moving vehicle adjacent to us in the right lane. As I maneuver to the right lane we are now a quarter mile past the frantic lady. I asked Barfy, who is riding shotgun, what should I do? He says, "you are too late." I proceed on, only moments later telling him we should



Thanks to you, the Julianna Hike Fund recently surpassed \$400,000 in total funds donated.

Moreover, you have made this fund an integral contributor to two of our area's most compassionate organizations: The Center for Grieving Children Teen's and Families and the Breathing Room Foundation.

We look forward to advancing these causes further, not just with money but actions.

If you have interest in participating, please contact us at juliannahike@me.com

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have stopped. He retorts, "you are driving, you have free will and you could have stopped." I agree feeling ashamed over my lack of action. Barfy senses this self torment and tells me in a thoughtful tone, "Hey don't worry about it, you are not perfect." I absorb his counsel while he senses an opportunity. "I have a great idea. You can make up for this act of selfishness by letting us stay in a hotel each night of the hike." I grimace in disgust, not for this weak attempt at Barfy absolution, but for not jumping to help when the opportunity was there. This is not a good start to my spiritual growth.



The rest of the trip south on I-81 is stress free, not considering my continued sense of regret for not doing something. The drive provides a clear view of the surrounding countryside, which becomes more mountainous as we journey further south. The sight of these slopes brings back beautiful and painful memories.

After five hours of driving, Streek inquires if we can look for a place that sells hiking gear. As is his annual tradition, he buys nothing in preparation for this hike. This carefree attitude used to aggravate me, however, in a positive sign to my own personal growth this request doesn't annoy me. After purchasing a rain poncho, water canister and other essentials from a local outfitter, we

proceed to the adjacent grocery store to load up on light provisions. I leave Barfy and Streek to shop, which is never a good move. At check out I review a few of their purchases: a jar of jelly, a jar of peanut butter, a twenty four pack of breakfast bars, a loaf of bread and a case of beer. In all, we purchase 12 pounds worth of stuff we will likely never use. I think these two forgot we actually have to carry this stuff.

We load up our four bags of food and head to Roanoke Airport to pick up the fourth piece to the Julianna Hike puzzle. Our reunion with Giggles is always special. Since he moved out west six years ago we don't see him as much as we like. The four buddies are finally reunited and life is good. Little did I know this moment would end up being one of the highlights for the week.

Next, we arrive at the hotel, dump our bags and instantly head out on the town. We plan to enjoy our last meal at a barbecue restaurant. We sit down and before ordering, Streek offers up the most dimwitted thought in eight years of our pre-hiking routine. "Lets just grab a beer and an appetizer here, and then hop around to different places." Sensing this was not a good idea, but not wanting to be the perpetual dull bulb, I remained silent. I confirmed my "spidey" senses of impending danger, when Barfy chimed in, "that's a great idea!" I silently thought, this can't end well. Needless to say, it does not.

By the time we hit our fourth venue, we saunter up to the classic wood bar with an attractive female bartender.



Being knuckleheads we ask what she recommended. She could have said diesel fuel and we would have drank it.

Promptly, she proceeds to set up four shots of fancy tequila in front of us, which was probably the most expensive liquor in all of Roanoke (imagine that). After several more rounds we began behaving like school boys without a worry in the world. Before long Streek leaves the restaurant and takes over the barfy role. I am just thankful Barfy didn't take over the Streek(er) role, which he was prone to do in his younger days. After countless laughs we stumble back to the hotel around midnight. We did not prep our bags or ration our food, we just collapsed. The trend lines to spiritual growth take a quick and dramatic bounce down.

There could not be a worse way to start a hike.



You will note our overview theme for this year is water. After our 2010 hike, we have a new appreciation for this precious resource. The lack of rain in the Appalachians combined with my poor planning for water sources left us dehydrated and bone dry more than a few times.

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After eight years of hiking the Appalachian Trail, we have raised and donated more than \$410,000. Last year the following organizations received more than \$70,000 in funding from the Julianna Hike Fund.

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



For the 8th year, The Center for Grieving Children, Teen's and Families 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. For the last six years I have witnessed the work this organization has accomplished as a board member. We have recently added a full time development director to our staff, which will help the center fulfill its mission to help all children in our region grieving a loss. Their goals are below.

- * Double the number of youth we serve
- * Support our growth with new part time staff
- * Relocate our center to better serve all of Philadelphia
- * Establish satellite locations throughout the city
- * RAISE VISIBILITY & Expand support for children and families

[THE BREATHING ROOM
FOUNDATION.](http://WWW.BREATHINGROOMEFOUNDATION.ORG)

This is our 6th year supporting this foundation, which provides comfort

(breathing room) to families suffering with cancer.

They provide the following:

Family Support:

- *Initial financial award
- *Transportation
- *Housecleaning
- *Companionship
- *Meals and groceries
- *Prescription assistance
- *Co-Pays
- *Home Repairs

Programs: Keeping traditions alive

- *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

Creating Connections: Connecting

- *Volunteer to Recipient Family
- *Family with cancer to Family with cancer
- *Family to cancer Resources

I have participated in many of these programs.



The comfort this organization provides suffering families is needed and overwhelming. I currently serve on the board of directors for TBRF.

[HOPEWORKS N CAMDEN
\(WWW.HOPEWORKS.ORG\)](http://WWW.HOPEWORKS.N.CAMDEN)

This is our 3rd 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](http://WWW.JULIANNAHIKE.ORG).

[ST BARTHOLOMEW OUTREACH](http://WWW.STBARTHOLOMEWOUTREACH)

This is our sixth year of support. Seven 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. We have also provided financial resources to several other struggling families in this parish.

[VARIETY, THE CHILDREN'S CHARITY
\(WWW.VARIETYPHILA.ORG\)](http://WWW.VARIETYPHILA.ORG)

This is our sixth 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.

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Day 1 17.3 miles

Salt Sulphur Turnpike to Sarver Hollow Shelter

I wake up at 5:30 AM in a hungover panic. I begin to think of my aching knee, which I pray can hold up over this next week. I also remember dreaming of the woman we passed on the highway. Was she alright? I want to live a life without regrets. Not stopping is a regret. I doze back to sleep and return to my dreams. I wake in another panic. This time I am not contemplating past failures but current ones. It is 7:10 AM and we are set to leave in 20 minutes. I wake the groggy troops who barely budge. Homer, our shuttle driver, was scheduled to pick us up at 7:30 AM and not a single bag has been touched since arriving in Roanoke, including the food purchased at the grocery store. We usually take hours taking final inventory and pruning excess waste.

In a cloudy daze, I awkwardly pack my bag, load my food, fill my water and savor my last few minutes in a real bathroom. I arrive in the lobby by 7:45 AM. Homer has been patiently waiting for the past twenty minutes. I am tired, nauseous and inconsiderate, not the way I want to start a week of spiritual hiking. I curse Streek.

On the plus side (or so I thought), the outside temperature is surprisingly warm for morning mountain weather. As minutes pass, my incorrigible team follows in slow procession. By 8:10 AM, all hungover hikers are accounted for at last. We immediately depart for Salt Sulphur Turnpike and our day of self determined torture. One phrase is echoing in my aching head, "Lets go bar hopping." I hate Streek is my early theme of the 2010 hike. So let's take an early tally of my personal growth even before we put on the backpack. First, I abandoned a woman on side of road; second, I got drunk and third I hate my good buddy. Unless some quick turnaround occurs, it seems I am doomed to hell...at least for this week.

On this painful morning our destination is last year's ending point, a dirt road named Salt Sulphur Turnpike. On this one hour ride from Roanoke everyone is silent except Homer. This is

our third year using Homer as our shuttle driver. He knows our hiking incompetence quite well by now. Homer and his wife are responsible for clearing and maintaining roughly twenty miles of trail. Since the trail is prone to erosion and destruction, constant maintenance is required in perpetuity. Because of this work, he knows everything there is to know about the AT, as he returns to some section of the trail virtually every single day. He is a true outdoorsman. On the other hand, we are not outdoorsmen. In fact, we are borderline fearful of the outdoors, especially on this first hike



day, when we still have some of our wits. Being wimps, our biggest concern is always our physical well being. I recall our first few years when we were petrified of bear encounters. Around each turn of the trail, a few guys would yell or clang the poles together to scare this potential menace away (when in reality, any bear could hear or smell us four miles away). Subsequent years brought other adversaries like aggressive bees, psycho hikers and an internal threat, an imagined heart attack. This year, the focus of my concern is snakes. There is no doubt that snakes are my biggest fear in the wild. We see them every year and each time they scare the crap out of me. In fact, snakes have long ago replaced bears as our biggest threat. Homer diminishes this fear slightly, informing us he has not seen more than a few this year.

Barfy awakes from his back seat slumber prudently asking for the appropriate response to a snake bite. "The rattler is the deadliest snake we will find on the trail" Homer responds thoughtfully ... "if a rattler bites, you must get to an emergency room as soon as possible." Great, this is comforting advice as we are about to enter the deep woods. Concern levels elevate to code red. Before long we turn onto a long and windy dirt road leading to our starting point near Wind Rock. Giggles, sitting in the back of the van, gets car sick on this road.

