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The Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia

Julianna's Hike began 21 years ago in Springer Mountain, Ga. In our initial foray on the famed Appalachian Trail we hiked a negligible 2.5 miles. In retrospect, we were really bad hikers overmatched by the challenge we committed to endure: hiking the entire 2,190-mile trail seemed an improbable dream.

I have been told you will always enjoy great success if you find something you love to do. Unfortunately, this philosophy was never getting us to Maine since Julianna's hikers don't like hiking. Fortunately, after 20 attempts, I now realize you don't need to love what you do to find success. You can move mountains (or climb them!) if you do something because you love.



This journey's core has always revolved around love. Love is why we endure. My love for Julianna, plus the love of my friends who dared to start this quest with me. Jeff Price, Dave Guyer and Murphy Barton have made this two-decades-long marathon the greatest success in the world...one miserable step at a time.

Our quarter-century effort will continue in 2024, after a forced sabbatical in 2023. We have already completed 12 states. We are now battling New Hampshire's White Mountains – which I wish we'd never met.

Our week in New Hampshire in 2022 began when our new friend Al Labozzo dropped us off. Boz had rescued us two years earlier and has been an honorary part of the Julianna Hike team ever since. Our first two days were hard but manageable. Things changed dramatically on Day 3 when we entered the White Mountains on Mount Moosilauke. The 3,700' climb was quite hard, and the descent was ridiculous over one big rock with no sun exposure, glazed with moss slick as ice. We had to walk on makeshift wood steps drilled into the rock or slide on our backsides to make sure we did not fall off the mountain. One hiker noted, "This is crazy dangerous, I cannot believe they let people hike this."

The White Mountains are the most difficult section of the Trail. I assumed we could handle any terrain the AT had to offer. I was dead wrong and I put my three friends in real danger. Due to my overconfidence, we were hiking in the dark on Day 5 when a monsoon erupted on a steep descent. Streams of water flowed over/under our feet as we navigated the rocky landscape. A broken head lamp and two hard falls on the slick surface had me praying, "Julianna...please get us to the hut safely." The sight of this hut in the dark stormy night may have been the best single moment in 20 years.

Our hiking goal was 83 miles but after seven exhausting days we had managed a paltry 62. We had never been this defeated in 20 years. Although we achieved the 1,800 Mile mark on the AT, we struggled, getting further behind our hiking goals each day. By mile 62 we called it a hike and hiked 4 miles straight down to the closest road where we were met by our devoted support team Dan Castaldi and Joe Innes. They were a life saver.



In 2023, we wanted redemption but I injured my left knee doing something foolish...work around the house. *(Note to old men: hire young men to move furniture!)* Instead of exulting in the AT experience, I was bedridden with my second knee replacement in four years. This was depressing for me and all the hikers, who to a man

told me missing one year on the Trail made them appreciate the journey all the more.

The hike brings joy and pain. The pain comes from the physical strains endured and the intense feeling of loss I relive each year for a three-year-old child I have not hugged or seen in 23 years. My joy comes from the love I feel in my heart for Julianna and the ability to appreciate this journey amidst unrivaled beauty, ruggedness and friendship.

2024 will be a challenge like no other. We head into this hike with eyes wide open as we know the terrain and our personal limitations, with greater gratitude. Our 15-mile days are a thing of the past, and we've extended our hike

from one week to 10 days. We will face this like all our challenges... head down, always marching forward. This year's obstacles will be daunting and the fear of our bodies breaking down (mostly mine) will be omnipresent. The Presidential Range is notorious for its rocky terrain and some of the worst weather on Earth and includes scaling the granddaddy of them all, Mt. Washington at 6,188'.



We will begin our 21st annual hike at the peak of **Mt. Lafayette, N.H.** and finish 69 miles later near **Gorham, N.H.** We hope to have completed 1,899 trail miles – 86.4% of the Appalachian Trail.

We will also give generously. Since 2003, we have donated over \$1,700,000 to share the love so many people provided us when we needed it most. 100% of the money raised goes to organizations that support grieving, ill and needy children. The beneficiaries continue to be the **Uplift Center for Grieving Children** and the **Breathing Room Foundation**. Uplift supports children and families who have experienced tragic loss and cannot afford counseling. Many of these kids experience severe personal trauma which often leads to self-destructive depression, drug use, giving up, or a recurring feeling that no one cares. Uplife allows kids to channel grief correctly and gives them a feeling of hope and community. The Foundation helps families living with cancer to live more stable lives in the face of disease. We also support other organizations, including the **Take A Breather Foundation**, which grants wishes to children living with cystic fibrosis.

This year's hike will begin on August 24th and end Sept. 2nd. Although the hike is arduous it pales in comparison to the struggle many of the families we support face on a daily basis. We want to thank everyone who has shown interest and sponsored us in this Hike for Jules. You have all helped us heal and, more importantly, helped keep Julianna's love alive.