Our quest to hike and find peace is about to begin. This quest starts abruptly as Homer dumps us off unceremoniously as he was late for his next shuttle and departs in a cloud of dust...literally. Before we know it, we are isolated and alone in this quiet desolate place. By 9:30 AM, we commence our hike. We stop to pray after a few short steps. We pray for our safety. We also pray to appreciate this hike and what we gain from the effort. Even though I feel horrible, I tell everyone I feel like the luckiest man in the world to be taking this journey with my friends right now. They grudgingly agree. As I take my first step my knee pops. Prior to departure, I had an MRI on my aching knee. The results were not comforting. I had a torn meniscus. The doctor recommended a knee brace until I have surgery upon my return. Although the first several steps are painful, I soon forget about the pain in my knee and focus on the lack of air in my lungs as we ascend our first mountain en route to Wind Rock. We reach the scenic spot without any fanfare. We looked at the rock and immediately pushed on. There will be no appreciation of this majestic trail today. We are eager to get this day over. We had 17.3 miles to complete in far from an ideal hiking frame of mind (thanks to last night's festivities). I remind myself of one of my simple goals, which I need to fall back on right now. Just take one small step at a time, but keep going forward. Everything will be fine if I can just make this next step. Fortunately, our first few miles provide flat terrain on pillow soft pine needles for these early steps. After a long descent we take our first extended break of the day at Warspur Shelter. I look around at the faces and see nothing

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but fatigue. We have traveled roughly 5 miles over very easy Appalachian Trail, however, based on appearance we look as if we just completed twenty miles of hard terrain. We have 100 miles remaining in this year's goal. Streek attempts to motivate the troops, with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, "what does not kill us makes us stronger." We appreciate the sentiment at this moment, however, Barfy interprets this logic in another light, retorting, "yeah, but that which kills me...kills me."



We sluggishly gather up our gear, painfully aware the easy part of trail is behind us for the day. We are hung over, out of shape, mentally depleted and have twelve miles of difficult terrain a head of us. To make matters worse, it is now already 1 PM. Peace and spiritual growth are the furthest thing from my mind right now.

We head north past John's Creek Valley and begin our first major challenge of the week, a 1,500' ascent. Encountering rocky terrain, the pace is painfully slow. The first goal is Rocky Gap. We break again at this location. Everyone is thoroughly drenched releasing what is left of last night's excess fluids. There is no joy on the Appalachian Trail today. Giggles becomes especially miserable when he notices his soaked pack. His camelback had a leak and is now almost empty. He cries out, "this is bullshit." I am in trouble. My most reliable hiker did not check his gear before departure, or more surprisingly, even notice the leak when filling this water container. This is not good as he's down to a single 32 oz container of water until we hit a town. Water on the trail is a precious commodity. Today especially, it is vital for our physical well being. The alcohol in Giggles system had already bonded with the water in his body and has been pee'd out. More formally, alcohol is a diuretic, which elevates your rate of urination. Either way, Giggles needs to replace this water. Unless he sucks it out of his soaked bag, he is destined to be dehydrated all day and joins me in my curse of Streek.

Our next mountain valley brought a new nuisance, a swarm of a thousand gnats adding more glee to our day. Speaking of sarcastic joy, my knee is feeling wonderful. Each descending step is taken with care applying as much downward resistance as possible with my hiking poles. Thank the Lord for my hiking poles. Even though I am spent on many levels, I can maintain an attitude of gratitude for the good things in my daily life. Focusing on good reinforces the positive in my life. Right now the positives I am focused on are my lovely hiking poles and my hiking buddies...except Streek. We break again on a forest service road. We are now on pace to break every twenty minutes or so. Everyone sleeps on the dirt trying to shake some of the effects of last night. I look over these pathetic men in amazement. I won't let them know it, but I am impressed with all the effort they have put forth in these eight years. Barfy is particularly impressive



considering he has hiked all these years without training. "Anybody can do this hike in shape", remains the chorus. I awake from my solitude when a cool breeze hits my face, which is appreciated on this sultry afternoon. I attempt to rally the troops with the battle cry, "we won't get to the top of

this mountain laying here - get a move on!" Barfy wakes from his moment of sleep and says, "hit the snooze button, I need just two more minutes." I can't motivate him, but the sound of crumpling rocks propels Barfy off the ground like a ninja warrior jumping into battle. A Jeep appears from nowhere cruising past us on the forest service road. To Barfy, this is not a car but an opportunity. With his customary grace, Barfy raises his hand and stops the car. He wants a soda pop. After a brief exchange he returns empty handed and dejected. "They had no soda pop and can you believe they asked me for directions?"

We crawl up this mountain and reach Kelly Knob (3,740') by 3:30 PM. We take another much needed rest. Considering we still have seven miles remaining, I can't imagine how we will complete this day. We press forward and downward, descending 1,000' in the next mile. The short journey was slow, rocky and painful. After one hour we stop at Laurel Creek Shelter in desperate need of water. Barfy is exhausted and suggests we eat dinner. I am always hesitant to take long breaks late in the day. Our likelihood of getting back up diminishes as the day advances, however, I am too tired to resist and dinner is soon prepared. We break out the freeze dried meals; lasagna with meat sauce and chicken curry cashew. The lasagna was edible, however, the chicken curry was putrid, obtaining a notable distinction. This freeze dried junk became the first meal we could not finish since we began hiking the Appalachian Trail.

We are all gathered in a heap around the camp site. We start our small talk. Barfy suggests, to our big surprise, that we try to find a hotel. Streek informs us he is hiking commando and has never worn underwear ever on the trail. I am shocked and now realize half the hiking squad is one layer from hiking nude. I tried this once, but my big fat legs kept rubbing together giving me a horrendous rash. After our meaningful conversation, I inform the troops we had better get a move on and you better have the headlamps accessible. More shock...they actually get up. By 5:30 PM, we depart with six miles remaining. We thankfully have a pleasant walk toward Sinking Creek Valley. By the time we enter this valley it is near dusk. We are rewarded with a pastoral setting teeming with wild flowers, an inviting creek and a gentle late afternoon sun. We could not be in a better spot in the entire world than we are right now. It would have been perfect had we not had five more miles of hiking with a big

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incline to boot. Giggles calls this place magical. The valley over one mile long is the most relaxing walk we will face all week. Notwithstanding the late hour and the diminishing light, we stop to break (again) and soak in the majesty.

We proceed forward leaving this magical valley to enter the woods once more. At this late hour, the woods appear dark and menacing. As we enter the cold dark lifeless woods it feels as if we are leaving heaven and going right to hell. We march on for some time and pass another milestone - The Keffer Oak Tree estimated to be 300 years old. We stopped to rest again and savor the late afternoon respite. Barfy naps again.

We begin our ascent once more en route to Sarver Cabin, our ending point for today. The tree canopy accelerates our path to total darkness as the light of day is gone by 7:00 PM. We push ahead. Barfy is laboring the most. His lack of conditioning has taken a heavy toll, which I am sure was made worse by the escapades last evening.

It is dark, it is rocky and it is extremely steep...the trifecta of torture. Our head lamps are now lighting our path. Unfortunately, we are cruising at a miserably slow pace. Barfy needs to stop every 100 yards to catch his breath slowing the pace even more. At one of these stops, he looks over to me and says while panting, "I want to dictate a promissory oath to you right now." I think he is going to dedicate his life to doing good or maybe never drinking an ounce of beer ever again. He leaves me in suspense saying no more. I move on penetrating the darkness once again. I catch up to Streek and Giggles, who were waiting ahead. We stop and rest. Streek tells me to turn off the lamps. The result is complete darkness. We could not see the outline of our own fingers in front of our face much less the trail or the guy ahead of you. As we wait for Barfy, I ask the guys if they are upset with my planning this opening day. Their silence is deafening. The only retort came a few minutes later. Streek can never say a bad word about anybody. Consequently, Giggles becomes the momentary team spokesman solemnly telling me, "we decided 17 mile days are no good." I was happy with that. All things considered this was not too bad a rebuke at 9 PM in total darkness with no idea of where our shelter may be. We continue through the night. The trail thankfully has flattened out, but no end seems to be in sight. Every five minutes feels like a half hour. Every so often you hear a shi* or fuc*, when one of the guys trips over a hidden root. I can only imagine the enmity these guys feel for me right now.

At 9:40 PM, we arrive at the area for Sarver Cabin. We are so grateful. We thank God and start looking for the shelter. It is



hard to imagine, but we cannot find the shelter in the dark. We look and walk in every direction, but nothing -- not even a sign. This is either a bad joke or the perfect example of kicking a guy when he is down. We look for at least ten minutes and find nothing. We are so tired and deflated we opt to camp on the spot. We search for a flat piece of ground on a sloped mountain ridge. Needless to say, we cannot locate one. We finally agree to camp on a heavily rooted and slightly slanted piece of dirt. Let the bears come and eat us and put us out of our misery. I start to unpack my sleeping bag when Giggles yells out, "I found it, I found it." No, not the shelter, but a sign leading to the shelter. It indicates the shelter is .4 miles away pointing straight down a very dark rocky trail. I say, "screw that, lets stay here." I am out voted and we start the downward trek. This isn't a typical down, but a very steep down with multiple switchbacks. I contemplate the return up this hill tomorrow. After fifteen minutes we arrive in a very large clearing. We are thankful once again to be at our shelter. The only problem: There is no shelter. We look everywhere blanketing the entire camp site. It is not freaking here. I start to unpack again on a generally level spot. Giggles is pissed -- he heads out on an angry quest to find our El Dorado. He keeps saying, "this is unbelievable, this is unbelievable, it has to be here!" After some time we hear a yell from the distance. Giggles' determination finds our city of gold. We scurry over to him only to see Giggles on full alert staring at a shelter full of equipment and hanging clothes without a hiker apparent. We are all concerned. We hypothesize for a few moments. This hiker may be out for a late evening stroll, maybe retrieving a refreshing cold beverage from the nearby stream or possibly relieving themselves. We quickly recognize that no hiker would do any of this at 10 PM at night. We now ponder a worse case. This is probably a criminal who went scurrying when he heard our desperate voices. He either ran for cover or is planning to stay in hiding, while preparing to slit our throats when we fall asleep. Barfy doesn't care. He is beyond sick at this point. He goes to the edge of shelter and promptly barfs. We definitely will keep this intruder on the defensive. Giggles locates the shelter log book and reads a few passages. We all become slightly more comforted when he reads the latest entry from a hiker two days earlier. This hiker was alone and was equally freaked out by the same equipment we stumbled upon. At long last, we remove our dirty disgusting clothes and attempt to clean up. After thirteen hours and 17.3 miles worth of hiking we finished our hardest day ever.



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Day 2 14.65 miles

Sarver Hollow Shelter to Trout Creek

I awake to the sounds of the outdoors, mostly wind rustling in the trees. It is early and it is peaceful. My peace is abruptly terminated when I spot the stranger's bags and clothing hanging from the shelter. In the light of day I can clearly distinguish all the gear and junk the stranger left behind. No less than four bags hang over me including a back pack, a trash bag and two hand bags. Probably ten bottles are littering the floor below. In an instant, I quickly recall the misery we experienced yesterday. Next a sudden sorrow envelopes me as I remember the reason we are here. I miss you Julianna. I remind myself it is alright to be sad. When I experience this melancholy, I am capable of greater and deeper feelings allowing me to reach closer to my soul. I love you Julianna. Sadness is part of who I am. Embrace it for what it gives and then let it go...you must always let it go. The rest of the guys begin to stir and it is gone. Streak, as usual, is first to wake. Together, we inspect the shelter and the surroundings. Despite the junk strewn throughout, this shelter is better than most.

We notice a plaque on the south end of the shelter dedicated to an Appalachian Volunteer who had died at the young age of 34 years. It appropriately read, "While looking for the light you may suddenly be devoured by the darkness and find the true light" J. Kerouac.

Giggles and Barfy arise. Giggles gleefully informs us he just had his best sleep on the trail he can ever remember. After yesterday's thirteen hour marathon, we all slept well. Barfy ambles over to me and continues his thought from late last evening on the dark mountain. This may be his most lucid moment in 36 hours. "I want to dictate my personal oath right now." I am breathless with anticipation wondering where this is going. I am now guessing this will be an official resignation from this hated hike. Barfy starts, "I pledge I will never come to this hike over 225 pounds again...if so I will not show up." This was a noble statement of commitment I think. He will be 225 pounds or not show up. On second thought, that is a resignation. Barfy is pretty clever. After offering this life changing (or possibly hike quitting) oath, he asks me if he could use some of my hand wipes. I watch in astonishment as he uses up half of the wipes I am carrying to clean his entire body prior to a ten hour sweaty hike. On second thought, he is not that clever.

When we unrolled our sleeping bags last night we did not complete our pre sleep routine. We did not hang our food bags. If the bears wanted our bags they could have them. We just crashed long and hard.

Streak dutifully performs the most difficult morning task, retrieving water. On return he admonishes all of us for the

slovenly shelter. Barfy asks where his bag is? It was in a heap in the corner of the shelter. Clearly, we are in disarray from yesterday.

By 9 AM we get back on our horse and hike back to the Appalachian Trail. We hike straight up the side trail leading down to this shelter. This day is already .4 miles longer. If I have not made this clear already, we hate when shelters are far off the trail like this one. We reach the trail and start our day, but first we pray: May we all find our life's journey before we die.

Our trail is smooth and welcoming this morning. We needed it. After a short time we break into conversation on my lack of personal organization. I'll admit, I am a mess most of the time, but these guys are far from perfect. I can put the four of us into two separate camps. Disorganized: Streak and Giggles, and pathetically disorganized: Jules and Barfy. Truth be told we all are organized enough to get it done. I ponder our lack of organizational skills and I rationalize it this way. Hyper organized people are actually cursed in my view. They generally get uptight when things are out of place. They can't take life as it comes. If things are not a certain way they generally focus on the single disorganized item not appreciating the entire beauty of something. The hyper organized also tend to get flustered when things get chaotic. The four of us don't have that issue and we are thankful we can be comfortable in chaos and can adjust on the fly. There you have it -- being disorganized is our gift!

After one hour of smooth walking we break. Giggles, the optimist, makes an observation, "At least we know we can hike in the dark!"

We proceed over pleasant terrain on the top of Sinking Creek Mountain. After several miles we slowly warm to hiking again even though our muscles are very strained. None of our muscles are accustomed to this. I would bet not one of the four hikers had walked more than two hours straight in the last year much less 13 hours with 35 pounds of weight on our backs, like yesterday.

We break after one hour. We rest our tired legs while eating an energy bar. Our next obstacle is a huge rock outcropping on the ridge of this mountain. The big rocks slants at a severe downward angle, which requires a painful awkward northern march. The slanted ridge extends for nearly a ¼ mile. We head back to flat ground and shortly run into the eastern continental divide. The Eastern Continental Divide runs along the high ridges of the Appalachian Mountains. It



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separates land draining east to the Atlantic Ocean (405 miles away) from that land draining west and southwest to the Mississippi River, and the Gulf of Mexico (1,920 miles away). There is no way around it, we are all dead tired even at this early hour. On a gentle incline, I attempt to ask Barfy a question. He looks at me with a pissed off glare and says, "don't talk to me." I accept my rejection and move on. Obviously, I am looking for friends, maybe seeking acceptance after yesterday's blown hiking plan. My next bonding attempt is Streek, a good choice since he can't say a bad word about anybody so I am likely safe from rebuff. We started with small talk and soon went a little deeper. He told me, "I can't understand why some people desperately need other's approval for acceptance in everything they do." I am now thinking about my need for reassurance after my screw



up. He goes on to say, "it is important to be your own person and be comfortable in your own skin." Amen to that. You gotta be happy with you because you are always with you. Wow! A nice reflective moment with Streek. Here is a spiritual gain. Maybe we have a shot to improve this year despite our obvious

physical collapse. Self reflection is critical to spiritual growth. What I have found is that the more I serve others through this hike, the more good deeds I attempt to do, the better I feel about myself when those times of self reflection come. This is one of Julianna's gifts to me.

We continue on a nice piece of Appalachian Trail when we come upon four strangers heading the opposite direction, hiking south towards Georgia. We make quick introductions. In front of us are two fathers in their late fifties with their two sons in their twenties. They live in the great State of Alaska. I am instantly intrigued why anyone from Alaska would come to this trail. Simply, they loved hiking the outdoors and had always wanted to witness the beauty and mystique of the Appalachians they heard so much about. They were section hiking (280 miles this year). We provided one another an overview of the trail we just walked over. We also made general small talk. Streek, Mr. Comfortable in his own skin, goes another direction. "What do you think about Sarah Palin?" They were thrown off balance by this seemingly political question. Clearly they did not understand Streek and before they could respond, Streek asks a follow up question, which reveals his real question, "Do you think she is hot?" They nod. That was a show stopper. Mr. Comfortable made them uncomfortable and we say our goodbyes.

Our objective on day two is 15.9 miles. By 12:35 PM we have only reached the six mile mark. At this point we break at the Niday Shelter in need of rest and water. The stifling heat is causing us to consume an abundance of water. We are virtually bone dry by the time we start pumping at this creek. It is a decrepit little creek guarded by an aggressive crayfish. The water pump situation turns bad once again this year.

Barfy's water filter begins to strain when it becomes progressively harder to pump to the point of being useless. This is the fourth year in row we have had a faulty water filter. This sucks!!!! Our only back up water filtration device is Giggles's new gravity filter. It seems rather simple. You put water in a bag, hang it and let the water drip out of a nozzle on the bottom. The water, which exits the bottom will pass through a filter. It's hard to imagine this contraption working, but considering we have no other options, we don't care and drink.



Next, we have a leisurely 1.5 mile descent to Craig's Creek, a perfect sparkling mountain stream. The flowing water brought sheer joy to everyone. Giggles, Streek and Barfy promptly take off their shoes and soothe their weary feet. Of course, Barfy takes it a step further soothing his entire body. While frolicking in the current he challenges me to join the fun. Instead, I walk around this delightful camp site littered with beautiful pine needles. Barfy yells out, "I think I am ready to barf again!" I walk forward toward a letter stapled to a beautiful Oak Tree. As I get closer, I see a photo of a familiar smiling young couple happy and alive. This was a reward poster for \$50,000 to anyone with information leading to the arrest of the person who murdered David Metzler and Heidi Childs, violently killed on Aug 26, 2009 in a campground only a few miles from our present location. My peaceful world becomes suddenly hideous. Reality smacks me in the face recognizing that much good in this world is offset by too much evil.

It is now 1:20 PM. We look at our maps. We have a 3.5 mile walk straight up the next mountain. Barfy, who is starting to hallucinate, tells us he has been fantasizing about Mr. Pibb and chocolate milk after coming out of our water break. We are in deep trouble. The next hour is painful for all of us, but especially Barfy, who came to the hike at 250 unconditioned pounds. We have completed 25% of our journey (27 miles), and we already have no gas left in the tank. The heat, yesterday's hangover hike and the surprisingly difficult Appalachian terrain has taken a hard toll on our bodies in just a couple days.

Our next milestone destination is the Audie Murphy Monument. The topography is not as bad as expected in this stretch. This section of the trail contains 8 to 10 bridges, which traverse a long graded elevated trail wide enough for a car to pass over. We appreciated the smooth elevated walk. We did not enjoy the afternoon heat, which was suffocating. There was no air circulating on this side of the mountain and we marched on at a snail's pace.

On this ascent I thought about life and what makes us who we are. Our life is about choices.



JULIANNA'S HIKE

We are to an extent the result of those choices. At many points of each day we have the opportunity to do the right thing or not. I believe our destiny is determined by the culmination of these daily decisions. If you decide to act selflessly you will live a happy and blessed existence. If you choose selfishly, you will not understand love and you will not enjoy the relationships/friendships which gives our lives real meaning.

By 3:30 PM in the afternoon, we are all exhausted. There is no breeze and it has to be 90 degrees out. The hike to the Audie Murphy Monument, which is at the apex of this mountain, is maddeningly long. Barfy begins to hallucinate again. He is now dreaming of swimming in a pool filled with Mr. Pibb.

At one of our numerous breaks, Barfy asks for the elevation chart. He sits up to look over the chart with a glazed expression. After a momentary review he crashes back to the dirt like a sack of potatoes. Barfy was not the only soul in torment. Streek, in his own world of misery asks, "What day is this?" It is only Day 2. We continue our ascent in this oven. We have no cover from the sun and there is no breeze. Making our situation perfectly miserable was our empty water containers. My thought on this incline "at least I am getting a little color on my face." We are all hiking on empty and Barfy is very close to barfing, once again. I am now not thinking about making good choices, I am thinking about finding water. In hot and dry conditions, like we are experiencing this week, the water holes and springs outlined in the guide books tend to vanish - adding to our frustration.

By 5:30 PM, Giggles and I crest this mountain. We wait at the top for Streek and Barfy. As we catch our breath an older man and his dog pass us by. He introduced himself as Dale. As we talk, he removes a half gallon milk jug filled with water from his satchel bag. We look jealously when he starts giving the dog water out of the jug. He pours the water in his hand while the dog laps out of his hand and the jug's lip. I let him know how lucky that dog is. He kindly offers to share the dog's water with us.

I hesitated for a moment. The dog was still standing so the water probably isn't poisoned and Dale doesn't look like a killer. I finally fill up a small water container with this generous offer but did not yet partake. I was thirsty but wasn't that thirsty yet. We thanked him and he headed down the mountain. We waited for Streek and Barfy. After several minutes they arrive. The look on their faces says it all, I hate this damn trail. Barfy collapses in a moaning heap and says, "Steve call Homer I have to get off the trail." He bellows, "I'll pay for it." Every time he wants to get off the trail he says the same damn thing. "I'll pay for it". Oh OK, that makes getting off the trail just fine. I stew for a few moments before responding. I find my happy place and decide not to argue back but offer him some cool refreshing water I just acquired

to make him feel better. I know what you may be thinking, but in my world that was the right choice. He needed water and I had it. Everybody is a winner.

Barfy is now on ground in full battle cry. "I need a cheeseburger...its the only thing I can hold down. I need to get off this mountain." I am at a loss. Barfy has struggled immensely over the last two days and truth be told he did look pretty bad. In fact, to give him credit, he worked so hard by the end of this week he lost 18 pounds.



I call Homer, who initiated the rescue operation. We still had some work cut out for us as the closest road was still five miles from our present location. En route we stop at the Audie Murphy Monument. Audie Murphy was the most decorated soldier in U.S. History. He earned 24 decorations during World War II including the Medal of Honor. On May 28, 1971, he died in a plane crash at this site. The site of the monument was roughly 50 yards up a slight slope in an open clearing at the top of this ridge.

We pay our respects to this great American and begin the hike to Trout Creek. Not surprisingly, we moved quickly. Barfy found some energy deep inside and set the pace for this down hill jaunt. The sun was beginning to set in earnest. As I usually do, I had mixed feelings about our sudden departure from the trail. I tried to focus on Julianna, however, my knee was quite hobbled with each step requiring all my limited attention span. Barfy practically sprinted the five miles to the road. I was the last to arrive at VA 620 where Homer was already waiting for us.



There is little doubt after eight years of hiking, I have gotten a little soft. I am actually happy on the thirty minute drive to the closest motel. We are all still in a daze. The only pertinent thing I remember about this trip is Barfy's off the wall request to stop for a watermelon at Wegmans, which was over 200 miles away. We arrive at the Howard Johnson motel before long. We have been out in the wilderness for two days and we smelled fresh compared to the guy behind the counter, who obviously preferred a man's natural scent. We checked in and how about that, Barfy didn't pay. This downscale HoJo's had a pool, which provided a much needed refresh and body cleansing. As we sat in the pool and looked around, the place seemed more like an apartment community in New Delhi rather than a motel in the middle of the Appalachians. Tonight we ate Pizza Hut pizza and watched ESPN in a cool room. Now this is hiking.

JULIANNA'S HIKE

Day 3 15.15 miles

Trout Creek to Catawba Mountain Shelter

The day begins rather civilized. We change into clean gear washed last evening. We meander down to the Howard Johnson office and enjoy a buffet breakfast. Cold cereal was the highlight. By 8:25 AM we are packed and retrieved by Homer. On the drive back to the trail we ask Homer what he has in store for the day. He tells us he is doing trail work like most days. I asked him about the many volunteers I hear are involved with trail work. He politely responded, "yes, we have over 200 volunteers, but unfortunately only 5 workers." Blessed are those who step up and actually do something.

We are on the trail by 9 AM. We have about 1.25 miles to make up for yesterday's early dismissal. Before this 1,500' climb we stop and reflect. Today will be a day of peace after



two days of hell. We need to remind ourselves to savor these moments together. In a few weeks we will look back at this day, this struggle and remember this was the best of times. As painful as it feels, this struggle and sacrifice give us balance and perspective. Nobody buys it, but me.

We take our time this morning. We have just over 15 miles to complete on what appears to be forgiving trail (Based on elevation maps). The morning temperature is already quite toasty. By the time we reach Pickle Branch Shelter, yesterday's official ending spot, we are drenched with sweat. We break for a few minutes. Barfy tells us, he thought he was going to puke at the start of this hike too. He mutters to himself, "If I can make yesterday, I can make anything." We pass Hemlock Point. Hemlock Tree's, just like the four of us, prefer a moist and cool environment near stream beds or in the shaded woods.

Usually we come out after a night in a motel like a cannon. Today, we are more like a pop gun unable to build momentum on this arduous morning climb. Our first conquest will be Dragon's Tooth. Certainly the real thing can't be as menacing as the name. The climb, rocky and steep, is proving me wrong. In the next few miles we push higher and higher praying this ascent would soon end. Over each large boulder we scale, we wonder aloud whether this was Dragon's Tooth. On this quest we run into a young man near twenty years of age who was hiking the Appalachian Trail with his father. This duo, who live south of Boston, had started in Maine and headed south when this younger man was seven years old. They are now two third's finished. I wondered if we would ever reach this same milestone. We

ask them, "is this Dragon's Tooth?" Oh no, this is the easy part, Dragon's Tooth is another mile further and the terrain is much more difficult than this. We deflate momentarily, but go on just like we always do. Life will beat you down if you let it, we just can't let it, I remind myself.

Although it is not yet noon, the heat of the day is already upon us. Beads of sweat are pouring out of our bodies. I stop for a moment next to Streek. I ask, "How long will it take us to complete the Appalachian Trail? He thinks thoughtfully, eventually estimating 25 years to reach Katahdin, Maine. That is the year 2027! Ouch! I ask Barfy the same question. He tells me with no thought, "this hike is over for me in three or four days." Double ouch! The upward march continues painfully and slowly over this sun drenched rocky terrain. We savor a gust of wind that pierces our face as we near the summit. We break under a shade tree enjoying a well deserved mountain view from the apex of Dragon's Tooth.

After a few minutes, we continue our northern route. I lead the troops out. "You are going the wrong way moron", I hear from my brethren. I started on the wrong trail down. I find the right trail and begin our slow descent. The heat was



unbearable made worse by the lack of shade. More importantly, we were finally in the jaws of Dragon's Tooth. We traveled down this rocky route as slow as possible. The rocks on the trail were large and awkward. In several locations these

large rocks could not be climbed so metal rungs were drilled into these rocks to provide grip. Giggles implored, "you have to be part billy goat to walk this trail." After a short break, Giggles and Barfy lead us down the next stage of Dragon's Tooth. The trail switch backed every 25 feet or so leveling off the extreme slope of this mountain. Half way down, Giggles missed one of these turns. Barfy follows him down the makeshift trail. Fifty yards into this wrong way excursion Giggles tells Barfy, "I'll stay here you go down further and find the blaze." (white blazes mark the trail. If we don't see them we are lost) Barfy, who is practically incoherent, heads lower determined to find that blaze. He keeps going down and down. Streek and I reach the missed turn off, which is clearly labeled with double white blazes indicating the turn. We yell down to Barfy and Giggles that they are going wrong way. Barfy yells out in complete anguish, "expletive, expletive, expletive." Giggles climbs the shorter trip back to the turning point. He feels bad admitting to us he told Barfy to head down and to keep looking for the



JULIANNA'S HIKE

elusive white blaze. Me and Streek start laughing out loud. Although we know how much pain Barfy is in right now, we couldn't help but laugh at the situation including Giggles participation.

We sit for ten minutes in the shade and watch each and every sun drenched step Barfy took back up this wrong way trail. He arrived at our feet, hit the ground and kept saying, "Oh my god, Oh my god." We looked at Giggles and just laughed. This is what good buddies do. Streek said almost instantly, "OK, lets get going, we need to make up this lost time." After Barfy's recovery from near cardiac arrest, he regroups. He tells us about his plight down the mountain. He said "I kept going down, through brush and rock and saw no trail. I went further looking for a blaze and any sign of a trail but couldn't find squat. It got to the point where I kept thinking if only I had a paint brush, I would have just painted a freaking blaze." We laugh once again.



The mountain is one rock after another as we push downward. We pass some poor soul going up this pile of rock and ask him, "How much longer are the rocks?" There is no verbal response, only a loud laugh as he pushed by us. "What the hell was that?" Streek inquired. I don't know, but it was not encouraging. On this rocky route we are trying to reach Lost Spectacle's Gap. After descending through some treacherous rocky ledges the rocks eventually subside. As we approach VA 624, we are now on mostly dirt trail. Dirt has never been appreciated more than it is right now.

After a few miles of wonderful dirt we break at VA 624 along a creek bed. We have no water, no energy and no enthusiasm, however, we have our own slice of heaven 1/3 mile away at the Catawba Grocery. As anticipated, when soda pop is involved, Barfy is the first to volunteer. I am the second. The short trip was taken in silence. We were not only too exhausted to talk, Barfy didn't much care for me at this point. We anticipated juicy cheeseburgers at the mountain deli, however, the Catawba Grocery only served a ham sandwich. Who were we to complain as we promptly ordered four of them. At the same time Barfy went through the store like a tornado. First, he guzzled a Gatorade; next he finished off the much fantasized Mr. Pibb fountain soda; next he savored (for three seconds) a full bottle of chocolate milk. Finally, for good measure he refilled the Mr. Pibb and drank that too. He is a true marvel. The return walk was slightly uphill and proves a little more difficult considering the few gallons of water we were carrying. We rejoined our hiking partners sitting in the shade. We ate, drank and before I could relax we were off to the next leg of this excruciating day.

Our next mile provided a nice opportunity to sweat out the fluids we just consumed. The elevation change opened up our pores as sweat flowed with abandon. We crossed another road, VA 785, crossing over another ladder into a cow pasture. The enormous cows stood in the shade next to us as we walked along a picturesque shaded creek. We yelled out and heard nothing but trickling water, a few moos and the echo of our voices reverberating off the surrounding mountains. We crossed over the creek bed and exited the shade. In front of us were more cows and a giant mountain. We had faced mountains like this hundreds of times, however, this was different. The temperature in this low valley had to be near 95 degrees. Moreover, there was no breeze and there was not a scrap of shade over this 1,000 yard climb. We gathered our faded spirits and started this march through an Appalachian oven. No more than 50 yards into this sweltering climb, I was out of breath and soaked. Streek and Giggles were 50 yards ahead. I remember thinking I wish I were them right now. I turned around and saw Barfy 25 yards behind me catching his breath in the furnace. Alternatively, I was so thankful I was not him right now. There were numerous individual hikes we made over this week that I hated, but none more than this one. The shaded woods in the distance was our goal. It took us fifteen minutes to make this climb. When we reached the shade a cool breeze hit our face. In a positive sign to his returning to the hike, Barfy made his oath once again. I will come back in better shape next year.



We gather what steam we have left in our bodies and climb the next mountain. We pass a hand written sign that read, "Hornets Nest 200 yards ahead." We had hoped for a little break from the trail, but that is not the way it works. We scamper forward in a defensive posture. At 150 yards, we leave the trail navigating the dense woods to avoid any potential battle with these tormentors. Nobody gets stung after we complete a text book left flanking hike maneuver. We have run out of water again.

We pass another road VA 311. I recognize this road. I have been here before. We break for a moment. It is now roughly 7 PM and getting darker by the minute. We continue our quest for the end of the day and the Catawba Mountain Shelter. The pace is slow as we are elevating once more. About 1/2 mile from VA 311, I ask the guys to wait a moment. I leave the main trail and head west on a small side trail. I find a small forest access road and head south. After twenty two paces I see a log and a rock aligned on the left side of the road. I move the rock and the log slowly. I begin to dig. After removing a few inches of dirt I find a black plastic bag. The



plastic bag is cold from the damp ground it is buried in. I pick up the bag, shake the dirt off and return on the circuitous route back to my waiting friends. The guys are sitting on the side of the trail, almost in the dark staring at me. I open this bag and share the contents, four water bottles, hard candy and chocolate bars. Roughly three weeks earlier I was traveling on 1-81 and decided to leave a gift for us. When I hid this stuff I thought it would be a nice treat. Nobody cared today. They just wanted the water and the shelter so they could lie down and go to bed.

After our short break and my anti-climatic treasure hunt, we pushed forward in the burgeoning darkness. The terrain was elevating and the pace slow. We pass the Boy Scout Shelter. Everyone inquired whether this was our stop. I told them with false confidence this was not. There was no water here at this shelter. We hiked for another half hour. After each step I became more certain I had screwed up. I now believed the previous shelter was actually our stop and we were hiking to oblivion with no water.

I felt like an idiot repeating our first night's late night fiasco. We pushed forward in the looming darkness. I kept my feelings of ineptitude to myself. Adding to my guilt, Giggles lets me know that he is beginning to hallucinate that he is seeing our shelter around every corner. I began praying the Catawba Mountain Shelter would appear. At 8:30 PM my prayers are answered. The shelter is small, simple and empty. Streak and Giggles retrieve water. By 9:15 PM we have eaten, cleaned up and are tucked into our sleeping bags. We fade to black.

A loud noise startles us from our sound sleep at 10:30 PM. Voices and banging are heard in our camp. We get defensive when two large head lamps invade our space and peace. Usually hikers are respectful of people sleeping. "Yo, what are you guys doing?" is heard from an intoxicated voice. What the freak do you think we are doing idiot? I think. Five people including two girls squeeze there way into our tiny shelter and start asking questions. We learned they all were college students from Ohio University enjoying a binge in the wild. They were hammered and very annoying. They repeated themselves and talked general gibberish. I know the symptoms, I saw it three nights ago. As they talked, I was becoming more agitated with every word they slurred. Of course, Streak was enjoying the show and ever the conversationalist kept them going with stupid questions. What's your major? Do you like hiking? I wanted to strangle Streak. After they grew bored with us they left us to prepare dinner with the promise that two of them would be back to sleep in the shelter since they only had enough tent space for three of them. They partied and cavorted for at least another hour. By midnight, they ran out of gas and all was quiet at last.

Day 4 17.6 miles

Catawba Mountain Shelter to U.S 220

Don't tell my wife Denise, but I woke up next to an Ohio University female coed on my left. Thank goodness I had Barfy on my right protecting me from her collegiate advances. Today is our fourth day of hiking and by lunch we will be half done this unforgiving week. So far we have traveled 47.1 miles over back breaking Appalachian Trail. Homer's comment this week would be similar to our previous year's experience is dead wrong.

We prepare oatmeal out of our single bowl and pass it around. On Barfy's turn he spills it all over his shirt and begins to feign crying. At this moment, we all understood his response. We all felt like crying in our current state of mind. The lack of sleep, due to those meddling kids, combined with our overall fatigue left us mentally purged. Our path to spiritual growth has seemingly hit a brick wall. We gather for our morning prayer. May we feel and give love at all times. If we let it, love will nourish us and help ease all of life's pains...even the loss of your child.

At 7:47 AM we depart toward McAfee Knob, one of the most revered destinations on the southern Appalachian landscape. Our charts indicate a 1,000' climb to the summit. We departed early for several reasons. First, we wanted to see sun rise over the knob (we didn't make it). Second, and the greater motivation was the fact that we are scheduled to finish the day at a motel. Each year I have relented and made arrangements to stay indoors one day during the hike. Today is the designated day. Of course, this will be our second night indoor due to our struggles two days ago.

The walk up is steep but manageable. The soil is sandy and soft providing a pleasant pathway to the top, however, even in these perfect conditions my knee is slowing me down already. I am in the rear contemplating the trip and trying to find some peace amidst my painful steps. In less than an hour I see a sign for McAfee Knob. I pass through some

hedges and feel an enormous cold gust of wind encircle me. I step onto an enormous flat rock platform. Over the edge of the rock is the Appalachian Mountain range in all its glory. This is God's work. I reach the guys who are already soaking in the majesty...mostly.



JULIANNA'S HIKE

Barfy, takes this opportunity to rest once again. He is lying down with eyes closed oblivious to his surroundings. A guy dressed in military gear is our only companion on the knob. He walks around like a proud peacock telling us facts about the location, which none of us had any interest in absorbing. His presence did offer one benefit, we had a photographer. We dragged Barfy out of his rest and took our positions on the edge of the rock. Barfy focuses on our new friend for the first time and says, "What's up with the Colonel?" We crack up as the colonel photographs the moment.



and easily forgotten. We will never forget this place as long as we live.

The terrain is now in our favor. We have a generally flat run for the next three miles. We chat about life. Giggles, too relaxed, trips on a little stump on the trail. I instantly label him "spaz." No defense is offered and he quickly admits, "You are right." Damn...I was hoping for a little more fight. In reality, I am in Giggles bust mode because he partially missed an opportunity on the knob. Immediately after reaching McAfee Knob he whipped out his phone to make an urgent business call. He chatted away with great animation for several minutes. I would expect this kind of behavior from Barfy, but not Giggles, the most ardent hiker in the group. If Giggles turns to the dark side this hike is in deep trouble. Before this train picks up speed I need to get Giggles back to my side. Future hikes are at risk here. I am seeing a daily hotel stay (only hotels with pools) with nightly beer drinking a prerequisite. Who knows with this crowd I could envision Barfy hiring a personal concierge to pump our water from the streams. Actually scratch that idea, he would never drink water from a dirty stream if he had a choice. Instead he would have a Sherpa carrying his cold beverages. If I don't get Giggles in line I can already hear what the Sherpa is saying, "That was a fabulous hiking effort Mr. Barfy. Will you be drinking a Mr. Pibb or a chocolate milk refreshment?" As we descend, Giggles laments making the call. Thank goodness there will be no Mr. Pibb on the trail. He missed an opportunity like we all do every day. Each of us falls victim to the chaos of our daily lives, when we fail to recognize and appreciate something special right in front of us. Slow down - take a deep breath and savor the beauty all around us. It is there. Giggles now makes up for lost time and starts to redirect his focus. Barfy, in a perpetual mindset to finish hiking, tells us all we will get to the Howard Johnson's by 5

We leave McAfee Knob thankful we had a clear day to enjoy this view. Much of the Appalachian Trail scenery is the same

PM. We are staying in the same HOJO's once again. Giggles lets him know he is in no hurry, "I am just walking," and appreciating these moments.

In eight years on the trail, we have had a lifetime of moments to appreciate. Appropriately, we have also endured a lifetime of struggle in the same span. It is hard to convey how much we struggle or how far we are walking to raise money. As an example, today alone we will walk 94,512 feet and take more than 30,000 steps each. Much of these steps will be elevating, causing greater muscle fatigue or descending creating excessive ligament and cartilage wear and tear. There is no doubt our bodies are wearing down.



Day 4 of the hike is usually when that reality sets in. Right now I am able to ponder these realities, rather than just focus on the next painful step, because we are on a beautiful shaded and level run. We are all appreciating this current terrain. We have finally left our overindulged needs behind us. We have returned to basics when we can be thankful for something as simple as a flat dirt trail in the shade.

After a short break, sitting on a cool rock under the tree canopy, we hoist our backpacks for roughly the 80th time this week. The terrain proves more challenging this late afternoon. I am feeling lifeless with the heat being a huge factor in my personal demise. As we climb toward Tinker Cliffs I have no idea how I am going to make the remainder of this hike. I tell myself, much like I do in my daily challenges, keep my head down and march forward one step at a time. The strength will come to me from somewhere, it always does. We must fight the good fight.

We stop to break again on a cool rock. I start thinking of the Timber Rattle Snake we faced a few years back on a rock like this. My fear of snakes surfaces once more. My focus is thankfully diverted when Streek asks, "How far are we hiking today?" I tell him eighteen miles and proceed to ask all the guys a question. "How far do you think we have gone so far today?" The guesses were between 7 to 8 miles. When I inform them we have traveled only 6 miles, their collective dismayed faces say it all. Giggles did verbalize his feelings with two letters. "That is B.S." This year has to be our hardest hike ever. Our current trek to Tinker Cliffs is more difficult than I can ever remember. We are hot, we are out of shape, we are low on water and we are stopping to rest every couple hundred yards. Barfy, whose glazed eyes are staring straight through you, tells me he is going to blow chunks again. I used to believe practicing three times a day for high school football in full pads in the breezeless August sun was the hardest physical struggle I would ever endure. That was a picnic compared to this torture.

JULIANNA'S HIKE

At 2 PM we arrive at Tinker Cliffs. This was a feat. Barfy found the first rock and crawled into the fetal position. The rest of enjoyed the views from these cliffs. Tinker Cliffs is a cliff walk approximately half a mile long offering sweeping views of the vast Appalachian's, including McAfee Knob to the south. The name "Tinker Cliffs" was derived from Revolutionary War deserters who hid here during the war. These deserters repaired pots and pans, thus the name tinkers. The half mile walk was our finest ridge hike of the week and possibly the entire Appalachian trail so far.



Streek, our hike medic, pulls me aside somberly advising me to get off the trail as soon as possible. He was very concerned about Barfy, who was getting delirious. I am not sure if there is a clinical analysis for his symptoms, however, when the patient starts hallucinating he is swimming in a pool of orange crush soda, there probably is some reason for caution. Being a complete lug head the only thing I noted about his condition was the change from swimming in Mr. Pibb to Orange Crush soda.



Unlike Streek, I had little sympathy for my friend, who after eight years of hiking should know that hiking in mountains with a heavy backpack on is kind of hard. And another thing - playing golf twice a week does not qualify as training. After Tinker Cliffs, we head straight down toward Scorched Earth Gap. Yes, it was as bad as it sounds. It was hot and we were hiking in the sun again. We reach Lambert's Meadow Shelter at the base of this mountain and collapse again.

There is an elderly man in this shelter enjoying the serenity of the meadow. His accent let us know he was raised in the deep south. He let us know this was the first day of a multi-week hike heading south toward Erwin, Tennessee. We talked about the trail. Streek abruptly adjusted the topic of conversation asking if he knew whether the Phillies had won last night. So has it, this southern gentleman was a Braves fan. He proudly informed us his beloved team beat the Phillies last evening. At that point of last season in 2010 the Braves and Phillies were competing in a neck and neck battle for first place. Streek told the southern man he had better be nervous talking that way with four oversized Phillies fans in the same shelter. He laughed. Barfy changes gears again on the poor man looking for quiet. "Can you tell me where there is any water to swim in?" He does not.

At 2:32 PM we depart this shelter full of water and empty of energy. As we proceed back to the trail, Barfy shares his

sentiments on the old man with us. "I can't understand why this guy would be out here alone. Who would choose to do this...it makes no sense." The heat of the day is upon us. There is no breeze, ample humidity and a lot of distance yet to cover (about ten miles). Fortunately, according to the map our trip to Hojo's should be relatively flat.

After one hour of hiking, we stop to break. Streek goes to his bag and pulls out his water jug. It is empty and reminiscent of Giggles earlier screw up. Streek had placed the bottle in his bag upside down with the lid not fully tightened. This was Streek's only fluid. He was now dry with eight miles of hiking remaining and no water available on the trail. He was totally pissed at himself. Although Streek is tough, I don't think it was possible to finish this hike without more water. We were screwed. Streek looked at me optimistically and said, "We have no major ups the rest of the day, I can make it." I looked up at him and said, "Good luck with that."

We continued our quest for Howard Johnson's. We hiked in the hot sun for most of the afternoon. The heat combined with our diminished overall physical condition made this last six miles nearly unbearable. We shared extra water with Streek, and before long we were all out of water. As we hiked on our final ridge of the day, we caught a glimpse the tiny town of Troutville to our left and an enormous lake to our right. They were both so tantalizingly close but so realistically far away. In the distance below, a high school marching band bellowed a familiar tune on the football field. The sound, which buoyed my diminished spirits, carried perfectly to this mountain ridge above.



At long last, the trail gave us the final descent we coveted. There was no excitement at this moment. We were mentally depleted. On one of our final breaks Barfy thinks out loud, "Who was the idiot that put this together?" Even in my comatose state I knew he was talking about the Appalachian Trail. At this moment I could not disagree or didn't have the energy to do so. He went on, "As stupid as it is, I accept the trail is here, so I just have to deal with it. I request mandatory team training for next year's hike", recognizing he has not demonstrated the will power to do it himself. I asked him how would this would work since we live so far apart. He thought for a moment and said, "How about a four way training simulcast? We can call it Appalachian buns of steel." No doubt about it, this hike has finally cracked him. At 6:50 PM we hear the roar of U.S. 220. We made it Julianna.



JULIANNA'S HIKE

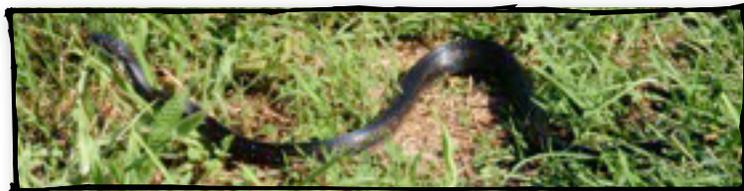
Day 5 11.2 miles

U.S 220 to Wilson Creek Shelter

We wake up in a comfortable air conditioned room. All is quite pleasant until I attempt to move. My leg muscles are not responding to what my brain is telling them to do. I look down at my swollen self abused legs and wonder how I will proceed. Beside my disfigured knees, the blisters I have developed over the last four days have emerged once more. Most notably, I have blisters under two of my toenails, which will certainly cause my nails to fall off. Barfy scoffs at my simple blisters displaying his own, which have colorful yellow puss oozing from them. Thankfully his toes are still completely numb and can't feel the associated pain. Streek laments that his blisters are the worst he has ever experienced. It is just another day on the trail. We bandage these wounds and gear up.

At 10 AM we crossover U.S. 220 and head back into the woods. We stop and each say our own prayer. Jules - May we do the best in everything we do: Giggles - May I be a good leader and set a good example to those in my life, especially for my kids. Barfy - Don't be too hard on myself, it is ok if I am not perfect. Although not appropriate for prayer time the rest of us looked at each other and laughed aloud. Streek- I love you guys very much. You are all my family, my bothers, except you Barfy -- you are more like a family pet. We burst out laughing once more, say amen and take our first step into the woods.

We start our day in the deep woods going up another mountain. This is short lived as we quickly come into a sunny clearing. About 100 yards into this clearing we cross paths with a slithering 5' black snake warming itself in the morning



sun. In the lead I jump like the scared man that I am. We walk around him like it was a King Cobra, then intersect another road where we turn right and walk under the I-81 overpass. The Appalachian Trail will run adjacent to I-81 for the next 600 miles or so. After the underpass we turn to the right, climb a fence ladder and enter a pasture filled with cows and cow pies. The morning sun is not too hot yet. The soothing morning sun on our faces feels heavenly as we descend into an emerald green valley with an inviting pond at the bottom. In the distance I notice Barfy eyeing up the inviting pond, which he surprisingly bypasses. The hiking day now begins in earnest. We have a 3 mile steady climb to Foolhard Knob Shelter. We are silent in this climb. I recognize this hike is supposed to be therapeutic for

me but my body is just too exhausted to go there. The path to personal/spiritual growth is being overtaken by my need for simple self preservation.

Giggles stubs his toe three times on the rocky climb. We are also navigating a sea of spider webs, which seem to encircle us with each step. At one of our many breaks, Barfy breaks the silence.

"There is no way we can hike seven days like this, it is not possible." I tell him seven days is part of our plan and always has been. Barfy retorts testily, "I don't want to listen to your plan, I was not involved with this plan!" At this point I can only

remember the silence of the deep woods, a nice breeze on our faces and Streek throwing rocks down the steep mountain side. Like a kid, he keeps throwing rocks and says, "look they just keep rolling," after each and every throw. Before long we are all throwing rocks, just like we were ten years old trying to out do one another.

We move on. By mid day, we are all out of water. We mismanaged our water retrieval. I should say I mismanaged it and Streek let me hear it, "way to go leader." I felt like a schmuck, which was not an uncommon feeling this year. In my defense, water sources were horrendous on the Appalachian Trail. The hot and dry conditions ruined even high flow streams and springs. The entire week has provided an enormous challenge. This was just another.

Our lack of hydration has created an irritated mood. Barfy is very lethargic. He now adjusts his fantasy drink to include his wife. He begins telling us of a drink she makes for him. It includes grape juice combined with club soda over crushed ice. His reverence to this drink would make one think this is the finest beverage ever to be consumed. I think he really misses the pampering of his wife Nicol right now. Streek discusses his concerns about turning an ankle over all the rocks under foot. "One of these days, these rocks will take me down", he predicts. Giggles is complaining about the worst blister he has ever earned. I am suffering in agony with my right knee. Currently, I can only walk downhill by supporting the all weight on my right leg with the hiking poles.

Mercifully, we only have 11.1 miles of torture today. After a 1000' descent down another steep mountain we find a water source, Curry Creek. The water is running hard allowing Barfy to make his move. He casually strips down and bathes letting out an, "oh my god this feels so good" acknowledgement. Giggles begins to find cray fish and minnows, who we feed with our trail mix. This spot offered



JULIANNA'S HIKE

an ideal break from the heat. This will be remembered as one of this hike's little pleasures.



Rejuvenated slightly, we head north on the trail up another hill. Our destination is the Wilson Creek Shelter. We labor in these final two miles. My limp more noticeable, earns me the name "gimp" from Giggles on the

last run of the day. We arrive at our shelter at 5:30 PM. The shelter is a fine three-sided wood abode in an open clearing. The water source, indicated by a blue blaze, is down a rather steep embankment. Me, Streek and Giggles make the trip straight down. We get to the water source, which is a small creek. Regrettably there is no water where it is supposed to be, only wet dirt. We head down the damp creek bed in search of something resembling a puddle. We get to the point that we need to clear brush to travel further down this small valley. Streek leads the way down. At this point we have to be 600 yards from camp. We finally find a water puddle deep enough to pump. We take turns and fill up two five gallon water jugs. The pumping exercise alone took us twenty five minutes. We had done the easy part, now we had to carry this water back to camp. Both Streek and Giggles say, "I got it." I didn't argue. In one of the toughest conditions, when our bodies were most fatigued, these two men carried the water (42 pounds of awkward weight) the entire way back to camp. I have never been more impressed



with any physical effort. I genuinely struggled just walking back under my own weight. When we got back, Barfy said, "what took you guys so long?" We told him. In a statement of humility, Barfy noted, "I am not worthy to wipe my ass with you guys." I am not sure it came out the way it was meant to, but the sentiment was appreciated.

We lit a fire. Streek and Giggles got the wood for that as well. Me and Barfy rested. I would equate us to the husband, who comes home from work, drinks a six pack while waiting to be served his dinner. Oh yeah...we won't do dishes either. The night ended peacefully as we recount the last five days of genuine torture. Before long we all fade to black again.

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Day 6 7.3 miles

Wilson Creek Shelter to Bobblets Gap Shelter

Sore, sore and sore some more. The wood Streek and Giggles collected for the fire lasted into the night providing a soothing atmosphere for getting to sleep. Unfortunately, a stiff wind developed over night forcing much of the fire's smoke directly into our shelter turning our sleeping conditions to less than ideal. Another offset was Barfy's phone alarm, which went off at 5:30 AM, waking me for the day.

As I curse Barfy, I lay in solitude in the shelter. Before long the glimmer of light started to emerge from the darkness. Slowly the sun spilled through the filtering trees creating a glorious site and an ideal moment for reflection. My life has been filled with unrivaled suffering as I think about my sudden loss of Julianna, the daughter I will never get to know beyond her three years. I know next week she would be entering sixth grade. Right now my pain is so real for her loss. I could dwell about all those things that could have been, but to what end. I am here right now and she is only with me in spirit. What good is my life if I feel sorry for myself and relive my past sufferings on a daily basis.



I need to focus on all I have gained in this journey. The one thing I know is that my perspective on life has changed. This life is not to be taken for granted but celebrated. We are here on this earth too short a time not to live as fully as we can each and every day. My loss has given me this understanding. I will not take my life for granted and I will live as fully as I can each and every day for Jules.

By 8 AM, everyone begins to wake. We complete our morning ritual of dressing back into dirty wet clothes, tending to our growing blisters and eating a small breakfast.

Barfy cannot eat instead drinks hot chocolate as a substitute out of a bowl. I cringe at our lack of hygiene when I observe Barfy cleaning the bowl with the two fingers he just used to wrap his nasty blisters.



We have a very slow start today. We shove off by 9:40 AM. We say a simple prayer, which I think about all the time. Don't just live for your self (aka think selfishly), but live for something more important than ourselves (aka think selflessly).

JULIANNA'S HIKE

We had a goal of 104.2 miles for this week. After day five we are on target to reach this goal. In reality, we have no shot. Our physical condition has finally caught up with us. Our goal today is 16.9 miles. In my mind, I thought we could reach today's target but my body and my buddies say otherwise. No one and I mean no one feels we could go 16.9 miles. We are just too beat up. I still had hope though.



Me and Barfy start the hike in tandem with a healthy heart pumping three mile climb in front of us. His toes are numb at first and then his feet follow shortly after. After two hours of numb hiking, without a complaint from him, we approach the apex of this

ridge and intersect the famed Blue Ridge Parkway. We stop and break. We are completely exhausted. Streek led most of the way and swears the spider webs blocking the trail slowed him down in this three mile climb. We walk out to the well manicured two lane winding road. It looked nice, but not nice enough to take a short walk to the scenic overlook. The Blue Ridge Parkway has a long history. It is 469 miles long, took 52 years to complete and was primarily built to connect Shenandoah National Park to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Today, it is the most traveled and the most revered scenic highway in America. According to our map, we were supposed to intersect the Blue Ridge four more

times today. I am sure we would have ample opportunity to appreciate this American marvel later. We are just too tired to waste any energy right now.



As we walk it becomes obvious we are not getting close to 16.9 miles goal today. We started much too late and proceed forward at a turtle's pace. We are all out of gas, especially me. I take the lead out of this

latest break. I am walking on one healthy leg through the woods adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway. The faint sound of a car whizzing past interrupts my thoughts every few minutes. Before I know it, I turn around and witness a traffic jam behind me. This jam was not on the Parkway but on the Appalachian Trail. I am walking so slow, everyone is right on my back waiting for me to pick up the pace. I can't and let them pass after Giggles says "Hurry it up Gimp." When they pass I watch each of them carefully. They are a wreck. Gaunt faces, disheveled attire, each leaning over in defeat. I thought damn, this may be how confederate Civil War soldiers looked returning home on this same trail after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. I step in behind Giggles. He looks back at me and says "Barfy absolutely hates this hike." This is what makes him being here that much more special. We continue at a very slow pace. Random topics emerge. We talked about the tragedy of people living with chronic pain or a chronic disease. We realized the battle we face here is nothing

compared to what many people face on a daily basis. We change gears again when the conversation changes to how our personal failures in sports teach us how to deal with our personal failures in life. Giggles mentioned the struggle he endured shattering his arm in football during his senior year in high school. Barfy talked about being cut his senior year from the basketball team. I was jealous of Barfy since I was cut my freshman year. Streek, who has never known failure in sports due to his extreme athleticism, is notably silent during this conversation. We pass Taylor Mountain Outlook and enjoy an open view of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountain range

Before long we make it to the next stop on the Blue Ridge Parkway, which is the Montvale Overlook. We find a piece of dirt underneath a shade tree and spread out. I walk to a small sign posted in the center of this vehicular lookout. It describes the Appalachian Trail stating among other things that this is the "Longest footpath in the world." I return to our team resting spot. Giggles, who did not totally learn his lesson from McAfee Knob, is checking e-mails this time. At least he isn't yapping on the phone. Good thing, because he would have woke Barfy who was fast asleep and snoring up a storm.



We rest in this beautiful spot enjoying a light breeze and the welcoming shade. It was quite peaceful until a car riding the Blue Ridge pulled into Montvale. The sound of the car woke Barfy from his sleep. He looked up at the car, looked over at me and touted, "Watch me do my magic." Literally he leaps out of his prone position into a full gait, with one goal - Soda Pop. If any of you know Barfy and the Barton strut you know what I am talking about. Full of confidence, full of bravado, he struts the 30 steps to the car just like he was going to ask a girl to dance at the freshman frolic. The three of us left behind cringe. However, we are enjoying the show, watching if this girl is going to turn the big loser down.

We all laugh as his negotiation ensues. He looks animated pointing to the trail head, probably describing how brave he is to hike this 2,000 mile + Appalachian Trail. He looks frustrated as our laughing accelerates. He will not be dancing tonight. Before you know it, a hand comes out of the car and two cans of soda pop emerge. He grabs them with a quick dart of his two beefy hands. He is now on cloud nine, the boy just scored. The return strut was priceless. He just danced with the prettiest girl in the class and is returning to boast to the real losers too



JULIANNA'S HIKE

afraid to talk to girls. He returns to his prone position, looks over to me, and says, "I still got it."

After our very long lunch, we gather our stiff bodies and continue our walk north on the Blue Ridge. Within one mile we stop at the next overlook on the parkway at Harvey's Knob. There is interest in stopping again. I feign resistance as everyone drops their backpacks. This time we sit on a quaint picnic table on the edge of this Overlook. We all sit around the bench talking about how beat up we are. We also check the map to find a spot to sleep tonight since we have no chance of making our planned goal at this relaxed pace. A van pulls up into the Overlook. Barfy's head turns toward the source of the sound like a dog who hears a knock at the door. He then looks back at us smiles a big smile and immediately jumps into Barfy action. As he struts out again, we grimace once more. Barfy lives by one motto. You don't get anything in life unless you ask. That he does over and over again. This time he attacks the unsuspecting car from the passenger side with an aggressive knock on the window likely stunning the inhabitants. He starts his routine with his back to us. He begins pointing at trail head again. He has his wrap down. He is working hard. In fact, he goes on and on and on. He must be finding some resistance with this prospective donor. Barfy continues his sales pitch through a small 2" crack in the window for more than 5 minutes. Streek is sure he is about to ask the inhabitants whether he can get into their air conditioned van to cool off. Before much longer, his tenacity wins again when the window opens a little further. A small hand protrudes with something big and yellow. He hit the mother lode, four large gatorade bottles. As our hero Barfy returns to the picnic table, he looks exhausted. We asked him how it went. He say's, "They made me work. The one guy had an oxygen mask on. Also, they were really scared of me."

Once again we depart from our break. Giggles said, "if we stay any longer at this spot, Barfy is going to get us all lunch!"



It is now mid afternoon and we have only gone 5 miles. We are moving at an excruciatingly slow pace. With no tent and shelters every ten to fifteen miles, we don't have many options for sleeping accommodations. Consequently, our only choice is

Bobblets Gap Shelter, which was 7.3 miles from our last stop. We could afford to take our time and we did.

We arrived at a sign post indicating Bobblets Gap Shelter was here, however, it pointed straight down a very large hill. Water must be scarce in this area, because every shelter seems very far from the trail. The shelters in deep gaps were always scarier. They all seemed dim, damp and dumpy. Bobblets Gap lived down to our expectation. Barfy went right for the dirty dirt floor and crashed. Me and Streek followed while Giggles looked for water. Barfy opened his eyes assessing the accommodations. "This is horrible, just look at the disease infested, bug crawling, disgusting place." Streek piped in. "I may as well go home and just sleep in my garage." I couldn't disagree.

Nonetheless, my guys have a gift and they made the best of a tough camp site. Streek set up the Appalachian Horse Shoe pit. Me and Streek lost in a close battle. Next we played picnic table top football, with a paper football. The goal of this game was to make sure your football hung over the edge of the bench with out tumbling to the ground. If you did this you kicked the extra point with your finger, through your opponents finger goal posts. Barfy won this round robbin tournament. Once again, earning team MVP honors for all activities which do not involve hiking or working at camp sites.



I think of my three friends as we head to bed. We all possess unique traits, which make us a fairly productive group together. Streek is our creative guy always coming up with a new idea, Giggles is organized and prepared, and

always knows what to do in a new situation, Barfy is bold and entertaining, a man not afraid of what people think. Me - I have Julianna and a resolve to keep her love alive.

There was no breeze in this location, we stirred in the balmy night air. My last memory before I faded was Streek wrestling with his sleeping bag.



JULIANNA'S HIKE

Day 7 9.6 miles

Bobblets Gap to Jennings's Creek

We are going home! This morning we wake by 6 AM in order to end this week as soon as humanly possible. It is still pitch black in the deep woods. Headlamps are required as we gather our gear and stuff our bags for the last time this year. Praise the Lord! Barfy groans as he attempts to put a dirty sock over his severely infected toe one last time. It is nasty.

Despite his discomfort, he is happiest man on the entire Appalachian Trail today. In 9 plus miles he will be done for one more year. Before we leave I pray for resolve to overcome my pain both physical and mental. I also pray for my resolve to put forth effort to help those in need.

We start the ¼ mile trip straight up to the trail with spirits high for the first time all week. Our first major goal is the Peaks of Otter on the Blue Ridge Parkway. No one knows for certain why this mountain range is called Peaks of Otter. One theory is the Cherokee Indians

could have called this place "Atari", which means high places. The other theory is Scottish settlers arriving in the early 1800's might have named the Peaks of Otter after Scotland's Ben Otter Mountain, which resembles one of the three prominent peaks, which make the Peaks of Otter. By the time we reach this location it is only 8 AM. Although it is now light, this is the first day in seven we have not seen the sun as the long overdue clouds cover the morning sky.

We walk north. Barfy stops to thank us for putting up with him this week. He is grateful to have two very good friends on this trip, and less than grateful to have one friend who makes him work too hard. I take this as a compliment. We march forward slowly. Our next destination is Mills Gap, also on the Blue Ridge. We rest and enjoy the view of the James River below.

We have 9.6 miles today. Thankfully, much of this terrain is flat with limited elevation change. We walk and talk, appreciating our short lived camaraderie. The four of us will likely not see one another until this time next year. I appreciate these guys more as I realize our time together is coming to an end. I am thankful for much right now, but mostly thankful for them and their love.



Our next stop is Bearwallow Gap. The only thing memorable about this location is the three gallons of water somebody placed at the road's edge. As fate would have it, today is a cool cloudy day, we are full of water and our hike is ending in a few miles. There were 85 other miles on this trip we would have given a month of our life for three gallons of water, but not today. Oh well, some days the wind is at your back, some days you are facing a gale force wind. We just need to deal with it and not dwell on it.

Our next goal is Cove Mountain, the last peak of the week. After Cove, it is all down hill from there...literally. We have an approximate 4.5 miles descent to Jennings Creek. We walk slowly toward VA 614 and our ride to civilization. I am far in the rear on this long descent. This is the time I would take to reflect on the week long hike and my thoughts of Julianna.

After hiking for one week in the woods, I have cleansed my mind of my trivial worries that usually prevent me from higher level and deeper thinking. On day seven, I should now be capable of putting my accumulated thoughts together generating some theme that can propel me to some level of spiritual growth and inner peace.

Unfortunately, that ain't happening. Each step is a grimace. I cannot think about finding peace, I can only think about finding the next level part of the trail, which does not shoot pain up my right leg. Although I had glimpses of positive reflection this week, I am less than one hour from finishing the hike and I am no closer to peace than when I started. Maybe it was my knee, maybe it was the weather, or maybe it's something else inside of me. Like everything worthwhile, spiritual growth requires preparation, work, sacrifice and commitment. I need to do better next year on all these fronts.

So to answer my question I started with. Is it possible for four middle-aged men to improve with each passing year? The answer in my case is a big NO. I deteriorated both physically and spiritually. Hopefully, I can have a different answer in 2011. Fortunately, I have an unequalled resolve given to me by a little girl and three of the best men in the world to help me find the way.

We arrive at Jennings Creek grateful this week is done. There is a perfect swimming hole at the creek making for a perfect ending to an absolutely imperfect week.



JULIANNA'S HIKE - 2010

Tinker Cliffs



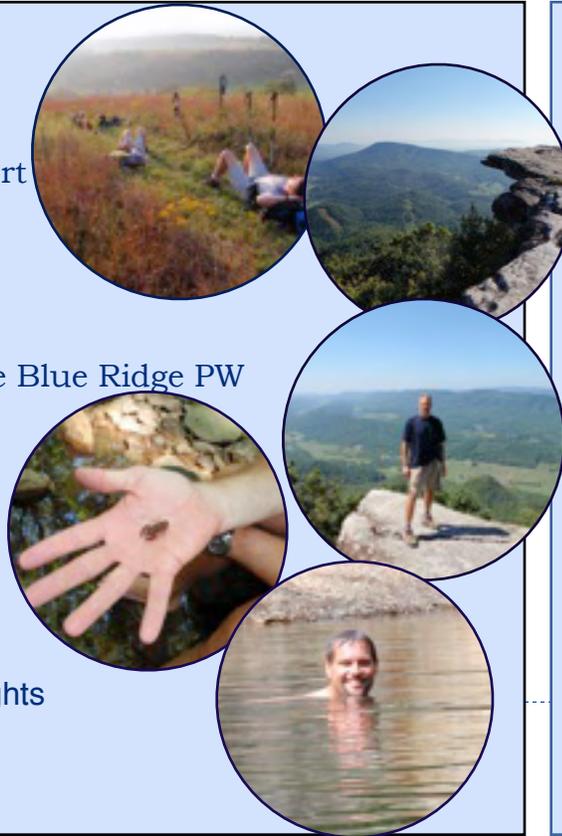
There is little doubt our 2010 journey was our most difficult hike since our first year in Georgia in 2003. My memory for the entire week is one of struggle...one after another along with a few laughs in between. This hike is a reminder to me life does not unfold in a straight line. Some days there are dramatic moves downward. When these times occur we must endure, keep love in our heart and move on. I am ready to move on.

Highlights of the Week

-  Reuniting with Giggles at Airport
-  Sinking Creek Valley at sunset
-  Views at McAfee Knob
-  Walk along Tinker Cliffs
-  Break at Curry Creek
-  Watching Barfy get soda on the Blue Ridge PW
-  Swimming in Jennings Creek.
-  The end

Lowlights of the Week

-  Everything else not listed in highlights
(See below)



For Mimi and Nick

In addition to Julianna, this year's hike will be dedicated to everyone who lost someone special in their lives. In 2011, our thoughts are with the families of Jeff "Streek" Price and Dave "Giggles" Guyer, especially. Jeff lost his dear mom, "Mimi" after 81 loving years. Dave lost his nephew Nick Guyer, who passed too early after 21 years.



If you want to see more go to juliannahike.org to watch our 2010 hike video.